

Approaches To Extensive Reading In The Japanese Education System

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Extensive Reading (ER) is currently widely utilized in many schools and universities. This paper seeks to conduct a review of the currently available literature regarding Extensive Reading, with the intent to determine a methodology suitable for use in a range of Japanese EFL contexts. Additionally, this paper further seeks to provide insight and possible suggestions for future research in these contexts.

INTRODUCTION

Extensive Reading (ER) is currently held by many EFL teachers and researchers to be a useful method by which to expose L2 learners to their target language. Thanks in part to the advancement of digital media tools, online services and websites, and also due to an institutional refocusing to lengthy reading-based tests such as Testing of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), an increasing number of teachers within Japanese universities are incorporating ER and subsequent activities into their courses. Unsurprisingly, this has led to an expanding body of contemporary research with many studies investigating the impact ER and its related activities have upon learner L2 acquisition (Chun, 2012; Nishizawa, Yoshioka, & Fukuda, 2010; Waring, 2011), motivation (de Burgh-Hirabe, 2013; Yamashita, 2013), as well as cognitive processing and reading ability (Singhal, 1998; Taguchi, 2012; Yamashita, 2002).

However, while many of the concepts investigated and discussed in the literature are generally applicable to teaching and learning contexts the world over, there are several situational and environmental effects to consider when applying ER to contexts within the Japanese education system. This paper will review the currently available literature regarding Extensive Reading, with the intent to determine a methodology suitable for use in a range of Japanese EFL contexts. In order to do so, the authors will analyse the practice of ER from viewpoints considering the following factors. First, we will examine the overall objectives of ER, based on the effects that it is held to achieve according to the EFL researchers implementing ER programmes in their teaching contexts. Next, we examine the literature covering the effects of ER on a range of attributes, such as general motivation, reading fluency, and vocabulary acquisition. Finally, we summarise the findings from these sections, and compare them with recent Japanese context-specific concerns in order to suggest a suitable general framework for the effective utilization of ER in Japanese educational institutions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

ER: Objectives and Effects

ER is discussed frequently with regard to several main objectives. Many of these objectives were originally summed up by Grabe (1995). Grabe discussed a list of 8 general effects that ER was held to have; while these were 'effects' and not 'objectives', a selection of them should prove sufficient in lending structure to this section of the literature review, in which we will endeavour to compare the intended objectives of ER with its supposed effects.

Motivation

“It is a key resource for building student motivation once students are ‘hooked.’”

Currently, given the abundance of research into motivational factors vis-a-vis language acquisition, perhaps the most prevalent of these objectives focuses on getting L2 English learners to simply read for reading's sake. As Carrell (1997, p. 50) notes:

Extensive reading generally involves rapid reading of large quantities of material or longer readings for general understanding, with the focus generally on the meaning of what is being read rather than on the language. Extensive reading is intended to get the reader to focus on reading for the sake of reading (for information or entertainment), and less on reading for the sake of mastery of a particular linguistic structure or even a particular reading strategy or skill.

As stated by Judge, “motivation... is better guided by a move towards pleasure, than by a move away from pain” (2011, p. 164). The need for EFL teachers to instil a tolerance, or more preferably a fondness, within their students for extensive reading in a foreign language is commented on by several others; Waring notes that teachers should encourage students to “Read quickly and Enjoyably, with Adequate comprehension so they don't need a Dictionary (READ)” (2011, p. 3). Perhaps the main reason for this is the need to increase, preferably through autonomous, out-of-class methods, the exposure of the learner to their target L2. Taguchi (2012) notes that even by age 6, L1 speakers have roughly 10,000 hours of language experience, covering about 5000-7000 words and most of the basic grammatical structures (p. 30). It is clear that L2 learners need to ‘catch up’, even a little, for without this exposure it could prove difficult to engage with authentic L2 materials. In this vein, Allan (2009) suggests that graded readers provide a useful, more linguistically accessible source of material to motivate L2 learners to read extensively (p. 23). Nishizawa et al. comment that short term ER programmes, lasting perhaps a single academic year or even only a single semester, do not seem to impress this upon the students sampled during his investigation (2010, p. 637). Taguchi, in his research on Repeated Reading, adds that non-fluent readers may be trapped in a vicious circle; by reading slowly and with little comprehension, they do not enjoy what they read, which in turn causes them to read less and further stunts their reading attitude and skill development (2012, p. 30). While this does not align with Bamford & Day's ‘bookstrapping’ concept (1998), this dichotomy does highlight the variability of the results in research regarding ER.

Other authors comment frequently on this point concerning the balance between reading attitude and reading ability. Lituanas, in his study of ER in schools in the Philippines, notes that there seems to be a dearth of ER for “lower-achieving students”, possibly as many teachers consider that “such students lack the desire and skills to read extensively” (2001, p. 218). Yamashita, in one of her many investigations on the subject of EFL reading and vocabulary acquisition, comments while ER programmes are intended to develop “good reading habits”, as most reading programmes do not seem to have a significant effect on students’ course grades, there is a tendency for learners to respond to short-term ER activities with a somewhat indifferent attitude (2013, p. 256). While investigating the differences between L1 and L2 reading schema, Singhal laments that “L2 readers who do not possess (sufficient) knowledge can experience schema interference, or a lack of comprehension” (1998, p. 3). Even from the very beginning, it would seem that despite the best intentions of teachers who implement ER programmes there already exists a familiar divide between “those who excel and those who struggle” (Judge, 2011, p. 161).

Reading Ability

“ER has demonstrated positive influence on reading comprehension proficiency, as well as other language skills.” / “ER develops automatic word recognition.”

There are, of course, several remaining objectives of ER courses to consider. Of these, reading experience and ability feature prominently among the literature, with many investigations into the effects of certain reading programmes, activities and methods on EFL learners’ reading and general language abilities. While reading skill is acknowledged to be the most stable and durable of the second language modalities, there are differences between L1 reading skill and L2 reading skill. Taguchi (2012) points out that, amongst these differences, speed initially appears the most striking:

Because of a greater amount of reading experience, L1 readers' reading rates are faster compared to L2 readers' rates. According to Grabe (2009), fluent English L1 readers usually read texts at 250 to 300 words-per-minute with good comprehension and with little hesitancy in syntactic and vocabulary analyses, compared with advanced L2 readers at 80 to 120 words per minute. (p. 31)

Taguchi does admit that these figures are for university-level texts. However, while it would be quite apparent to even a layman observer that L2 reading would be slower than L1 reading, the fact that there is such a wide difference even for advanced learners does potentially pose a few questions.

Extensive Reading, as noted previously by Carrell, is intended to get the reader to focus on “longer readings for general understanding”, with more emphasis on “the meaning of what is being read rather than on the language” (1997, p. 50). Given the global nature of the 21st century, and the expanding influence that research from English-speaking countries has on other international economies, industries and academic fields, Carrell’s comments in 1997, while aimed at academia in general, are all the more poignant:

Without the experience of dealing with large amounts of text, and without having developed the ability to apply acquired ... reading skills and strategies in appropriate ways during extensive reading, students will not be fully prepared to manage the reading demands of actual academic classes. (p. 56)

The ability to read, and comprehend, in a foreign language does require a modest amount of scaling and scaffolding. Nishizawa et al., in their investigation into ER programmes in a technical college in Japan, implies that L2 English learners of a lower overall ability should start with relatively (perhaps surprisingly) low-level books, such as Oxford Reading Tree Stage 3 (aimed at 5-year old native speaker children), in order to discourage L1-L2 translation practices while reading (2010, p. 633). Allan, investigating the authentic input provided by a graded-reader English book corpus, suggests that intermediate-level learners – situated at the B1 or possibly B2 levels of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) – are “unlikely to be able to deal with the peripheral linguistic content from a large corpus,” as with an un-restricted corpora there is a very high proportion of language on topics which fall outside of the scope of these ability levels (2009, p. 24).

In general, however, the consensus of the literature is that ER helps improve reading comprehension, reading speed and overall reading fluency (Taguchi, 2004, p. 74). ER appears to “shore-up” reading skills (Lituanas, 2001, p. 223) and provide chances to try L1 reading strategies

on less demanding L2 texts (Yamashita, 2002, p. 82). Nishizawa et al.'s study demonstrates a marked increase in reading speed and word-quantity over a 4-year period (2010, p. 636).

Vocabulary Acquisition

“It may be the best way to develop a large recognition vocabulary.”

Reading skill, while difficult to reliably quantify, is undoubtedly an important area for EFL students to focus on for their future L2 acquisition. In addition to reading skill and strategy selection, however, Grabe's list also discusses vocabulary recognition and acquisition.

As mentioned in the previous section, Taguchi reminds us that even by age 6, native speakers have acquired most of the basic grammatical structures, as well as a sufficiently functional vocabulary of 5000-7000 words (2012, p. 30). Though due to many interwoven factors, such a broad base of L1 knowledge is in no small part due to the exposure to input that they have received. ER would appear well suited to supplying a large, authentic range of L2 lexis and attending information. Yamashita agrees, stating:

The more text L2 learners read, the more input they obtain. Therefore, the ER approach receives conceptual support from views and theories that prioritize the importance of input in second language acquisition. Krashen's widely known input hypothesis (e.g., 1982) and his reading hypothesis (1993) represent the strongest theoretical contention of the necessity and sufficiency of comprehensible input for many aspects of L2 acquisition, including vocabulary, grammar, spelling, and linguistic skills. (2013, p. 249)

On this same track, many other researchers have investigated the links between ER and vocabulary acquisition, in particular focusing on the degree of input that a learner can gain exposure to through reading authentic L2 texts (Ellis, 2005). Judge cites Long (1981) that “lack of meaningful, comprehensible input” usually results in the failure of L2 acquisition (2011, p. 162). Waring (2011) and Chun (2012) also echo the potential vocabulary benefits, though with qualifications. Waring reminds us that the majority of research highlights the need for numerous repetitions of a word; roughly 25 (or indeed more) encounters appear to be required for a learner to be able to read a word and not have it slow down their comprehension when reading (i.e., automaticity) (Waring, 2011, p. 4). Chun notes that while “a vast body of research has established that ER is a highly effective means of vocabulary development”, there remain certain negative points; chiefly, the amount of time it takes to sufficiently experience a word through ER due to the random nature of repetitions in most texts (Chun, 2012, p. 126). Similarly, Kweon and Kim (2008) point out that while L2 learners are able to acquire words incidentally whilst engaged in ER, this incidental learning is merely a useful by-product as learning vocabulary is not the explicit purpose of reading (p. 191), and that certain word-classes (adjectives, in Kweon and Kim's study) can prove more difficult to acquire than others (p. 200).

Despite these valid qualifications, however, and even allowing for Kweon and Kim's stating that results are not always clear regarding incidental learning (2008, p. 192), the majority of the research does in fact point to ER having a significant effect on L2 learners' vocabulary. Yamashita points out that vocabulary, on the whole, makes a larger contribution to L2 reading than grammar knowledge (2002, p. 82). Nishizawa et al.'s investigation concluded that a long-term, 4-year ER programme prompted a significant increase in TOEIC scores (2010, p. 638). Chun's own study comparing differences in vocabulary acquisition between Paired Associate Learning (PAL) and ER concluded that while in the short term both PAL and ER proved similarly effective, long-term vocabulary retention was better in the ER sample-groups than their PAL counterparts (2012, p. 128). Waring also reports on studies that suggest that through ER, between 4% and 25% of target L2 words were acquired (2011, p. 3). Allan, while investigating the effects that a limited corpus based on graded readers has on L2 learners' comprehension, concludes that the learners will be less likely

to be overwhelmed by the data, and as such can deepen their vocabulary knowledge at their own pace and level (2009, p. 30).

ER and Japan's EFL Context

Clearly, reading is rather important, not only as a skill but also as a gateway to authentic L2 input. There are, however, several other factors to consider when selecting teaching methodologies for a given teaching context. As the objective of this paper is to discuss approaches to ER in the Japanese education system, we must take this context and its attendant factors into account.

When considering the desired outcome of a process (be it a learning process or otherwise), it is necessary to highlight the factors that can act upon that process. Most commentators focus on 'learner factors', such as aptitude, attitude, identity, cognitive style, effort, learner autonomy, and motivation in particular. While these factors are indeed part of the process, there are others to consider. As Wen and Robert (1997) discusses, 'non-learner' factors, drawn from a wider scope such as social, cultural, economic, teaching, assessment and linguistic factors, should not be ignored, primarily due to the possibility that these environmental and institutional non-learner variables do a great deal to construct the context in which learning takes place (p. 29):

It is assumed that unmodifiable learner variables may influence learning outcomes either directly or indirectly through modifiable learner variables, and that modifiable variables can be arranged in sequence with learning purposes beliefs and effort, operating through management strategies and finally through language learning strategies. Each variable influences English achievement either directly or indirectly *through* the variables that follow. (Wen and Robert, 1997, p. 30)

In sum, while both non-learner and learner factors influence learning outcomes, non-learner factors are notable mainly as they do so *through* learner factors. While Wen and Robert note that the "modifiable learner factors contribute the most immediately and directly to the outcome (in this case, English achievement)", they also suggest that the unmodifiable factors "establish the environmental, institutional and individual constraints upon learning" (1997, p. 30). It is with this in mind that we will briefly analyse the constraints placed on the teaching and learning process by the context; Japan and its education system.

English in Japan is a concept sculpted by many unique socio-cultural characteristics, and is curiously noted by most SLA and EFL commentators akin to a "love-hate" relationship (McVeigh, 2004, p. 213). As an extremely homogeneous and monolingual society, the ability of a Japanese person to speak another language, such as English, occasionally leads to them being marked as "not sufficiently Japanese" (Kamada, 2011, p. 11), and there are frequent top-down rejections by established institutions (such as newspapers) of new, youth-driven words inspired by foreign loanwords (Daulton, 2011, p. 8). While many researchers, including Seargeant, insist that such direct identification and discrimination is less pronounced than in previous generations (2009, p. 54), Kamada suggests that the social-identification of "unmarked/Japanese" language acts and behaviours and those "marked/foreign" still exists in contemporary Japan (2011, p. 13).

In such a context, it is quite possible that English exists as a unique concept, perhaps more a commodity than a language. This concept is in part enforced, if not created, by problems within the Japanese education system; commentators on this point are rather numerous, and claim that these problems have largely been ignored by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science & Technology (MEXT) since the 1970s (Seargeant, 2009, p. 47). Though multiple, perhaps the main causes of the language-commodity disconnect can be traced to a skewed reliance of the Japanese education system on high-stakes tests (Barry, 2004; Aleles, 2009; Miura, 2010). While high-stakes tests, such as those required to enter high school or university, are shown to temporarily boost

motivation and effort levels regarding study, the same investigations also illustrate that such extrinsic motivation collapses in the post-test period (Berwick, 1989, p. 207; Miura, 2010, p. 31). Despite the recent updates to MEXT's mission-statement to "cultivate Japanese students with English abilities" this test-system has remained untouched, and we yet still find that the majority of the English lessons taking place within the middle and high schools focus on grammar instruction and preparation for entrance exams (Kikuchi, 2009, p. 198). In accordance with this view of reality, several commentators have suggested that while imported foreign-language learning methods such as Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and Task-Based Learning (TBL) are commendable and have their place, their place is not in the Japanese education system as such methods are not suited to its objectives (LoCastro, 1996, p. 45; Sato, 2009, p. 12). On the premise that English is seen as a commodity instead of a language in Japan, this might imply that learning the language for its own sake is not as important as being able to pass tests about English. Thus, it is very likely that promoting reading, especially in class time, might not be considered an acceptable use of lesson time. Students in Japan might not develop benefits from ER as they are not reading for pleasure, but to satisfy requirements for graduation (Robb, 2002, p. 146).

Another factor linked with potentially restricting English achievement in the Japanese education system is the focus on socialisation evident throughout all levels of institutional education, from elementary school through to university. As Seargeant notes, according to the comments of former Education Minister Ibuki:

[S]chools should: 'teach children the social rules they should know as Japanese' before imparting skills and knowledge, and, through further analogy, that 'it is fine for students to eat sweets and cakes (referring to EFL learning), but only if they still have an appetite after consuming the basic foodstuffs for sustenance of the body (in reference to social training).' (2009, p. 16)

The emphasis on being 'Japanese' also links with activities focused on interdependence, a trait frequently commented on by SLA and EFL researchers in Japan as more prevalent than in other countries (Miura, 2010, p. 35). Establishing social links to others, exploring the social boundaries of the group and understanding one's part in it, all require a lot of time and effort, according to Warrington (2006, p. 5), and with some results suggesting even university students (for whom club participation is not mandatory) devote on average 5-6 hours a week to such club activities, it is perhaps not surprising that foreign EFL teachers in Japan comment on the frequency of students sleeping during class (Barry, 2004, p. 52). Under such circumstances, it is perhaps understandable that EFL teachers in Japan often comment on the lack of 'perceived value' on behalf of students regarding the learning activities done in a language course. Yamashita (2013), in discussing attitudes towards L2 reading in Japan, noted that despite the fact that students knew that the amount of reading they did would be reflected in their grade, learners did not believe it valuable (p. 256).

A learner's L1 is also considered to have a strong effect on the acquisition of the target L2. L1 interference is frequently commented on, and perhaps is at its most notable when the orthography and sentence-structure of the L1 and the L2 are dissimilar. Typically, ER programs start with students who are already familiar with the language. In one study, researchers chose students specifically because they were already used to the L2 writing systems (deBurgh-Hirabe, 2013, p. 79). It is possible, then, that ER might not be as effective as a teaching tool if the students are not familiar with even basic English. Even though Swan and Smith show that Japanese people have a strong grasp of English through the use of *romaji* (2007, p. 299), it should be stressed that *romaji* is not English, and the two should not be conflated.

Another hurdle with reading in English for Japanese students is that there are conflicting conversion systems from *hiragana* to *romaji*. In many cases, Japanese students are taught a

different style of *romaji*, the *Nihon Shiki* system, as it is perceived as easier for the students to learn. This system strictly matches the Japanese syllabary, but it ignores English pronunciation (Horvat, 2008). For example, students are taught “si” is pronounced /ʃi:/. A few years later, they are then taught, with no explanation nor transition, that it should be written as “shi”. As many EFL teachers in Japan will attest, this error is rarely corrected when the students start to learn English (K. Inamoto, personal communication, November 4, 2014). This, and many other instances of word-and sentence-level L1 interference (such as the grammatical differences between the Japanese “head-last” and the English “head-first” verb placement), all combine to potentially restrict the (relatively) easier cognitive transfer of L1 reading skills to the L2, further stunting skill and L2 development.

Furthermore, a single case study about RR (Repeated Reading) showed incredible gains from a Japanese adult (Taguchi, 2012). However, there are some problems with these gains. The student developed reading fluency in the passage, but that same fluency did not transfer to new texts. Comprehension also increased for the repeated passage, but there was little to no transfer of skills to any new texts (Taguchi, 2012, p. 45). Additionally, this case study was conducted with an adult with relatively high speaking ability and TOEIC scores, which suggests that the participant was able to re-marshal their previously-gained reading skills and strategies during the experiment rather than acquiring them due to it.

ER METHODOLOGY: SOME BRIEF PROPOSALS

Given these problems with the starting assumptions of ER as well as the place English holds in Japanese culture, perhaps the approaches and tenets regarding ER, as examined in the literature review, may not be the best solution for Japanese students to develop their English abilities through reading. It is possible, as Robb suggests, to propose several adaptations of current pedagogy to match the students' situational needs (Robb, 2002).

First, a wide selection of books must be available with the students being allowed to choose their book from a smaller selection (de Burgh-Hirabe, 2013, p. 89). This means that while there are many books to choose from, students should not be given unfettered access. They should be limited to only about four books at a time to choose from. One good solution, as mentioned earlier, could be the Oxford Reading Tree books, though they are geared for younger audiences. Students could choose one book from among the following: one from a level below, one from a level above, and two from their current level. The students should be allowed to choose books both below and above their level, as reading gains are not linear (Mason & Krashen, 1997, p. 93). The teacher should monitor this selection process and make sure the students are choosing a variety of books, though sometimes choosing the same book repeatedly is acceptable. This should allow the students the flexibility to refresh and marshal their reading skills with more comfortable, easier levels of book, as well as challenge themselves with longer and more complicated texts.

Students are then given 15 to 20 minutes to read by themselves, during class time. If they finish a book, they can choose from another set of four books with the same criteria as above. At the end of the time period, the students should give a report about only one of the books they have read. While the limitation of this method is that it imposes the expectation that a book will be finished within an externally-set timeframe rather than at the student's own pace, this does match Waring's READ anagram (2011), as discussed previously. Students should be permitted and encouraged to read enjoyable, comprehensible texts relatively quickly, and by initially structuring this kind of activity in class, learners will be able to gain a positive experience that they might not seek out on their own outside of class (Robb, 2002). Additionally, this reading should be incorporated – if only partly – into their grades, so as to impress upon the learners and their stakeholders as much as possible the importance of L2 reading (Yamashita, 2013).

Here, another limitation presents itself; as previously discussed, reading in class, along the lines of Sustained Silent Reading and Drop Everything And Read programmes common in the

Western education systems, is not well received in the Japanese education system which values test-scores above abilities. While it should be admitted that the devotion of entire classes to ER might not serve in the best interests of Japanese EFL students (i.e., to directly support their goal of passing high-stakes entrance exams), promoting reading and instilling a drive to read in students is of paramount importance in improving their long-term L2 proficiency. Teachers, as guides and leaders, could prove instrumental in providing examples and chances for their students to engage with their target L2 in this way.

CONCLUSION

As we have seen in the literature review, ER has tremendous potential as a language learning tool. However, it is clear that ER in Japan has some issues that need more research. As the concept and status of English itself is somewhat unique, in that it is seen as a commodity and not seen as a language that is valuable to learn, EFL teachers undoubtedly face a host of problems when attempting to introduce their students to ER. To make gains in reading ability, learners require sufficient scaffolding (in terms of comfortable levels of difficulty as regards to comprehension and so as not to rely on dictionaries), sufficient flexibility and time in which to read (though mindful of the need to read without lengthy pause), and to do so over a sufficient period of time to make the project meaningful. As such, the current state of ER in the Japanese education system could easily be said to be somewhat disjointed and ambiguous. Extensive Reading, Repeated Reading, Intensive Reading and other Western-influenced pedagogies, while they are important and clearly have their place in students' learning and development, need to be adapted as far as possible to the Japanese education system in order to be utilized, including adapting to a high-stakes testing environment. It is hoped that this brief look at some of the potential benefits versus the potentially limiting environmental factors in the Japanese education system could provide for new, more situationally-tailored avenues of enquiry into the approaches to ER in Japan. As most EFL researchers are predominantly situated in just one level of the education system, be it university or elementary school, or indeed outside of it in Eikaiwa schools or conducting private lessons, there are many potential difficulties in assessing whether a long-term approach to ER, traversing, say, elementary school to high-school, would truly be effective. At the moment, however, perhaps researchers should focus on assessing longer-term programmes, e.g. at least an academic year, within their teaching context, and continue to develop their approaches to ER from there.

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