

Bridging the Gap Between Readers and Native Speaker Literature

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The number of graded readers available for Extensive Reading has grown exponentially in recent years, as has awareness of the Extensive Reading approach and the number of institutions using it. Students can now read material of an appropriate level in large quantities, but what about native speaker literature? Should that be a concern, and how do students cross the bridge from the controlled lexis and grammar of readers to the wild beyond of native speaker literature? Is it necessary to build a bridge to help them, and if so, how does one go about building such a bridge? This paper will outline how one large Extensive Reading program is attempting to tackle this important problem.

The conference theme was 'Extensive Reading: The Magic Carpet to Language Learning.' If it truly is a 'magic carpet' then all we need to do is provide students with lots of graded readers at the appropriate level and it will be effective, won't it? After all, native speaker material of similar length and level is below students in terms of maturity, and the vocabulary is too hard, so it is not appropriate, is it? But how do students, if they wish to, work their way up to native speaker material and when is the appropriate time to introduce such material? Is it 'above' the construct graded readers provide, and is there a place for children's material? If you just provide a lot of material, students will read, won't they? Does one actually need to build a bridge between native speaker material and readers? All these are very important questions.

Background: Extensive Reading (ER) at Kyoto Sangyo University

I love Extensive Reading!! I love reading but all I read in English last year [*in high school*] wasn't really interesting. It wasn't story and I had lots of words I didn't know, so I didn't like the way. [*it was taught?*] But the Extensive Reading books are really interesting and I can finish reading most books within 1 hour and there is a goal. I can have fun reading!

(First-year Kyoto Sangyo University English Major transcribed from learning diary with errors intact by Tom Robb. Italics have been added by the author.)

There can no longer be any doubt ER is a valid

approach, and, as the above quote shows, students find it new and interesting. The fact that it is based on stories, there can be clear goals (for example, in numbers of words) and students can finish reading a whole book in a relatively short period makes it very appealing to students. The program is obviously working for some students, but how did this approach start out at Kyoto Sangyo University (Sandai)?

ER began at Sandai in 1988 with SRA materials for native speakers for in-class use, and a range of native speaker literature for outside class reading. Students wrote reports to track their reading and teachers wheeled carts of books into class for students to take out. In 2002, this changed with the library's willingness to put the books into the reserved section of the library and the adoption of the Accelerated Reading program from Renaissance Learning to track student reading. At this time, the limitations of the program meant that only one hundred of the graded readers that had started making an appearance could be included. The books being used at the time were, for the most part, what are now higher-level books in the Sandai scale (levels seven to ten), and lower students in particular struggled to read them.

The graded reader limitations, the level of the books involved, and a range of problems and challenges in administering the program led to the development in 2007 of the MoodleReader module, an on-line test-based tracking program, by the English department of the Faculty of Foreign Languages. It soon became apparent that this approach was much more promising, and it was made part of the General Education courses for the entire university soon after. This was accompanied by the library's willingness to

organize ER books into a special section and by level. Students now began reading at much lower levels (levels 1 to 5) and the vast majority of books students were reading were graded readers. Sandai soon had almost 3,500 students doing ER and around 8,000 books in the library. The English department students were reading the largest amount of material, often at the higher levels, and many of them found it very beneficial, as the above quote by a first year student and the following quote by a second-year student show:

Although I had read a couple of English books before, I did not like English books. However, I was forced to read English books as one of English programs in university. In the beginning, I didn't like it, but nowadays I like to do it and I am interested in English classic books.

(Male second-year English Major on ER)

ER purists would argue that doing online tests to track reading (the core concept of MoodleReader) is detrimental to the approach, but the above quote from a high-level English major shows the benefits. Many students read slowly and intensively, do not have a reading habit, and are busy with clubs and part-time jobs, and so they need to be made to regularly read easy material for overall understanding. The above quote shows that this worked for this student—but what does he mean by classic books? Native speaker books such as *Jane Eyre*? In a follow-up interview with the same student, he stated this was not the case. He had been made to read some native speaker children's chapter books and found them interesting and challenging, but had also discovered how 'safe' the world of graded readers was, and had gone straight back to reading only graded readers. This was a mature (in his thirties), top-level second-year English major who had already read over 400,000 words and was at university as he wanted to be a secondary school English teacher. Was this reluctance to tackle native-speaker literature a good thing? And what is the difference between graded readers and native-speaker youth literature that creates this reluctance?

Graded Readers vs Native Speaker Youth Literature.

Here is an excerpt from *The Moonspinners* (Stewart, 1991), an Oxford Bookworms stage 4 book that is level 7 on the Sandai scale:

It all started when the big, white bird flew out of the shiny leaves and yellow flowers. It rose up suddenly and turned away towards the mountains. I followed it. What else could I do in the middle of such a bright April day, at the foot of the White Mountains of Crete? The road was hot and dusty, but the valley was green and full of the sound of water. (p. 1)

In contrast, here is an excerpt from *Oliver Moon and the Potion Commotion* (Mongredien, 2006) from a new and popular chapter book series:

Oliver Moon was the hardest working junior wizard at Magic School. He was smashing at Spellcraft. He was tip-top at Toad Training. And as for his broomstick flying... it was absolutely brilliant. "One of our most promising pupils," Mrs. MacLizard, the head teacher, had written on his last school report. "If he could just perfect his potion brewing, he'd be dynamite." ... Oliver knew his mum and dad weren't the worst witch and wizard in the world. Not quite. They hadn't "Gone Good" like Hattie Toadtrumper's mum and dad. (p. 7-8)

What is the difference? First and foremost is the richness of the literary language. *Oliver Moon* is full of descriptive language—similes, metaphors and idioms—and, even in such a short excerpt, there is wordplay, culturally specific information and language (the UK use of the word 'brilliant'), and sarcasm or social commentary ('Gone good'). All of these make the text more interesting, give students an appreciation of the power and role of language, and require imagination and cultural or genre understanding to follow. Books like *Oliver Moon* are the training wheels on the bicycle that takes the young reader towards the world of adult literature, and the use and appreciation of these literary concepts are all skills L2 students need. People read books for a wide variety of reasons, and gain a great deal from them—an examination of universal themes, appreciation of how language works, or an understanding of culture, a country or an idea. Graded readers are often written for international markets and content needs to be 'safe' and 'universally usable'. While this is laudable and reading a great deal of them helps students develop reading endurance, it means that graded readers cannot provide as full an experience as what might be considered in certain cultures a 'flawed' or

‘inappropriate’ native speaker book, so students need exposure to native speaker texts. However, these texts present considerable hurdles in terms of background knowledge and skills. For language learners, the problem of language difficulty can be overcome by giving visual support—and the use of visual references in children’s literature makes it ideal in this respect. But is it appropriate in terms of maturity for an adult L2 learner?

Children’s literature is by no means only for children. The memories of the books we knew when we were young are very strong, as can be shown in the reaction of any Japanese university-level class in being shown and read *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* (Carle, 1969), a book that has been translated into Japanese and is universally known and loved. In fact, children’s books can be very entertaining for the adult reader—they have to be, or parents would not willingly read them again and again to children. The challenge of working through a Dr. Seuss tongue-twister will send any adult L2 class into paroxysms of laughter, and chapter books such as *Nate the Great* (Sharmat, 1972) that provide such an entertaining satire of the detective genre are sure to draw some sniggers:

My name is Nate the Great. I am a detective.
I work alone. Let me tell you about my last case:
I had just eaten breakfast. It was a good breakfast.
(p.7)

In addition, there is a growing trend in publishing to produce children’s literature for an adult audience. Titles such as *Where’s Bin Laden?* (Lalic, 2006), written and drawn like *Where’s Wally* (Handford, 1987), *Go the F**k to Sleep* (Mansbach, 2011) for the worn out parent, and *B is for Beer* (Robbins, 2009) are all great examples of this.

Books written for children thus can provide mature learners of English a more approachable, wide range of exposure to common elements of genre, a wide range of literary tools, and the ability to interact with a book (in considering such elements as the writer’s environment and life and the values of the society they inhabit) in a way that is very similar to the way they learnt through their own language’s literature. In addition, publishers often spend far more money on the presentation of children’s books, and so they are often much more visually appealing than the average graded reader.

Graded Readers and Native Speaker Literature at Sandai

Graded readers are extremely important in ER. They provide a safe, controlled environment that is carefully edited for content that is ‘appropriate’ to develop student reading habits and confidence. However, students do need to be helped to cross the bridge to the wild, challenging and exciting lands of native speaker literature and learn to handle such elements as the irregular grammar, new and old slang, invented words and sarcasm and social commentary. To do so, from the curriculum as well as resource point of view, we at Sandai felt the need to make native speaker literature and reading present and on the radar by:

- 📖 Having it on campus and accessible, with tours to orientate students and teachers (many of whom recall little of their own reading material as children and lack knowledge of what is available today),
- 📖 Having it integrated into the program and familiar to students by having it part of the range of choices available for reading outside of class as well as in class-use sets, and
- 📖 Making it an achievable goal for students and for teachers by ensuring that not only is it there, integrated and available, but that it is also not overwhelming. Simply providing a range of thick classics printed in black and white is not going to make a student confident enough in their reading ability to borrow one. Books need to be chosen carefully for difficulty and length.

To achieve these ends, we have included native speaker material, starting with reading program material such as Oxford Reading Tree at the lowest level, in all the levels of our reading program. While the level chart provided to students divides the selection of books available between graded readers and native speaker books, the latter are on the same shelves as the graded readers, mixed in by author, and not divided by series. It should be noted that the placement of native speaker books in levels with readers has been achieved through a mix of the Yomiyasusa level (<http://www.seg.co.jp/>), Lexile Measure (<http://www.lexile.com/>), and the length, the reasoning for which would take another whole paper.

In terms of curriculum, the reading program for English majors starts in the first year and is MoodleReader centered. The aims are primarily using

graded readers to develop student reading habits and help them find a level they are comfortable with, while hopefully on the way giving them the chance to begin to sample the native speaker material built into the program. This is similar to the goals in the General Education classes, where, regrettably, the structure of the curriculum means students only do Extensive Reading for one year.

In the second year, the English majors' reading program continues to be based on MoodleReader, where students have more and more choice of native speaker material as they work their way up the levels. In class, teachers are encouraged to introduce a range of native speaker genres including children's picture books, chapter books and short novels. Students are given extra points for reading native speaker material and many teachers also have a native speaker youth literature text (for example, *Kensuke's Kingdom*, Morpungo, 1999) for guided reading.

At the same time, students are offered a range of elective courses based on reading material, such as a lecture course on children's literature in English, in addition to the more traditional American and British literature courses taught in Japanese. Teachers are also encouraged to use literature in a range of other courses, one example being a lecture course on Australia where the teacher brings in thirty Australian children's books. Students read most of them in one class and choose one to write a report on.

We also feel it important to provide future reading material for students beyond the program, so we provide a range of popular appropriate materials that students may be interested in borrowing in the future. This takes the form of a 'Books for Fun' section in the library, made up of 6 sections including manga and graphic novels, picture books, graded readers with no tests, native speaker chapter books and youth and adult literature. To make books more accessible to teachers for class-use we created a mini-library in our Language Laboratory (LL) center which is very near many classrooms that includes sets of readers to take to class and a second extensive 'Books for Fun' section.

Conclusion

Graded readers should be the core of any Extensive Reading program, but they should not be seen as a complete replacement for the very enjoyable and valid ER material that can be found in children's or

youth literature. Nor should graded readers be seen as a stepping stone to native speaker literature, with all native speaker literature treated as a level above the readers. Wealth of choice is an important part of the ER approach, and children's or youth literature should be part of that choice at all levels. In this way, the children's or youth literature becomes a bridge to more challenging native speaker literature—a bridge that exists alongside the readers, and is available at the same time as the readers. This would aid in gradually giving students the skills that reading native speaker literature demands, skills that children's or youth literature often sets out to encourage far more actively than graded readers do. Teachers may need to help students find their way over the bridge by bringing those texts into class and helping students to see beyond what may initially be difficult language or concepts to find a way to enjoy and appreciate the stories and ideas in the literature. A bridge between readers and native material is necessary and students do need help in crossing it—but they need to be given some flexibility in when and how they cross it, and so elements of the bridge need to be available at all levels.

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