

# How Can I Get Extensive Reading Into My Local Library? Background, Challenges and Possible Approaches



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Understanding and use of Extensive Reading (ER) in English education is rapidly spreading through secondary and tertiary education in Japan. The growing stress on lifelong education and the need for large numbers of books would seem to make it ideal for public libraries as well, but it is proving difficult to persuade the average local library to invest in such a program. This paper attempts to explain the reasons for this through an outline of the history of Japanese public libraries and a discussion of related management and purchasing issues and staff beliefs, while outlining one success story.

In placing Extensive Reading (ER) books into local libraries in Japan, there are a range of very significant barriers and challenges that must be surmounted. Not only is there a lack of understanding of the ER approach, a factor perhaps to be expected, there are also serious problems relating to the nature of the libraries themselves. To understand these, an understanding of the history of public libraries in Japan along with the library facility and book management systems is required.

## Public Libraries in Japan: A Brief History

Prior to the Meiji period, the needs of the reading public (in 1817, it was estimated 70% of Edo's more than one million inhabitants were literate) were met through book-lending shops and private and shrine collections made public. Modern public libraries run by civil government did not appear until the opening of the first library in 1872. However, public education had priority, so funds were limited, stacks were often closed and fees were charged. Libraries had little effect for the first fifty years. From the 1920s until the end of World War II, libraries were seen to have an ideological role in nation building and funding remained limited to the extent that many libraries in 1930 could only buy 60 books a year (Domier, 2007).

After the war, the 1950 New Library Law was passed where, for the first time, books were to be lent for free and libraries were to meet local needs. However, funding was scarce and libraries were primarily seen as a place for educational material and study, not casual visiting. Private *kodomo bunko* (private collections of children's books open to the

public) and book-lending shops filled the void. It was not until the late 1960s that, sparked by a 1963 Japan Library Association report and Japan's rapid economic growth, modern, free public libraries began to take off (Kawasaki, Yamaguchi & Takashima, 1996). In the 1970s and 80s, there was a 'rush' to build local libraries, but the numbers even today are some of the lowest among developed countries. This rapid expansion was followed by serious reductions in funding due to the ongoing economic gloom over the last decade. Reductions in funding at a time when there is a growing need for expensive computer systems has created additional challenges for Japanese public libraries, many of which still operate under a service model centred on circulation of physical books; a model that arguably no longer caters to the needs of society (Nagata, 2007).

## Kyoto City and Iwakura Library

Kyoto city, while hosting the Kyoto prefectural library, maintaining library rooms in community centers, and running *idotoshokan* (libraries on wheels), did not have a 'library' building until 1981, and Iwakura, the library that is the focus of this paper and a good example of a typical local library, was not built until 1995.

Iwakura library is a relatively small but new facility housing 57,000 books and servicing the northern half of Sakyo-ku in the north of Kyoto city. This area is actually very extensive and the head librarian, Nakata-san, has chosen to focus his efforts primarily on Iwakura proper. At the moment the library has, according to Nakata-san, between ten and twenty thousand users, with two to three

thousand being regular users. The majority of those are housewives and children, and this is reflected in the range of books offered—children’s picture books, elementary school children’s literature and study support, and a range of adult material including novels and a range of hobbies, travel and home-related information. This is fairly typical of a small- to medium-sized library.

When I first approached the library, the only English books were a small range of dictionaries and a small range of dated Ladybird basal readers all of which were almost never borrowed. Visits to other local libraries in Kyoto found a range of children’s books and some classics, the majority of which also did not seem to have been borrowed. The most extensive collection of several thousand titles was in Daigo, but there were no graded readers and the borrowing of English books seemed limited.

### Library Facility and Book Management Systems

Management and staffing, funding, the usual method of purchasing books and staff beliefs all create significant difficulties in introducing ER to public libraries. Public servants (who are regularly rotated in and out of other areas of the public service), not professional librarians, are often in charge. In addition, staff pay rates are not high and trained librarians make up only half of the staff (JLA, n.d.). In addition, Nataka-san and the Japanese Library Association (JLA) warn that outsourcing and further funding cuts are becoming common, with resulting lower book budgets and fewer professional librarians in libraries. JLA statistics (n.d.) show that despite a fifty percent increase in the number of public libraries between 1993 and 2008, there has been a slight decrease in total numbers of staff and a steady decline in the per library budget for materials. With these budget cuts, reduced staffing and the emphasis on circulation, staff are often too busy and inadequately trained to deal with the demands that establishing an ER collection would require.

Funding for new purchases is often relatively limited. While budgets vary from city to city, Nakata-san informed me that the average main library of a city might have one half to one million books, while satellite libraries would usually have around one hundred thousand books and a budget for new books of ten million yen. This is born out by 2008 statistics

published by the JLA (JLA, n.d.). This means that a purchase of a full set of Oxford Reading Tree and Oxford Bookworms, a good start but by no means anywhere near enough for an effective program, would represent more than four percent of the annual budget, and they would need replacement with wear and tear. Kyoto City has nineteen satellite libraries, which is more than many cities. As a result, the budget for each library is relatively small. Iwakura has six million yen a year to buy new books. Even a medium-sized facility such as Fushimi library in Kyoto with three times the number of books as Iwakura will only have a budget of about twenty million yen a year, not a large budget for the population they are serving.

Purchasing practices also present a challenge. The average library relies on a company called TRC (<http://www.trc.co.jp>), with its weekly publication and online database of books published. Upon purchase, TRC provides the book labeled for each library and, through a TRC MARC number, a data package which allows easy installment of new purchases on the local system (there being no one system for libraries in Japan). According to Nakata-san, TRC has a long-standing policy of no *yousho* (Western books—the English link on their website does not even work!) and so local libraries, if they do purchase English books, need to input the information themselves. Local libraries can scan in the ISBN barcode, but the computer systems do not seem to be programmed to use the ISBN data that can be accessed over the net. The title, author and associated information for each book must be input by hand. This considerably slows things down—in donating books to Iwakura, I found that they were processing books at the pace of about ten a week.

With the introduction of compulsory English classes in elementary school and libraries’ traditional focus on elementary school, there is a feeling among library staff that something needs to be done in terms of English. Staff have an understandable lack of knowledge of ER and their own English education and beliefs lead to a range of concerns about the approach. The first and foremost is the question why such material should be in a public library. If someone is interested in studying English, they should go to a language school or buy the material themselves. A public library has limited space and funding. The idea that someone might want to build up their English through a lot of easier books to handle a higher level

book as opposed to just slogging through the well-known higher level book with a dictionary takes careful explaining.

I have now worked with staff at three public libraries and I have found the easiest explanation is that ER is just like learning to read Japanese—you start at shorter easy books and work your way up—and it is just like the ‘Let’s read 100 books’ programs that many public libraries and elementary schools have for Japanese books already. But it cannot stop with an outline of ER for staff and an introduction to the materials. The most effective way to win a librarian over is to offer your own services—to do ER lectures, book readings, children’s readings, or reading activities. As has been shown at Iwakura, once there is an active group of English material users who have a reason to come regularly, books that have in the past just gathered dust on the shelves begin to move and the users often take home a mix of Japanese as well as English titles—thus increasing overall circulation. A children’s English session brings not only children, but also the mothers—many of whom want to improve their English as well, and there is your initial group of graded reader users.

### What Books to Buy?

Once you have won a library over, the next challenge is what books to purchase. The first purchase for Iwakura involved a budget of 100,000 yen that purchased around 40 children’s picture books (including classics like *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* (Carle, 1969), *Little Bear* (Minarik & Sendak, 1957) and a range of Dr Seuss titles along with titles that had been made into movies like *Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs* (Barrett, 1978), all the Cambridge readers available at the time (77 titles with no CDs), and a small selection of young adult/adult material that could be seen as a logical follow-up or supplement to readers. These included some Roald Dahl, the first Harry Potter titles and titles like *Eragon* (Paolini, 2002). A small area in front of the main counter was set aside for the English section and ER came to Iwakura.

The first session was to start with a book reading and activities for children, and was to be followed by an adult session. On the day, it proved that both the planning of the sessions and the range and number of books were woefully inadequate (as will be discussed in the following section.) I immediately purchased and donated a further thirty thousand yen of books to fill

holes, mainly for younger children. Over the following year I continued donating some titles (and Nakata san also allowed me to purchase a further 100,000 yen in Oxford Bookworms titles, youth chapter books and children’s books.) I have since also begun gradually donating the Oxford Reading Tree books my son was finished with.

Iwakura now has over 500 English books, but about half at any one time are checked out—with most books usually being taken out once a month. There are never enough books on the shelves to offer a decent choice and it is not only local people borrowing. People come from all over Kyoto for the children’s sessions and many of the graded readers are being taken out on inter-library loan, with some titles not coming back for several months, and others being lent to neighboring prefectures. Nakata-san wants to build the collection up to 1,000 titles and we are currently working to increase the number of libraries with ER materials. Iwakura itself needs to purchase the Cengage Foundaton series to provide a stepping stone into the Cambridge and Oxford graded readers for those, such as some junior high school students, who find Oxford Reading Tree does not suit them.

### Who are you catering to?

Public libraries have a wide range of users and, as discussed above, just adding some graded readers is not enough. In discussing ER with Nakata-san we both agreed that we needed to cater to a wide range of ages—from a range of simple picture books for elementary school children to a selection of books to be read by adults once they have worked their way through graded readers and native speaker youth literature. Even so, as mentioned above, we were not prepared for the first session. Around thirty to forty people turned up and they included mothers with babies who wanted to expose their children to English, pre-schoolers who had already studied some English, the entire *gakudo* (aftercare) contingent from the elementary school next door, mothers with children of various ages (some who had lived overseas), fathers who wanted to start their junior high school children on something, several private English teachers looking for material for their classes and a wide range of adult learners, which included some rather colorful characters.

Subsequent ER sessions provided further surprises, with many people having unreasonable

expectations of the power of ER. I still remember being asked, "So, how will this help me in improving my accent in singing Country and Western music?" by a man with a considerable speech impediment. It soon became obvious that focusing only on one group, especially in a relatively small local library, was just not possible, and that our original idea of providing to a wide range of users was essential. Every group has multiple needs. Adult learners want to help their school-aged children as well, and mothers who came to expose their babies to English want to read themselves. The trick then becomes how one provides a decent amount of material for each group, many of which overlap, without compromising the need for a breadth of coverage. At Iwakura, we are still struggling with this.

### The Final Element—Luck

The reason Extensive Reading has taken off at Iwakura is one person—the head of the library, Nakata-san. He was the first person I approached and I was lucky. He speaks English, was responsible for the rather extensive English collection in Daigo library, and is unusual in being a public servant who has worked in public libraries for twenty years. He has the reputation of being different, and is a talented amateur musician. The fortnightly children's picture book reading sessions begin with him hosting an interactive version of Head, Shoulders, Knees and Toes with guitar accompaniment by a volunteer, and, a year and a half into the program, he has each of the staff taking turns to do something like read an English book, sing a song or do some sort of activity using English. Several staff members have become interested in ER, and I am constantly being informed of how popular and widespread the interest in the ER collection at Iwakura is. However, this has taken time. Nakata-san originally agreed to put in the ER books as I said I was willing to do the children's sessions and he wanted more English books in the library. It has taken him the best part of a year to truly understand ER, and the purchasing, processing and organizing of books has been a long and drawn-out process. Nevertheless, it has definitely been worthwhile and continues to be an on-going story—many aspects of which, due to the limits of space, have had to be omitted here.

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