

signed agreement of the participants. The participants were paid for their time.

Factors that could have influenced the findings

When conducting this kind of research, it is vital for researchers to reflect upon the influence that they may have had on their findings. In this case, the ideal of the unstructured interview was perhaps compromised to some extent by the fact that the interviewees perceived me as a teacher and expected me to take the lead. It took time and patience to encourage them to volunteer information rather than wait to be asked specific questions. I was surprised at how honest and frank all the students were in their opinions. The fact that I was a teacher, and to a certain extent, a figure of authority, did not seem to worry them. This may have been due to my reassurances that they would remain anonymous and that all they said would be treated as confidential. A further surprise was that, in the case of pairs, they were not afraid to disagree with each other in some matters. It was clear that there was no reluctance to express their true opinion in front of one another.

The only time when I became strongly aware that a student had shown deference to me as a teacher was when transcribing a section of an interview in Japanese where I had tried to confirm my understanding of something said in Japanese. I had done this by summarizing in my own words the point the student had made. In retrospect, I realized my mistake, for not only had I summarized the student's words incorrectly, but the student had also concurred with my summary at the time, no doubt wishing to spare the teacher's blushes by not correcting her mistake. Experts in this kind of ethnographic research advise against summarizing an interviewee's words for this very reason.

Results

Some students were clearly enthusiastic readers and the number of words they had read by the end of the semester confirmed this. Others disliked ER but just scraped through, or stopped after reaching the minimum target, or failed at the end of the semester. Some of these students were in high-level classes, but found ER hard for reasons explained below. Other high-level students resented the amount of time ER took up and believed different kinds of study would be more beneficial for their English and/or they needed time for other courses that they considered

more relevant to their needs. For these reasons, they read only the minimum number of words required to pass the course. There were some enthusiastic readers, who had started out in low-level classes, but had made great progress in their first year and had been promoted to middle-level classes in their second year. They continued to read with enthusiasm. One student, who had always struggled with ER, was in a low-level class and failed to reach the target number of words, knowing this meant repeating the course next year.

Some characteristics of enthusiastic ER readers

A characteristic shared by all these students was having a clear goal for their English studies in terms of a career, a plan to study overseas, or even a target TOEFL score. Another shared characteristic was having parents and/or siblings who enjoy reading. They were read to as children and their mothers, especially, encouraged them to read when they were young by providing books, thus enabling them to become independent readers of Japanese at an early age. Many of these students were encouraged to read in elementary and secondary schools by school policies or teachers' recommendations. Reading books was already part of their daily life by the time they reached university.

The enthusiastic students were able to cope with the heavy reading load of the ER program for a number of reasons. First, they were willing to push themselves, but also they liked to be pushed. This is no doubt related to their strong sense of purpose in raising their English proficiency level, but mixed with the realization that, if ER were not a course requirement, they would probably not read as much on their own initiative. They set time aside to read when commuting, or in their own room, or at the library. Moreover, they would take a quiz soon after reading and write a report while the book was fresh in their mind. Neither form of assessment was seen as a burden, rather as a confirmation of their understanding. This may have contributed to the fact that they enjoyed most of the books they read. Another motivating factor was no doubt their belief that ER has helped them improve their English and their reading skills. They shared the belief that practice is the key to better and faster reading. They said that a positive attitude to ER among their classmates can help and that hard-working students and an element of competitiveness can inspire them. Perhaps the key factor, however, was that all these students, regardless

of their English level, said that they could read and understand directly in English. They no longer felt a need to translate into Japanese in order to be confident they understood what they read.

Some characteristics of reluctant ER readers

These students did not have a clear goal for their English studies or career path. Most of them were not encouraged to read when they were young and had not developed a reading habit before they became university students. Their sports, clubs, social lives, and part-time jobs took priority over reading and, in some cases, their other studies. Consequently, they let their academic work pile up and then felt pressurised when they had to read a lot by the deadline, and especially when they took a quiz, because they needed to pass to reach the target. Writing reports was seen as a burden because they rarely did this straight away and so had to re-read the book in order to remember the story. They resented having to read when they did not want to and saw it as a duty. Some of them read the minimum and stopped, not because they were lazy, but because they had other homework assignments that, for them, had equal or higher priority. The reluctant readers did not find the graded readers interesting, whatever level they were reading. Neither did they believe that ER is useful for improving their overall English skills, or even their reading skills. They believed that grammar needs to be studied in a grammar-focused class. Moreover, it took them a long time to finish each book because they would translate into Japanese rather than read directly in English. Whereas almost all students said they translated into Japanese at the start of the ER program, after the first semester the enthusiastic readers, and those who had reached the program's Level 4 (e.g. Oxford Bookworms Stage 1, Cambridge Readers Level 1, or Cengage Footprints 800), were reading directly in English. Nevertheless, even a quite high-level reluctant reader reported still feeling the need to translate into Japanese because she was not confident that she could understand if she read directly in English. The reluctant readers, and especially those with a low level of English, are not, in fact, doing extensive reading but extensive translation.

Discussion

The fact that students are not reading but translating into Japanese leads me to wonder if our ER program is as effective as I had assumed in improving both

reading and overall English skills. It is important to bear in mind that the human brain has not evolved to read; it has to be trained and reading comes more naturally to some individuals than others. Moreover, students of an orthographically transparent language like Italian can learn to read much faster and with less effort than students of an orthographically opaque language like English. Whereas there is virtually a 1:1 correspondence between the graphemes and phonemes of Italian, there is a 30:1 correspondence between the graphemes and phonemes of English. For this reason, Italian-speaking children take only a year to become competent readers, whereas English-speaking children take at least three years. Moreover, the proportion of English speakers who have reading difficulties is far higher than that of speakers of other languages. Given that learning to read English is a challenge for children who already have a command of the spoken language, it is clearly even more so for Japanese learners of English, and especially for those who may not be very skillful or practiced readers of Japanese. There is strong evidence that reading experience rather than chronological age plays an important role in the development of the visual word form area of the brain and that even languages with writing systems as different as Japanese and English are processed in that same area of the brain. This makes me wonder if some of our reluctant ER readers, who do not read much in Japanese, may be at more of a disadvantage than we had realized when required to read a large quantity of English. They may have a reading difficulty in Japanese, or simply not be such practiced readers as others. If this is the case, the playing field may not be as even as we had imagined. More attention needs to be given at the outset to identify students who are not keen or regular readers of Japanese, possibly through a questionnaire at the start of the first year. This could be followed up with an interview and an English reading fluency test, such as reading aloud to the teacher. If such students are judged to have a reading difficulty, an alternative program could be discretely devised with lower targets and additional auditory support using books with CDs. Such students should be encouraged to read as much as possible, because they *do* need the reading practice, but with a realistic goal and without the threat of failing the course.

Further investigation is needed into the relationship between developing Japanese reading

skills and a reading habit at an early age and the possible transfer of these skills along with a willingness to try to read in English. There are possible implications for the value of encouraging ER in Japanese throughout the school years as well as for promoting ER at an early stage of English study. English teachers in elementary and junior high schools can assist students in building their English reading skills by using phonetic symbols and not *katakana* to transcribe English phonemes and by increasing awareness of the English spelling system from the start through the use of phonics. The more students are introduced to the inconsistencies of English orthography, the more opportunity they will have to become familiar with them and to be able to decode new words phonologically with greater efficiency. The sooner they can do this, the sooner they will be able to recognize words automatically and increase their reading speed and comprehension.

Finally, it must be remembered that these discussion points have arisen from the findings of an initial study of a small sample and that they will need to be followed up with more ethnographic and empirical research.

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