

How Word Count Counts in EFL Extensive Reading

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Monitoring students' progress remains an issue with Extensive Reading (ER). The focus of this abridged paper is the quantity of ER (how much students read), as opposed to the quality of ER (how well students read). I explore how word count data can provide a helpful tool for monitoring students' accomplishments, drawing upon a longitudinal case study, in which three Japanese university students' two-year experiences of ER were compared. The number of titles that the three participants read revealed consistent and similar increases. However, by counting the total number of words read, as well as the average number of words per title in each semester, the development of reading proficiency was detected in different students at different times. The pedagogical implication for instructors teaching ER in an EFL setting is that students' reading amount and fluency development can be more effectively assessed using word count data.

The teacher's role in an ER class is to engage students in their reading experience and to ensure they read in large amounts (Day & Bamford, 1998; Takase, 2010). However, most students in any educational context cannot be expected to read smoothly and fluently in their second, or foreign, language, simply with the accompaniment of easier and shorter reading materials in ER class. Teachers need to keep track of what and how much students read, so this information can serve as the basis of the teachers' guidance.

This paper explores how word count can serve as a parameter for monitoring students' progress in EFL ER classes. Drawing upon a two-year longitudinal case study at a university in Saitama, I compared three Japanese EFL participants, all of whom were struggling to read in English at the onset. I selected three "typical" students, limiting the number of participants in order to gain in-depth understanding of how the students were actually reading.

Quantity and Quality of Reading

Monitoring ER has two aspects: quality and quantity. When the focus is on the quality of students' reading, the teacher might want to know how well students are reading and whether they sufficiently understand the reading materials. Most reading tests that are given in a limited period of time focus on reading quality. Likewise, reading comprehension checks, short reactions, or summary writing assignments are customarily used to monitor the quality of reading in ER classes. On the other hand, the quantity of ER is the question of how much students read. One common

way to assess the reading quantity is by keeping track of the number of pages that students read (Waring, 2000; Robb & Susser, 1989). Thus, some teachers may give students page requirements for ER class. Another option is monitoring time spent on reading (Hedgcock & Ferris, 2009), yet; in that case, it is mostly based on students' self-reporting which tends to be quite unreliable.

Probably the two most frequently used parameters are the number of titles read and the number of words read. The former is considerably more convenient and easy to grasp. For instance, Nation (2009) recommends that learners read at least one graded reader per week, and preferably, 30 titles in a year (p.56). The latter parameter is gaining popularity in Japan based on the recent accessibility of information on the word counts of graded readers and children's books (Furukawa et al., 2010).

The Study

Research Purpose

The purpose of this study was to compare three parameters for tracking EFL learners' reading quantity in their two-year ER practice. The parameters explored were: the number of titles read, the number of words read, and the average word counts of the books read. The average word counts were calculated by dividing the total number of words read by the total number of titles read.

Participants and Data Collection

The participants of this study comprised of three male students enrolled in ER classes, within the

undergraduate law department at a university in Saitama, Japan. The researcher, I, was the class instructor. Participants were selected on the basis of their English ability levels (low to high beginner level), length of ER practice (two complete years), and completion of accurate reading logs. I refer to the three participants as A, B, and C, and all of them were between the ages of 19 and 20, when they started ER. In the case of B and C, the students registered for the ER class under the compulsory English subject guidelines, followed by the two consecutive semester-long elective ER classes the next year. In contrast, Student A followed the required classes by reading on his own through the means of borrowing books from the instructor as well as from the university library.

The data used in this study included students' reading logs with the following information: dates, books titles, reading levels (YL), word counts of the books the students read, and students' short reactions to the books read in a few Japanese sentences. In addition, the instructor's observation notes and in-class conferences with the students were also used to support quantitative data.

ER Class

The ER classes met for 90 minutes once a week, about 13-15 times in each half-year semester. The class time was essentially devoted to ER. The students were provided with the classroom library, brought into class on one or two multi-shelf book carts, which contained picture books for English-speaking children learning to read (e.g., Oxford Reading Tree, I Can Read Books) and graded readers for English learners (e.g., Foundations Reading Library, Penguin Readers, Cambridge English Readers, Macmillan Readers, Oxford Bookworm Library). The university library also had an abundant cache of various reading

materials in English.

The students were encouraged to read English books that they could follow without consulting an English-Japanese dictionary, and to focus on grasping the storyline instead of making an effort to mentally translate each English sentence into Japanese. The aim of using very short reading materials with ample illustrations was to allow students to experience reading fluency in their foreign language without checking each word.

Results and Discussion

The First Semester

During the first semester, there was no discernable difference among the three students' reading. Student A read 103 titles with 31,470 words, B read 145 titles with 17,947 words, and C read 107 titles with 18,336 words. At the first class session, students were provided with one title from the Penguin Readers Easystarts series (200 headwords), with 900-1,000 words, which they read for 10 minutes. All three students reported difficulty in reading their book in one sitting. In the first semester, they mainly read reading materials with a small number of words and ample illustration.

Number of Titles Read

Regarding the cumulative numbers of titles read, a constant increase is shown in Figure 1.

Student A read 346 titles, and Student B 361 titles, whereas Student C read less, having completed 252 titles by the end of the second year. The qualitative data based on observation and reading logs revealed that Student C was having considerable trouble reading extensively throughout the two years. On the other hand, Student A and B exhibited notable advances in terms of reading levels either in the first year or in the second year and were well aware of their accomplishments. These contrasts are not reflected by the straight lines in Figure 1, which illustrate a constant increase in the number of titles read from the first semester to the fourth semester.

The increase in the number of titles read may have been caused by two very different factors: Students might have been reading more, having gained reading fluency and skills, or on the contrary, they might have been having trouble reading and thus always selected only very short materials.

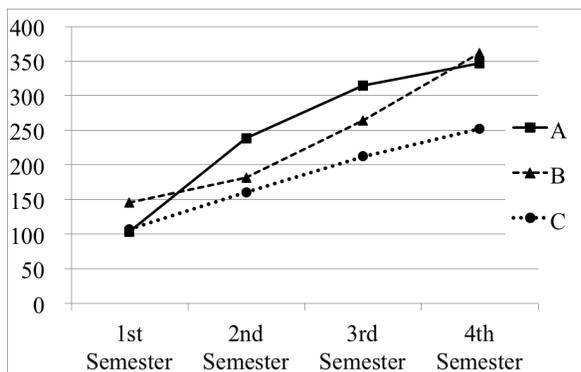


Figure 1. Total Number of Titles Read

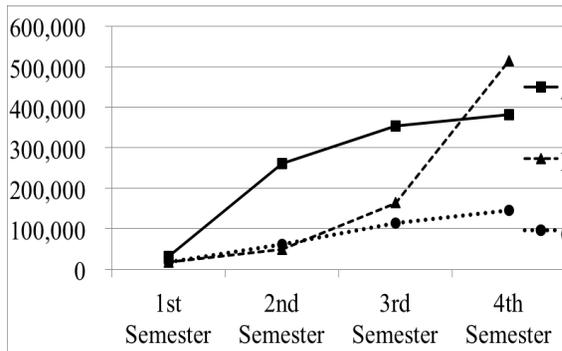


Figure 2. Total Number of Words Read

Number of Words Read

The cumulative numbers of words the three students read are shown in Figure 2.

Student A increased his reading amount in terms of word count dramatically in the second semester. Students B and C read nearly the same numbers of words, 30,569 words and 43,062 words respectively, in the first year, but only Student B's reading amount dramatically increased in the fourth semester. The total numbers of titles read by Students A and B are similar, but the total words read were quite different: Student A completed reading 381,677 words, whereas Student B read 514,501 words, 130,000 words more, in the two-year practice of ER.

It should be pointed out that the notable increase in the total number of words cannot be accomplished exclusively during in-class ER sessions. The increase in the number of words coincide with the time when the students started to spend more time on ER voluntarily and to read much longer materials: Student A started to read outside class on his own in the second semester, and Student B began doing so in the third semester.

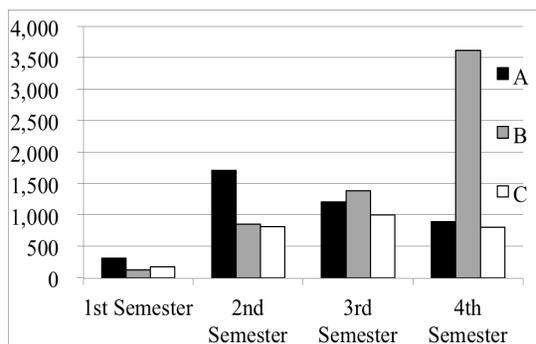


Figure 3. Average Word Count per Title in Each Semester

Average Word Count per Title

The average word count per title reflects the lengths of the books, and in general, longer reading materials are more difficult than shorter ones.

Figure 3 shows a notable increase in the average word count per title for Student B, in the fourth semester, that is, the second half of the second year. On average, the student read books with word counts of 3,618 words, which is especially striking because he was encouraged to read shorter texts as well in order to gain reading fluency. The longest texts read were approximately 10,000 words. For Student A, his reading advances were seen in the second semester, followed by a reading plateau in the second year, when he was doing ER on his own, without participating in ER class. On the other hand, it became obvious that Student C did not manifest any improvements or changes in two years, continuing to read only very short materials, and small amounts.

Conclusion

The qualitative and quantitative analyses of the data from this two-year longitudinal case study on three Japanese university students revealed that the differences between the three students' reading trajectories were not well reflected in the number of titles read. The total words read, as well as the average word count per title in each semester, revealed more precisely how much the students were reading. The word count data also showed the timing of when students started to read more fluently and in greater amounts, as well as when some of them had fallen back to their former reading levels. Also, by carefully monitoring word count data, a case in which a student did not show any improvement came to light. In summary, word count data could be a very effective parameter in assessing ER quantity.

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