

Extensive Reading: After the Honeymoon Is Over

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Since 2007, we have been using our 1440-book library of graded readers in our junior and senior high school Oral Communication classes. The excitement and hunger of first year junior high students to read 100 English books in a year was, unfortunately, replaced by apathy, a lack of motivation and a "Reading is boring!" attitude as they progressed to higher grades. So, with the initial ER honeymoon over, how can teachers continue to engage students with the learning opportunities available in an ER programme? There seem to be two main choices: 1) Force students to read as a part of their overall grade, or 2) Continually innovate and explore new ways to keep ER fresh. Doff (1988) points out that we usually read not because we *have to* but because we *want to*. Therein lies the key. As we aren't able to make an ER grade significant enough to force students to read, we have to rely on creative and motivating ideas to ensure the success of the programme.

Seibo is a 90-year-old Catholic, private girls' school with a long tradition of giving Native teachers autonomy in the classroom. Each grade has two streams: *Sougou* ("general" class, which comprises about 2/3 of the student body, and *Supaa*, ("academic" classes focusing on English, Maths and Science.) Graded reading activities take place across the board in junior high school, but are mainly restricted to *Sougou* classes in high school. The *Supaa* class is focusing on English writing and Centre listening tests, so they request speaking activities in Oral Communication class.

Our ER Programme

One challenge of starting an ER Programme with junior high school beginners was the limited range available in the "Alphabet" or "Early" stages (1-50 and 51-100 headwords respectively using the Extensive Reading Foundation Graded Readers Scale.) Therefore, we chose books aimed at native English speaking children for our beginners. Books in the "Elementary" range (301-800 headwords) were chosen to reflect the wide range of student types and interests.

A lack of consistency between different publishers' levels, and the fact that most of our students would be reading under 400 headwords, meant that we divided the titles ourselves into seven color-coded levels. Each student gets a binder and a

Table 1. Seibo's ER Programme: Level, Grades and Examples of Popular Series

Level	Grades	Number of different titles	Example of Series
Blue	J1	166	Sight Word Readers, Reading Line, High Frequency Readers, Fireflies, Hello Reader!
Green	J2, J3	137	Oxford Reading Tree (ORT) 2-4, Story Street 3, Scholastic Readers 1
Red	J3, H1	143	Welcome Books, Fireflies 3 & 4, Phonics Fun, Foundation Reading Library 1
Pink	H1, H2	108	Big Red Reader, Story Street 5, Scholastic Readers 2, Foundation Reading Library 2 & 3, ORT 6
Yellow	H1 - H3	144	Foundation Reading Library 5 & 6, ORT 7, 8, 9, Story Street 9 & 10, Fireflies 5, 6, 7
Silver	H2, H3	137	Penguin Readers 1, Egmont Books: Mr Men, Little Miss
Gold	H2, H3	87	Cambridge University Press 1-6, Black Cat 1, 2, Oxford Bookworms 1-6, Penguin Readers 2-6

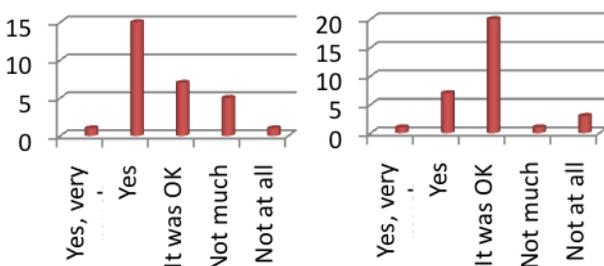
list of books. The only restriction is that "Blue" is only for J1 (Junior High first year), while all other years are free to read at a level of their own choosing.

Higher-level J1 students having read about 130 books in one year led to the J1 goal of "Let's read 100 English books this year!" This is now the case throughout the school, with students receiving a 100-square chart at the start of each academic year. Filling the chart in as they please has created an unimagined motivation, with some students reading after the end of the lesson as they wish to complete a section of the chart. For example, writing ARASHI (a Japanese band) means that six books have been read.

The Problem: From Keen to Routine

J1 students eagerly select books and read for about 15 minutes of each lesson. Reading aloud with a partner suits them best. The room is filled with a chorus of voices and questions asked in English, "What does this mean?" "How do you say this word?" Indeed, an anonymous end-of-2010-school-year questionnaire, after J1 students (N=61) had read a total of 5951 books, confirmed that the majority of students had enjoyed the readers and that all of them thought that "yes" or "maybe" it had helped them to learn English. They were then asked what they had learned from ER books: from the guided answers, 42 students selected 'vocabulary' followed by 12 for 'reading smoothly'.

Having a colourful, age and level appropriate, well-organised ER library in place, it was disheartening to read a substantial number of negative comments in a H2 Writing class in an assignment entitled "My opinion on reading English books": "Frankly speaking, I don't like reading English books", "I have felt, 'It is *tired, boring, annoying and wasting' in my junior high days" and, straight to the point, "It is boring and irritating *to me!" It wasn't all bad news,



K class (higher level) Y class (lower level)

Figure 1. 2010 J1 responses to the question, "Did you like reading English books?"

with comments like, "You *know foreign culture and thought" and "...we can learn many English words while reading. How nice it is! Nothing is *better way of learning English than this." These examples showed that some students had bought into the benefits, but what about the rest: those who don't like reading Japanese books, disregard an activity that isn't test-related or those who can't sit still?

Classroom ER Activities

For teachers in a similar or equivalent context, who may be challenged by classes that have lost some of their initial excitement for ER, the following examples of previously successful activities may be useful. The reader must adapt components of these activities to suit their own students.

Writing Original Stories using Oxford Reading Tree Wordless Stories A/B (J3, H2, 2-3 lessons)

Constant complaints of "There are no words!" originally caused the books to be taken out of circulation. Now, however, they are a springboard to an interesting third year junior high school project that is repeated in the second year of high school.

After reading a regular Oxford Reading Tree (ORT) story together as a class, the teacher selects an ORT Wordless Story and a simple story is elicited with attention being drawn to how small details make a story more interesting. Next, in pairs, students choose an ORT Wordless Story and write their own 100-150 word story guided by the illustrations. The students can use the ORT characters' real names or make up their own. The students work out how they will tell the story themselves, then practice turning the pages smoothly and maintaining eye contact with an imagined audience before memorizing their story. Finally, everyone gathers in a circle and pairs tell their story. For large classes this could be a warm-up activity over several lessons. Students vote for the best story in several categories, such as most interesting, biggest voice, best use of detail and even smoothest narrating while page turning.

As this is a popular activity, two years later, the students are handed back their stories and told to "make your old story high school level". 200-250 words are written.

Why it Works

It combines creativity, teamwork, and authenticity—students select which tense to use, support one

another through scaffolding, and use all four skills in order to complete the project.

Making Original Picture Books (H2 4-6 lessons, plus homework)

After achieving a set reading goal of 50-75 readers, second-year high school students are rewarded by becoming authors of their own handmade picture books. Completed story books join the graded readers in the ER library and can be read by other students during allocated ER time.

Students are given guidelines such as more than 500 words and 16 pages, and then, upon approval, have relatively free reign over the genre and content of their book. First they sketch out a 16-box storyboard and make notes in Japanese or English as to what happens on each page, along with a very rough idea of the illustration. Eight pages of folded heavy-stock paper are handed out to each pair on the completion of half of the story. At that stage they may start the cover page and illustrations. The students copy their story onto each page after the teacher has checked it, being reminded to take care as many people will be enjoying their book.

Why it Works

Students take great pride in their own work, grammar becomes meaningful, and the project has something for everyone as creativity and artistic sense count as much as English ability. Younger students anticipate their turn to produce an original book and enjoy reading the senior students' books.

Clifford the Big Red Dog Project (J2-3 lessons)

Lesson one—The teacher and students read "Clifford the Small Red Puppy" together. The illustrations showing Clifford getting bigger and bigger build interest. Next, in pairs, students read 15 Clifford readers together in 15 minutes. Readers closed, students are given five minutes to write as many Clifford 'facts' as they can. Things such as "Clifford is red" and "Emily likes Clifford", will be written by lower level students, whereas higher levels will write "Clifford was small at first", "T-bone looks like Pooh bear" and "Cleo's ribbon is pink".

Next, purely for fun, students watch two three-minute Clifford cartoons on YouTube ("Tummy Trouble" and "Halloween" are popular). Watching "Stage Fright", which has limited spoken English, students write down as many different English words as they can catch. Students share their answers with

their partner. The pair with the most words is the winner.

Lesson two—To maintain continuity, an unseen Clifford story is read and a vote is held to find the most popular character. In groups of 2-4, students are told that they are the character they like best. Deciding both a location and a scenario, they then write an original sketch or conversation. Students make simple character masks using coloured card stock and a chopstick.

Lesson three—After practicing enough, the groups perform in front of the class and are filmed. Students then watch the video and tell the teacher in English or Japanese their team's strong and weak points. Motivated classes usually ask for another chance.

Follow up—"The Small Red Puppy" and "We are Friends" are read to J1 who then watch the J2 videos. A listening cloze is given using one of the clearer performances.

Why it Works

The stories are fun, colourful, and offer lessons about life. While J2 students don't like being videoed or "performing" in front of peers, hiding behind a mask makes it an enjoyable experience.

Writing sequels and prequels (J3-H3)

With a partner, students select a Foundation Reading Library story. After reading it, they choose which characters they want to focus on and brainstorm "What happens next?" and/or "What happened before?" After completing notes or a mind map, they write the story together. Students swap readers with another team, then read the new story and sequel and give feedback.

Why it Works

The stories deal with teen issues and students relate to the somewhat moral messages in many of the stories. Some students feel put out that the 'bad' characters aren't punished enough or that the 'good' ones don't get justice. The activity is collaborative, with discussion time in Japanese permitted.

Other Activities that Work with Readers

Dictogloss, running dictation, sentence stretching, eliciting appropriate synonyms such as "Floppy is a dog/pet/animal/canine/creature." Teacher- or student-created quizzes, student-created cloze tests, plays (Dolphin Readers work well), telling the story in your own words (Foundation Reading Library are recommended), finding cultural differences, being

able to read a short reader aloud smoothly within a time limit, shadowing the teacher during storytelling and predicting the ending.

References

Doff, A. (1988). *Teach English*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Extensive Reading Foundation Graded Readers Scale.
<http://erfoundation.org/erf/node/44>