

Long and Easy Are the Keys to ER Success in EFL Settings

NISHIZAWA Hitoshi and YOSHIOKA Takayoshi

Toyota National College of Technology

nisizawa@toyota-ct.ac.jp

yoshioka@toyota-ct.ac.jp



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A 5-year ER program significantly improved the proficiency of Japanese EFL learners who were reluctant readers. They became frequent readers of English books, with more than half reading more than 870,000 words of English texts, and the population's average TOEIC score increased to above the national average of Japanese university students. The program consisted of 30 weekly lessons every year, each of which was a 45-minute sustained silent reading (SSR) in the college library. The program that led to this increase began with extremely easy-to-read picture books and extended the other texts over five consecutive years, suggesting that the keys to success are a long-term commitment and an emphasis on easy reading.

Although ER was considered a worthwhile approach in ESL/EFL programs (Day & Bamford, 1998), its influence on English education in Japan was rather limited until the beginning of 21st century. It did not appeal to the majority of Japanese English learners, and was unable to affect a change in their learning styles from traditional grammar translation. One of the possible reasons was the lack of long-term studies, especially in EFL settings. Studies of short-term programs could not show the apparent effectiveness of ER outside of student first impressions or their attitudes toward reading because measurable performance change required a longer time in EFL environments.

The situation changed when Sakai (2002) proposed one million words as a milestone for ER, with Sakai and Kanda (2005) proposing a detailed methodology for conducting SSR programs, and Furukawa & Itoh (2005) publishing an introductory guidebook to ER for Japanese learners. They stressed the importance of the amount of reading along with books that were easy to read. Starting with Simple Stories (SSS) is the acronym that has been generally used to identify the new method, which can be said to represent a new trend.

However, there were few ER programs where the average students actually read this amount. Furukawa (2008) reported the average reading amount of 9th graders was 677,000 words in 2.2 years of his ER program. Another ER program at a college of technology took 4 years for the median reading amount of the students to reach 690,000 words (Nishizawa, Yoshioka, and Fukada, 2010). Both

programs had durations over several consecutive years and the students' outcomes were measured by standardized tests.

Another important aspect was the readability of the books to be read. The standard book-list for ER in ESL settings, edited by Edinburgh Project on Extensive Reading (EPER) (Hill, 1997, cited in Day & Bamford, 1998, pp. 173-212) did not seem to be easy enough for Japanese EFL learners. Furukawa et al. (2005) compiled a book-list for Japanese EFL learners, which defined the Yomiyasusa level (YL), a readability scale optimized for Japanese EFL learners. Takase (2008) confirmed the positive effect of reading very easy-to-read books on Japanese university students, and pointed to it and SSR as the two most critical features of a successful ER program.

Research Questions

We would like to answer the following questions in this paper. The first question is "How many years should an ER program continue, to produce measurable improvement in typical engineering students, with one credit per year devoted to SSR lessons?" We used TOEIC to measure the effectiveness of the approach, and assumed the initial scores of the students were lower than 350.

The second question is "What is the recommended readability level for Japanese EFL learners?" We would like to compare the readability levels proposed by the book-lists of the EPER and Furukawa et al. in order to decide which is more appropriate for Japanese EFL learners and we felt that these judgments should be based on the actual

teaching experience, and on Japanese learners.

Details of the ER program

The 5-year ER program was conducted at a college of technology where the majority of students were average EFL learners. The program used a 5-year foundation course that had a cohort of 40 students aged from 16 to 20, accompanied by an additional 6th and 7th year advanced course that has 6-8 students per cohort. The program started ER lessons on April 2004 in all years simultaneously.

24 students completed the 5-year program in the 2008, 2009, and 2010 academic years. Former students also participated ER programs of shorter duration from 2004 to 2007. During the program, the students attended compulsory English lessons taught traditionally, and additionally attended weekly ER lessons for 30 weeks each year. Each of the lessons consisted of 45 minutes of SSR. The lessons were conducted in the college library, which had a large collection of easy-to-read English books including graded readers (GR) for ESL/EFL learners and picture books and leveled readers designed for English-speaking children in the U. S. The students were strongly recommended to borrow books from the library for their out-of-class readings. The students read at their own pace, without referring to dictionaries, and recorded their reading histories in logbooks. The logbooks were collected regularly before the lessons, and then returned at the beginning of the next lessons with advice from the teachers added to them. The students and teachers could always refer to the students' reading histories because the logbooks were kept by the individual students through subsequent years of the program.

The ER program had the duration of two years in 2004 and 2005, and increased in length year by year (Table 1). The median amount of English text read by

the students was less than 500,000 words until 2006 and they increased to more than 600,000 words in 2007. It increased in 2009 and 2010, even though the duration of the program was unchanged from 2008, and exceeded one million words in 2010. A longer history of conducting an ER program may have its own benefit.

Twenty 6th-year students, excluding four students who had studied in English-speaking countries for 10 months, completed the 5-year ER program in 2008, 2009, and 2010 and their median reading amount was 870,000 words. Their logbooks showed another benefit of a longer ER program in that they could read longer and more difficult books in later years although the absolute length and readability of the books differed from student to student. Most students who continued in the 4th or 5th year of the program were able to read English texts of 6,000 words or longer continuously, with a reading speed of 100 words per minute or greater, and grasp the outlines of the stories.

Improved TOEIC Scores

Improved English proficiencies of the students were measured by TOEIC tests. The central graph of Figure 1 shows the moving-average scores of the students who completed the program in the year and in the previous two years. For example, the data of 2010 along the horizontal axis shows the average of 20 students who completed the program in 2008, 2009, and 2010 years. The data was compared with the national averages of university students of all majors, university students major in English, and students of colleges of technology.

The average TOEIC score of the students in the ER program increased as the duration of the program increased. The students who completed the ER program of 2-3 years' duration in 2004, 2005, and 2006 had an average TOEIC score of 470. The students who

Table 1. Duration of the ER program and amount of reading of 6th-year students

Academic year	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
Duration	2 years		3 years	4 years	5 years		
No. of 6th-year students	7 (0)	5 (0)	8 (1)	7 (3)	6 (0)	8 (0)	6 (4)
Amount of reading *(Med.) Min.-Max.	(264) 85-1,250	(453) 271-589	(453) 97-6,030	(664) 367-1,210	(604) 391-3,120	(749) 596-10,690	(1,257) 389-1,546

(0) students who had stayed in English-speaking countries. Their data were excluded from the study.

* thousand words.

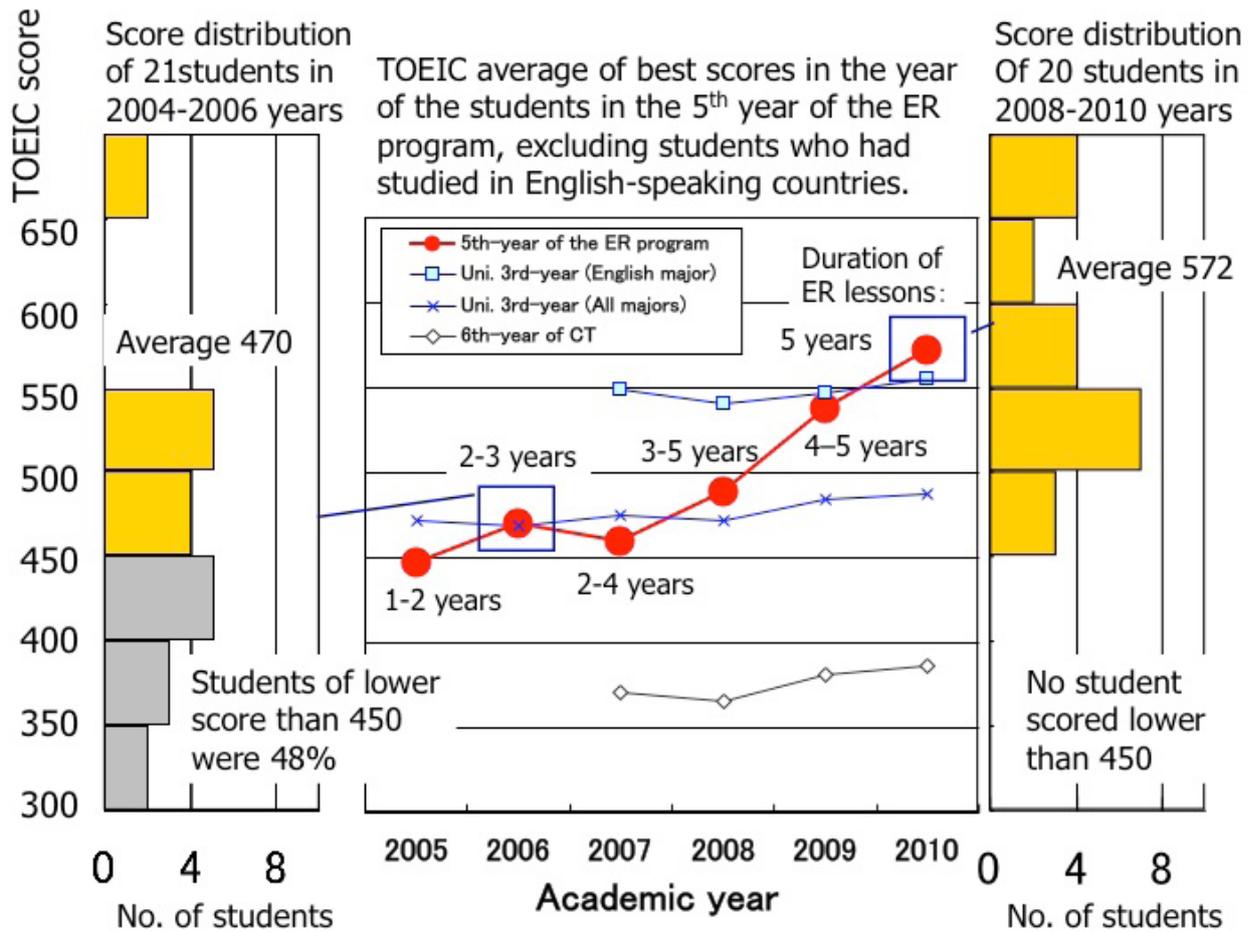


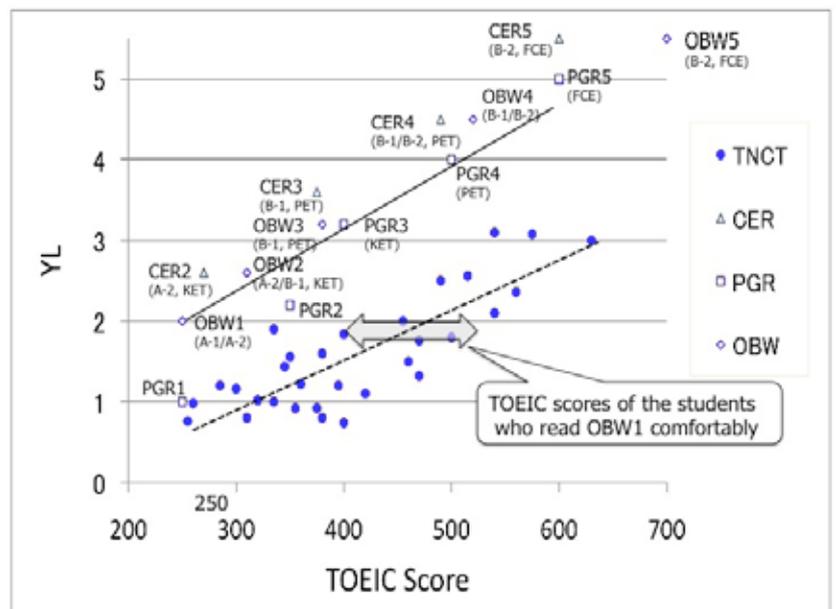
Figure 1. TOEIC scores of the 5-year ER program

completed the 5-year ER program in 2008, 2009, and 2010 showed an increase in their average score to 572, which is higher than the national average of 3rd-year university students majoring in English (555: ETS, 2011), who were supposed to have more English lessons.

The left and right graphs of Figure 1 show score distributions of the students who completed the ER program in 2004 - 2006 and 2008 - 2010 respectively. The comparison of the two distributions shows that the 5-year program not only improved the proficiency of average and higher performers, but also of the lowest performers.

Readability level of the books

The optimum readability level for EFL learners seemed to be different from that of ESL learners, and the level of suitable books was far easier than one



TNCT: Toyota National College of Technology
 CER1: Cambridge English Readers Level 1
 PGR2: Penguin Readers Level 2
 OBW3: Oxford Bookworms Library Stage 3

Figure 2. Readability levels of recommended English books

would expect. The solid line in Figure 2 shows the recommended readability levels proposed by Mateer (2009), which were roughly equal to the recommended readability levels of the EPER, along with the student's TOEIC scores. The vertical axis is scaled in YL defined by Furukawa et al. (2005). The broken line shows the relation of actual YLs read by the students in the 5-year ER program and their TOEIC scores. The broken line is located approximately 200 points higher than the solid line. Our observation tells that the students whose TOEIC scores are 250 are unable to read Oxford Bookworms Level 1 (OBW1) without translating every English text into Japanese but the students of TOEIC 450 can read the same book fluently without translation.

Conclusion

While the number of students involved in this study is limited, this study covers a much longer time frame than previous studies, and strongly suggests that a longer duration of the program coupled with books whose readability is much easier are the actual factors to the success of an ER program in EFL settings. Given that it is difficult to assign more than one credit per year for SSR lessons of the ER program, our study suggests that it would require four or five years to obtain significant improvement in the students' proficiency in English. The second point, that at least the first or second year of the ER program needs to be designed so that students read much easier books than the ones recommended for the ER of ESL learners is also something to be taken into consideration by designers of ER programs.

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