

Investigating the Effects of Extensive Reading on TOEIC® Reading Section Scores



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This paper reports on a study that investigated whether the effects of student participation in an Extensive Reading (ER) program could be measured by examining TOEIC® reading section scores. The gain scores of undergraduate EFL learners at a university in Japan who used ER ($n=213$) were compared with students who did not ($n=159$). There was no significant difference in outcomes between the ER group (Mean=169.4, SD=57.9) and non-ER group (Mean=160.2, SD=53.7); $t(370)=1.57$, $p=0.12$. These results suggest that any additional gains made through student participation in the ER program were not reflected in their TOEIC® reading section scores.

As Extensive Reading (ER) continues to gain widespread acceptance within high school and university EFL programs in Japan, so does the obligation to show that it is providing measurable gains in student foreign language proficiency. Numerous studies have been conducted to document its benefits within the Japanese EFL context (Mason & Krashen, 1997; Nishizawa, Yoshioka, & Fukada, 2010; Robb & Susser, 1989; Tanaka & Stapleton, 2007), but additional evidence is needed to encourage reluctant foreign language course coordinators and learners to participate. This paper will show how one widely accepted evaluation of English language proficiency in Japan, the TOEIC® test, was used in an attempt to measure the effects of a new ER program.

ER Program Background

Kyoto Notre Dame University is a small private liberal arts women's university in Japan. Of its approximately 1750 undergraduates, roughly 400 students belong to the Department of English Language and Literature, in which an ER program was made compulsory for incoming freshmen starting in 2008.

In addition to English speaking, writing, and listening-based courses, the students in this department take required English reading courses once a week during their first two years of study. All language courses are streamed by ability, and first-year students are divided into three levels and six sections (A-F) upon entry according to their performance as determined by the *Eigo Noryoku Hantei Tesuto*® placement examination. First-year students are streamed into three levels with section A being

considered advanced, sections B/C/D intermediate, and sections E/F basic. These 90-minute intensive-reading courses are mainly taught using the traditional grammar-translation approach in Japanese by full-time instructors. Teaching assignments and course content for reading courses did not change between 2006-2010, meaning that an instructor who taught one particular section, taught the same section every year using the same self-selected materials. In addition, there were no significant changes within the content of any other EFL courses students took during this period.

A supplementary ER program was introduced at the beginning of the 2008 school year primarily to give students a meaningful context for the detailed grammatical and vocabulary knowledge they acquired during the course of their studies in the intensive-reading course. The ER collection was composed of approximately 900 fiction-based graded readers of various levels and was prominently displayed in the university library. Students were allowed to borrow up to three books for up to four weeks with the possibility of additional two-week extensions. At least two complete sets from major publishers were placed on the shelves and up to five copies of the most popular books were available.

ER was conducted as a homework assignment in the required reading courses and accounted for 15% of the final grade. Only freshmen participated in 2008, and both freshmen and sophomores took part in 2009 and 2010. The number of books and the difficulty levels to be read were predetermined and strictly adhered to by the department (Tables 1 and 2).

Table 1. First Year Reading Requirements

Section	First Semester		Second Semester	
	Book level	Frequency	Book level	Frequency
A	2	Every week	3	Every week
B	2	3/month	2	Every week
C	2	3/month	2	Every week
D	2	3/month	2	Every week
E	2	2/month	2	3/month
F	2	2/month	2	3/month

Table 2. Second Year Reading Requirements

Section	First Semester		Second Semester	
	Book level	Frequency	Book level	Frequency
A	3	Every week	4	Every week
B	3	3/month	3	Every week
C	3	3/month	3	Every week
D	3	3/month	3	Every week
E	2	Every week	3	2/month
F	2	Every week	3	2/month

In the first semester, all students started with graded readers labeled "Level 2" or its equivalent by the publishers. While there are no common grading standards followed by all publishers when determining the grammatical and lexical difficulty of their readers, the use of a detailed chart such as the Extensive Reading Foundation Graded Reader Level Scale® was considered to be too complicated for students to understand at the time. No restrictions on word count or genre were made.

Paper-based book report forms were used to evaluate student participation in the ER program. In an attempt to reduce the possibility of cheating, the department produced 28 unique versions so that a different one could be used for each week of the school year after the first week of instruction. The model created by Jeffries & Mikulecky (2009, p. 20) was used as a guide in the development of the book reports, which each contained a section for students to write basic book information such as the title and author

followed by an area to record basic story content including information related to the characters, setting, and plot. Writing prompts that questioned the student's opinion of the book came next and a rating section was included at the end. Questions that required a reasonable understanding of the story to answer were created by myself with assistance from the literature professors in the department. Two or three of these were included in each B-5 sized book report form (O'Neill 2007a, 2007b; O'Neill & Hubert, 2011). Table 3 contains the types of questions used with some examples.

Table 3. Book Report Writing Prompts

Type	Examples
Character study	What does the character look like? What kind of person is the character?
	Which character did you identify with the most? In what way?
	Choose a character from the book and describe how your impression towards him/her changes as you proceed with the story.
Plot analysis	Did the story have a happy ending? A sad ending? Explain.
	Before reading: Describe the cover illustration of the book.
	After reading: Describe how the cover illustration relates to the content of the book.
Student opinion	What is one thing you would like to say to the author of this book?
	Do you think this story should have a sequel? Why/Why not?
	What experience or memory did this book remind you of?

Each book report contained a student opinion section along with either a character study or plot analysis element. These book reports were collected and evaluated for content, but were never returned to students in order to prevent their reuse.

Examining TOEIC® Test Results

The TOEIC® IP examination was administered at the end of each academic year and the results were partly

used by the department to determine second-year English language class level and third-year seminar placement. To investigate whether the new ER program had any effect on TOEIC® reading section scores, the average results from first and second-year students over a two-year period before the introduction of the ER program ($n=159$) were compared to the scores of the freshmen and sophomores who took the examination during the two-year period after its launch in 2008 ($n=213$). Students who did not have ER had an average TOEIC® IP reading section score of 152.1 at the end of their first year and 160.2 at the end of the second year for a gain of 8.1 points, or 5.3%. Students who had ER had an average TOEIC® IP reading section score of 150.1 at the end of their freshmen year and 169.5 at the end of their sophomore year for a gain of 19.4 points, or 12.9%. A two-tailed t-test showed no significance in second year gains between the two groups (Table 4).

Table 4. Non-ER vs. ER group TOEIC® IP Reading Section Scores

	Non-ER group	ER group
Mean	160.22	169.46
Standard Deviation	53.74	57.96
Standard Error of Mean	4.26	3.97
$t(370) = 1.57, p = 0.12$		

Limitations of the Study

A number of factors could have affected the outcome of this study. First is that only data from students who took the TOEIC® IP test twice, at the end of each school year, could be used for comparison purposes. Results from 28 students in the non-ER group and 27 students from the ER group were therefore excluded. Second, book reports as an assessment tool are by no means foolproof. Some quantity of chicanery undoubtedly occurred, making the stated minimum amounts of reading actually completed by students impossible to know. Third, some of the reading instructors initially voiced a certain amount of wariness and reluctance in requiring their students to participate in an ER program, and it is possible that their lack of enthusiasm could have negatively affected student attitudes toward the concept of

reading extensively. Fourth, the students in this ER program may not have been reading enough to make measurable gains. Even though teachers reported that the overwhelming majority of their students were submitting properly completed book reports in a timely manner, less motivated students tended to choose thinner books. More substantial amounts of reading may have favorably affected the test results (Storey, Gibson, & Williamson, 2006). Fifth, the university student enrollment pattern could also have influenced the study. In the same year that the ER program was introduced, the department began a widely publicized elective 10-course program in airline hospitality. This considerably increased the number of applicants to the department and resulted in a shift in overall freshmen interest from literature to communication-based study. This may have affected student motivation to read extensively in English and could possibly mean that a comparison between the two groups in this study is inappropriate. Finally, only the overall averages of the students in the two groups were compared. An analysis of gain scores made by certain levels or sections may have shown significance but was not possible due to the number of students who changed sections after their freshmen year.

Conclusion

This paper examined an ER program before comparing the second-year TOEIC® IP reading section scores of a group of EFL learners who participated in it and another that was not able to. While no significant difference between the two groups was determined to exist, several factors that could have affected the outcome of the investigation were identified. Additional research with larger populations that involve varied amounts of reading with diverse assessment procedures is necessary to further investigate the relationship between ER and the TOEIC® examination.

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