The Longitudinal Development of an Extensive Reading Program in a Japanese University

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This paper describes the development over four years of a Japanese university's Extensive Reading (ER) program. We demonstrate the impact of cultivating Extensive Reading as a practice in various school settings both inside and outside of the classroom. We also present reading word count data from successive year student cohorts to show how programmatic changes have affected reluctant readers and students with low reading ability, as well as their more advanced and motivated peers.

Furukawa, Takase, and Nishizawa (2009) have illustrated the rapid spread of Extensive Reading (ER) programs in Japan over the past decade. And despite broad scholarly support for the efficacy of sustained silent reading (SSR) in EFL, some researchers have questioned whether expectations of "self-motivated learning" in ER translate well to Asian contexts (e.g., Robb, 2002). One study in Hong Kong by Lai (1993) showed that when ER was used among classes divided by proficiency level, strong students excelled, but weaker students saw little or no improvement.

In 2006, ER was first introduced at our Japanese university to highly motivated students in a volunteer, extra-curricular Extensive Reading circle. In subsequent years, ER was brought inside the classroom, and experimented with in classes of varying levels. In 2010, our university began to support ER in our self-access language learning center (hereafter SAC) as well.

The expansion of our university's ER program beyond the classroom has led to increased visibility, and positively influenced student participation. Etienne Wenger's (1998) conception of a community of practice and Tim Murphey's (1998) notion of near peer role modeling provide useful concepts for exploring the challenge of how to further cultivate the positive sociocultural aspects of our university's self-access center-based Extensive Reading program.

Program Development

In 2006, one teacher at our university started to think Extensive Reading could be a possible solution to problems of low student motivation, passivity, and generally declining student academic ability. Securing the budget to purchase as many books as possible was the most important and difficult problem at first. Therefore, in 2006, the teacher started a small group consisting of about seven students as an experimental case to start a voluntary Extensive Reading club at our university. This small group could make the best use of our library's limited number of books, such as *Oxford Bookworms* and *Penguin Graded Reader* collections. The students of this group were all highly motivated juniors (third grade students) who had high English ability.

In 2007, the teacher introduced ER in a freshman reading class and encouraged the students to read in their free time. Because there were not enough Extensive Reading books, particularly for beginners, the instructor decided not to do in-class Extensive Reading for the class of 35 students.

In 2008, the same teacher introduced out-of-class Extensive Reading in the first term, and in-class Extensive Reading in the last term. The ER program was still very limited, and students questioned ER's efficacy. Only a small number of participating students believed this learning method could definitely improve their English ability, making it difficult to encourage students to read extensively outside of the classroom.

In 2009, in-class ER was introduced in one class for the whole year. For the first 30 minutes, students read ER books, and then used general English textbooks for reading comprehension. The students were told to borrow some ER books from the university library and bring them to the class. Therefore, when the teacher arrived at the classroom, the students had already started reading books. The teacher checked to see if students had selected appropriate books during the class and sometimes recommended books.

Two teachers introduced ER in two different classes in 2010. The classes provided approximately 30-minutes to one hour for SSR per week in the beginning of the reading classes. By the second semester the students had already become quite familiar with the method and atmosphere of ER in the former term, and they naturally seemed to enjoy reading English books. Around this time, we finally managed to prepare a wider variety of ER books for ER beginners. This is one of the main reasons why an increasing number of the students became interested in the ER program.

In 2010, we started to make use of the SAC as a support center for students reading ER books. Students could thus receive timely advice on ER and assistance with choosing books appropriate to their level. Many more students began to read ER books outside of class, and these students could make full use of this center. Finally, for the first time since our program's inception, two students surpassed the one million-word mark at the end of the second term. Through this new support system, some students started ER all over again, and other students received much influence from their friends who had been reading ER books.

Involvement of the Self-Access Center

Our university's SAC, the foreign language study support center (FLSSC), provides material and social support for student language learning on campus. The FLSSC is located next to the student dining hall, and open to students Monday through Friday 9:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. At least one staff member is always there to help students with their language learning.

Localizing an ER Library

In support of ER, our self-access center implemented several systems designed to encourage ER participation and increase student motivation. The first significant change was a decision to locate a small library of ER books within the center itself. Before 2010, all books had been catalogued and managed exclusively by our university's main library. Because of this, ER had remained largely invisible within the FLSSC. This step of securing even a small number of books for the FLSSC made it possible for students to receive support when choosing books to read, and perhaps more importantly, to see their peers engaged in ER.

To manage ER book lending the FLSSC uses a paper-based check-out system. And though time consuming, we have found that this system also functions as an effective tool for supporting ER. Because students have to write down book series names and other information, they learn more about the books they choose. This seems to help them to look for what to read next. Furthermore, the paper sign-out sheet allows students to see a list of the many other students engaged in ER.

Unlike in the library, at the center, students have to return books within two days. We set up the rule due to limited resources; however, it ended up having a positive effect on reading as well. The rule appears to help students build up good reading habits and strategies: Since they have to return books in two days, they try to plan how much they can read on that day, how many books to check out, and when to return them.

Progress Chart

Another step that seems to have help increased student motivation and communication about Extensive Reading is a progress chart that was designed and posted on the inside of the FLSSC's door in 2010. This simple homemade chart has hierarchically-aligned rectangular spaces divided into word-count achievement blocks. It has a range of 2500 to one million words, and participating students use nicknames on magnets to indicate their current progress. Students move their magnets as they make reading progress, and once they reach one million words, they use a new magnet with a different color to indicate that they are heading towards their second (or third) million. Students seem to look

forward to moving up their magnets, and one of the greatest points about having the progress board is that students talk to their friends in front it. They see others' magnets and compare their progress.

Human Resources

As for human resources at the center, at least one teacher, one non-teacher staff member, and one undergraduate student are always available for students. Each of these people is familiar with the books in our ER library (having read most or all of them), the book checkout process, and the progress chart system. They answer newcomers' questions, offer advice and book recommendations, and frequently engage long-time ER practitioners in conversation about books they are reading, reading progress, and other topics.

Book Information Stickers

A final step we took at our center and in our school's library was putting book level information stickers on all ER books. This helps students look for suitable books themselves, which encourages them to use the library more often. More students actually do ER at the library, and of course they thus check out more books. Reading at the library is likely to have a powerful influence on their affective factors.

Methods

In order to investigate the possible effects of the self-access center's support of ER at our institution, we gathered student-reading data from 2009 and 2010 to see what kind of gains students are making in terms of total words read. Our university places students into three levels using the TOEIC Bridge test, and so we looked at reading data from two classes in successive years that represented roughly the same level in terms of TOEIC Bridge Scores.

Additionally, we conducted a survey of 2011 first and second year students at the start of the academic year. The survey investigated awareness and attitudes towards ER, and attempted to ascertain influences upon students' ER participation.

Results and Discussion

Comparing the successive 2009 and 2010 first year student cohorts, we saw a very significant jump in reading (total word count) in the second year. All students in the 2009 cohort read less than 50,000 words, whereas in 2010 a majority (56%) of students read between 100,000 and 200,000 words. Additionally, there were almost twice as many students in the top tiers (above 200,000 and 300,000 words respectively) as there were in the bottom two tiers of reading achievement in the 2010 cohort. One reason for this jump can be accounted for by an increased amount of in-class SSR time provided to students. But on closer inspection of our data, we found that, given student reading speeds, increased in-class SSR time alone was not enough to account for the jump.

We explored the idea that the community of practice which had formed around the FLSSC might provide a plausible explanation for these reading gains. According to Wenger et. al (2002) "Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis" (p.4). If this is applied to ER, the implication is that students don't just need to be provided with interesting books at the appropriate level, they need to become members of a community to be successful. Membership implies that learners identify with other practitioners of some activity, in this case ER. In classroom settings, the notion of class-building is connected to this idea of creating a strong group dynamic where students feel membership and thus perform well together, but here we looked at how encouraging membership on a broader scale, beyond the classroom can affect ER outcomes.

The importance of teachers as ER role models is well established (e.g. Day and Bamford, 2000), less attention has been paid to peer influences. Tim Murphey's (1998) concept of Near Peer Role Modeling serves as a useful construct for another dynamic we believe to be contributing to the success of our ER program. Murphey (1998) explains that "near peer role models are perhaps more psychologically attractive to us in that their excellence seems more possible and easy to see and replicate because they are in some ways already very similar to us, or within our zone of proximal development" (pp. 201-202).

In the surveys we conducted of all first and second year students in our university's faculty of foreign studies, we found support for the idea that peers exert a strong influence upon each other in terms of starting, continuing, and actively participating in ER. Whereas most of the incoming freshman who had heard of ER, had learned of it from their high school

teachers, we found that 64% of second year students who had not had explicit in-class ER instruction had started ER due to the influence of a friend at university.

Our analyses of student word count data and survey results indicates that supporting ER in various ways beyond the classroom can have positive impacts on individuals' reading gains as well as overall participation. Such support can engender a thriving community of practice in which near peer role models exert strong influence upon newcomers and reluctant readers, leading to significant gains in reading volume and participation.

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