

Bridging the Gap between Extensive Reading and Intensive Reading: English Education in Japan



Yoshida, K. (2012). Bridging the gap between Extensive Reading and Intensive Reading: English education in Japan *Extensive Reading World Congress Proceedings*, 1, 90-92.

YOSHIDA Koji

Kinki University

k_yoshida@bus.kindai.ac.jp

This paper is one of four presentations that made up a colloquium held at the ERF World Congress entitled Bridging the Gap between Extensive Reading and Intensive Reading. The aim of the colloquium was to answer the two fundamental questions: "Why Intensive Reading?" and "Why Extensive Reading?" All the presenters are currently teaching at Kinki University and sharing some experience of teaching, which makes it easier to uniformly assess the different approaches to college students, though, of course, it is not easy to get clear answers to the questions mentioned above. This paper will first compare Intensive Reading with Extensive Reading, followed by a review of the situation of English Education in Japan, concluding with some suggestions for making ER work in this situation. Rough Comparison between IR and ER.

As a first approximation, let us look at certain differences between intensive reading (IR) and extensive reading (ER), as in Table 1.

There might be arguments for and against the comparison, and elaborate examinations are necessary, but it is evident that most of the English teachers in Japan sometimes notice the differences illustrated here. Let us assume here that it is our task to lessen the gap between IR and ER.

Some Remarks on English Education in Japan

Ubiquity of the Grammar-translation method in Japan
As is well-known, the so-called grammar-translation method has long been highly valued in Japan. There are lots of reasons for this peculiar situation: some are historical and some are cultural. Here it is worth noting two residual impacts from old days in Japan.

One comes from *Kanbun Sodoku* and the other comes from *Kotoshi*.

Kanbun Sodoku (to read Chinese classics aloud) was developed as a means of understanding foreign cultures and civilizations. The Japanese traditionally imported Chinese culture by translating Chinese classics. This custom has lasted for more than 1,000 years, and reading Chinese classics has been highly praised. This custom slightly changed after the Meiji Restoration, the great turning point in Japan's transition to a modern nation. Huge amount of books written in English, German, French, and other European languages were translated into Japanese in order to understand foreign cultures and scientific skills. Some Japanese intellectuals at that time hurled themselves into these tasks with enthusiasm. Due to this practice, Japanese students at high schools or universities were forced to study foreign languages

Table 1. IR compared with ER for Most Learners of English in Japan

	Intensive Reading	Extensive Reading
Merits	Grammatical explanation Basic vocabulary Reading aloud Familiarity (esp. for teachers) Easy to evaluate	Enjoyable Learner-centered Topics vary Autonomous studies Less boring
Demerits	Time consuming Teachers centered Heavy and oppressive Tired and boring Less communicative	Difficult to evaluate Unsuitable for the sensitive More preparation needed Books/facilities necessary Difficult to check the development

mainly through translation of foreign passages.

Kutoshi (masters of a foreign language) were officials in the Edo era in Japan (1603-1868). They worked as translators so as to obtain foreign information through books, papers, and letters. Some of them were hired at the *Bansho Shirabesho*, or "Institute for the Study of Barbarian Books," which was the Japanese institute charged with the translation and study of foreign books and publications in the late Edo Period. The institute is regarded as one of the predecessor organizations which merged to form Tokyo University, which was the first modern university in Japan. Many Japanese universities and colleges followed the system established at Tokyo University so that along with *Kanbun Sodoku* tradition, the *Kutoshi* system took root in Japan.

It is also worth noting that Japan is an isolated-island country and almost all of the information from abroad had then gained through printed matters. As a result, studying a foreign language came to mean just reading and writing for most of the Japanese people.

Wordbooks sell well in Japan

English wordbooks are a popular genre, with massive numbers of them written and sold in Japan. Their popularity is presumably because the Japanese have traditionally noticed the following. First, the Japanese language belongs to the Ural-Altaic language family and English belongs to the Indo-European language family. Thus, the Japanese morphological system is quite different from that of English. Second, in Japan, lexical knowledge is regarded as the most important thing in order to master a foreign language, and English teachers encourage students to learn a large amount of English vocabulary by heart, resulting in the glut of English wordbooks sold in bookstores in Japan.

Weaknesses of English teachers in Japan

Many English teachers in Japan are not good at speaking English. There are several reasons for this situation, but one often cited reason is that most of the English teachers major in English literature or American literature. Unfortunately, they are able to graduate from college or university by just reading classics without any language teacher's lesson.

Intelligence-centered

For some Japanese people, English is considered as merely a subject for entrance examinations. Some elderly people often say that it is sufficient for many

Japanese to read and write English properly, without the ability to speak or understand the spoken language. It is fairly easy to find a person who goes so far as to say that one's fluency of a foreign language inversely relates to one's intelligence.

The so-called *Yakudoku*

Hino (1988) defines *yakudoku*, Japan's dominant tradition in foreign language learning, as follows: "A technique or a mental process for reading a foreign language in which the target language sentence is first translated word by word, and the resulting translation reordered to match Japanese word order as part of the process of reading comprehension."

Yakudoku has recently come under broad attack, but it has some advantages. It is easy to check the students' knowledge of grammar and to give an objective score to their achievements solely through using the mother tongue.

Problems on Introducing ER in Japan

Low Readiness

There are three approaches often emphasized when one wants to introduce ER to the classroom (Takase, 2010: 59-81):

- a. SSR (Sustained Silent Reading)
- b. SSS (Start with Simple Stories)
- c. SST (Short Subsequent Tasks)

Even if you follow the procedure in (1), a few crucial problems come out in the open. For instance, a student with a lot of pride or a student with unclear motivation would sometimes feel uncomfortable. In addition, it is difficult to give proper and rigid scores to the students. So, some students feel that they are being treated unfairly.

Sociological Factors

It is often claimed that there still remains a feudal system in Japanese culture, and the same holds for education. As a matter of fact, the decisions made by the Ministry of Education in Japan have led to a state of confusion in all kinds of schools in Japan. Almost all of the teachers complain about the Ministry's educational policy, but few people try to resist it.

Interestingly, many Japanese people are fashion-driven and easily affected by trends. Once a new, remarkable educational method is introduced, some Japanese teachers have no hesitation about incorporating it, and others stick to the old method. As a result, the teaching fields become chaotic.

Personality

For many Japanese, it is admirable to be up-tight, so long as one's actions are carefully controlled. Japanese unconsciously take it for granted that "at attention" is the norm, and "relaxed" is the exception. So, if you advise Japanese students to relax in a classroom, they find it difficult to do so. Although the situation is gradually changing, many Japanese students don't want to be involved in classroom activities and prefer instruction by lecturing even if they are in language classes.

Lack of Intellectual Curiosity

Japan is an economic powerhouse and there are few people who have difficulty in having enough food. Due to this, young Japanese don't have a hungry spirit anymore. Most young Japanese are content with the current situation in Japan and hope their peaceful lives will last long. They don't want social change. Unfortunately, their preference for the status quo creates the lack of intellectual curiosity among the younger generation.

What Should Be Done to the Current Situation?

Let us conclude by considering good solutions to develop reading skills of English.

First, teachers should use a balance of ER and IR activities as a method to English education. That is easier said than done, but a good English teacher would try to find a better solution to do this.

Second, class size should be reduced to 10-20 students. To our mortification, the class size of English is 35-50 or even more in Japan. Accordingly, the number of teachers should be doubled or more.

Last but not least, intensive teacher training is highly required. As mentioned above, some English teachers in Japan need thorough language training as language instructors.

Conclusion

It is certain that ER is a good way to draw students' motivation to read books not only in English but also in Japanese. To carry out ER in a classroom is, however, not so easy as it seems. If you want to be a practitioner of ER, especially in Japan, you have to realize the truth about a nation's educational environment. It is also better to be conscious about the difference between IR and ER when you teach reading, both of which have merits and demerits, as exemplified in Table 1.

References

- Day, R. R., & Bamford, J. (1988). *Extensive Reading in the Second Language Classroom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hino, N. (1988). "Yakudoku": Japan's dominant tradition in foreign language learning. *JALT Journal* 10, 45-53.
- Takase, A. (2010). *Eigo Tadoku Tacho Manual* [The Manual for Extensive Reading and Extensive Listening]. Tokyo: Taishukan.