

EXTENSIVE READING AND ITS ROLE IN JAPANESE HIGH SCHOOLS

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Abstract

Despite the many language acquisition benefits frequently ascribed to Extensive Reading, it has yet to gain widespread acceptance in Japanese high schools. This is somewhat surprising, since teachers are constantly searching for ways to motivate and interest students, and Extensive Reading (ER) not only improves learners' reading abilities and aids the development of a variety of other language skills, but also provides the basis for a whole range of speaking, writing and listening activities. It is therefore perfectly compatible with, and a useful complement to, a communicative-approach based language class. This article therefore supports the view that ER has a useful role to play in high school English teaching at all levels. It begins by reviewing the theory behind ER and the evidence for its benefits. It then reports on a survey carried out at a high school which already has a functioning Extensive Reading programme, and which appears to confirm that not only do students come to enjoy ER, but that it also contributes to improvements in ability and attitude.

Introduction

The aim of this article is to examine the theory and practice of Extensive Reading in foreign language learning, and relate them to the particular context of English teaching in Japanese high schools. It begins with a review of the current literature on Extensive Reading (ER), exploring its characteristics, the theory behind it and the evidence for its benefits. It then goes on to contrast ER with the traditional grammar translation methodology still prevalent in Japanese high schools. Part 5 includes a profile of a functioning ER programme at one Japanese high school, while Part 6 reports a survey of the reading habits of the students participating in this programme. Finally, some suggestions will be made as to how to help students get the most out of an Extensive Reading Programme.

Extensive Reading: Characteristics, Theory And Benefits

a) Characteristics

The term "extensive reading" was originally coined by Palmer (1968), to distinguish it from "intensive reading" - the careful reading of short, complex texts for detailed understanding and skills practice. Intensive Reading has traditionally played a key role in English teaching in Japanese high schools. Extensive Reading, however, involves the reading of large amounts of longer, easy-to-understand material, usually done outside the classroom and at each student's own pace and level. There are few, if any, follow-up exercises, because the aim is for overall understanding rather than

detailed analysis. For the same reason, there is minimum use of dictionaries. Above all, the reading should be enjoyable, which is one reason why students should choose their own material as far as possible.

Extensive Reading is often taken to be synonymous with graded readers. While there is no reason why it should be limited exclusively to such material, these simplified texts do have a number of benefits (see Day and Bamford 1999, Waring 1997). They can, for instance, offer access to a wide range of material at an appropriate level, present language in context rather than in isolated chunks and, in some cases, promote intercultural awareness by providing insight into other cultures.

Debates continue about exactly how much reading has to be done to qualify as “extensive”. Susser and Robb (1990) quote suggestions ranging from an hour per evening to at least two books a week. Given the students’ already-considerable workload (homework, tests, *juku*, club activities, Saturday classes), a degree of flexibility is clearly necessary. Matsumura’s suggestion (1987, quoted in Susser and Robb 1990) of one page per day in term time, and three pages per day during summer vacation, may be a more realistic target for Japan. Whatever target is set, the basic goal of ER is to encourage students to read as much as possible and, hopefully, to enjoy doing so. This pleasure factor is vital for preparing the ground in which language acquisition can germinate.

b) Theory

In recent years, an impressive body of evidence has appeared supporting ER as a means of improving not only students’ reading level but also their general proficiency. Krashen (1982) argues that students can acquire language on their own provided a) they receive enough exposure to comprehensible language and b) it is done in a relaxed, stress-free atmosphere. ER satisfies both these conditions since, by definition, it involves reading large amounts of easy material at home, with little or no follow-up work or testing. Krashen (1982) further held that the unconscious process of language acquisition, such as occurs when reading for pleasure, is more successful and longer lasting than conscious learning.

In particular, through experiencing language in context, ER is a very effective way of reinforcing, confirming and deepening knowledge of vocabulary, expressions and structures, and of developing an implicit understanding of when and how words are used (see Nation, 1997, and Coady, 1997, cited in Mutoh, Bamford and Helgesen 1998).

In addition, as each student chooses a book within their own capability range, weaker students need not feel embarrassed about not keeping up with more advanced ones, as can happen with a class reader that all students have to follow. Students are therefore less likely to get frustrated and demotivated, so the overall effect on their attitude will be beneficial. Motivation is thus stimulated by combining the pleasure of “a good read” (something most people can relate to), with the satisfaction of accomplishing a meaningful task in the target language, while still at a relatively low level of fluency. Furthermore, by choosing the books themselves, students can follow their own interests, thus reducing teacher control and encouraging learning to occur outside class.

It is also a widely held belief among supporters of ER that, by eliminating follow-up testing and exhorting students to aim for general understanding rather than detailed comprehension, they gradually learn to read without word-by-word decoding at the sentence level, though this is by no means an easy transformation for all students, having learned to read by painstaking decoding. Carrell (1998) states that the goal is to turn “learning to read into reading to learn.” More research into exactly how this happens would be useful.

Day and Bamford (interviewed by Donnes, 1999) offer this simple summary of the theory behind extensive reading: “Students who read large quantities of easy, interesting material will become better readers and will enjoy the experience.” In other words, “students learn to read by reading.”

c) Evidence

Of course, it might be argued that this is simply stating the obvious. Naturally, people get better at anything by practice and, as Meara (1997, in Waring 2001) says, there is a danger of putting seeds in pots only to confirm that they will grow into flowers.

While gains in vocabulary are among the most commonly cited benefits of extensive reading (Nuttall 1982, in Robb and Susser, 1989; Mason and Krashen, 1997), this aspect may have been somewhat exaggerated. Since ER involves reading easy texts requiring little or no dictionary consultation, it is perhaps contradictory to suggest that students can make huge vocabulary gains. In fact, Nation (1997), Bamford (in Donnes, 1999) and Waring (2001) all concur that students can only hope to make small, incidental gains in vocabulary knowledge from ER.

However, what makes ER more compelling is the evidence suggesting that it also contributes to the development of a whole range of other language skills, as well as boosting confidence and motivation and improving overall attitude. Reading in this sense has to be seen holistically, as a part of students’ overall development, rather than a separate skill. This evidence will now be examined.

Where it can play a far more important role is in consolidating vocabulary through frequent exposure, and in developing automaticity of word recognition, a vital step in language acquisition (see Day and Bamford 2000, Grabe 1991, Nation 1997). This in turn enables students to increase their reading speed and process language (written or spoken) more quickly, thus improving reaction speed and contributing to overall ability and confidence.

Indeed, many researchers have found ER to have a positive effect on listening, writing and other areas of language competence (see Mason and Krashen, 1997 in Mutoh, Bamford and Helgesen 1998; Day and Bamford, interviewed by Donnes 1999). Robb and Susser (1989) were surprised at the extent of writing gains made by one ER group. Nation (1997) similarly claims benefits “in a range of language uses and areas of language knowledge”, including, significantly, affective benefits. Mason and Krashen (1997, cited in Robb 2001) support this view and conclude that “it is firmly established that free reading leads to increased second language competence” (Mason and Krashen, in press).

For his part, Grabe (1986, quoted in Mutoh, Bamford and Helgesen 1998) called ER a “major way to round out a reading program”, and argues that:

“students need to read extensively. Longer concentrated periods of silent reading build vocabulary and structural awareness, develop automaticity, enhance background knowledge, improve comprehension skills and promote confidence and motivation” (Grabe 1991, 396).

EFL In Japanese High Schools: An Overview

Given the weight of evidence in its favour, it is surprising that ER has yet to attract widespread interest in Japanese high schools. While reading skills are highly emphasized in secondary and tertiary education, reading still tends to be of the intensive kind, which as Alderson and Urquhart (1984, in Susser and Robb 1990) observe “may be justified as a language lesson but... is actually not reading at all.”

There are undoubtedly advantages to the intensive approach. It does, for example, allow students to access material of a more complex and interesting nature than the inane trivia that abounds in many ELT textbooks. However, as it revolves around the detailed, methodical study of short, difficult passages, systematically analyzing grammar and vocabulary, it foments the habit of word-by-word decoding, so that students often have difficulty reading in any other way. Certainly, most students are not used to reading without the aid of a dictionary. Indeed, Kitao and Kitao (1995, quoted in Frehan, 1999) conclude that “most Japanese students read by replacing all English words with Japanese words *one by one*.”

Once again, this is not necessarily a bad thing in itself. Intensive Reading is valuable for learning vocabulary and understanding how text is organized (see Waring, 1997), and some researchers (Hill, 1997) find Intensive and Extensive Reading to be complementary. Furthermore, reading of either kind lets students experience language in context, unlike the decontextualized dialogues of a typical textbook.

However, an exclusively intensive approach cannot be expected to produce the same kind of benefits that can be obtained by adding an extensive component. In fact, Barnett (1988, quoted in Susser and Robb 1990) maintains that teaching reading strategies alone produced no significant improvement in reading comprehension.

Furthermore, as Hill (1997) has observed, ER programmes would be “particularly helpful” in Japan, where students find it “embarrassing to speak English before they feel confident of their use of lexis and syntax.” Extensive Reading outside school provides students with the opportunity to improve their lexical-syntactical knowledge and language-processing skills in a pressure-free environment. This can have a knock-on effect on their overall ability and understanding, which in turn helps their confidence and, hopefully, foments a more positive attitude. Similarly, Torikai (2000) has pointed out, “even with their native language, the Japanese tend to value written language much more than spoken language.” Without wishing to indulge in Orientalist generalisations, if it is true that many Japanese students tend to be avid readers but reluctant speakers, we are missing out on a great learning opportunity if we do not encourage them to do more of what they enjoy, i.e. reading. This conclusion is borne out by my own experience as a high school teacher, as detailed in the next section.

Extensive Reading In Action

Students who choose to specialize in English at Hijiya High School in Hiroshima begin their ER programme in the first year of senior high school. There is no minimum reading requirement, although students are regularly encouraged to read as much as possible.

In addition to this free reading, or “home reading”, as it is called at Hijiya, students also have two reading classes a week, in which they all study the same class readers. From the first day of class, students are made aware of the differences between home reading and the reading classes. The class readers are used as a basis for a wide variety of activities involving practice in all four skills. Homework is given and students are tested on their understanding and appreciation of the books at the end of each semester.

For home reading on the other hand, students are encouraged to read a lot of lower level books. A library of graded readers comprising various levels (mostly, but by no means exclusively, beginner to pre-intermediate level for first-year students), is available, and students choose the books, and levels, they want to read, whenever they want. They are free to change a book without finishing it if they find one hard or uninteresting. They are encouraged not to use dictionaries, but to go for overall understanding and enjoyment.

I ask them to let me know whenever they finish a book. At that time I ask them a few questions about it, both to make sure they really have read it and to find out what they thought about it. Above all, this moment gives me a great chance to chat informally with students and get to know their likes and dislikes. Not only is it the easiest way to find out what kind of books they enjoy, it is also an ideal opportunity to have an informal chat and get to know them better. Thus, aside from any language-learning benefits of ER *per se*, it is also a great way to get students to talk, providing teachers with an ongoing, readymade topic of conversation to share with their students. Even those who are reluctant to speak in class in front of all their classmates are often happy to talk after class about their current book, or ask for advice on what to read next.

After this “feedback chat”, the students choose their next book, and the process begins again. The aim is for the students to take responsibility for their own reading as far as possible, although as suggested above, they usually appreciate any guidance the teacher can give, and often ask me directly to recommend something.

Small incentives have been experimented with, such as offering a token prize for whoever reads the most books (this spurred two students to challenge each other to read 20 books in a year. They both managed it!). It is debatable however just how appropriate a competitive element is to the spirit of ER. Every time a student completes a book, she gets to choose a cartoon sticker to put next to her name on a wallchart, which records the number of books read by each student. Again, the aim is not to turn reading into a competition, but simply to provide a light-hearted incentive. Certainly, most students enjoy having something to show for their endeavours and generally enjoy the sticker-choosing ritual. This kind of detail hopefully will further remove home reading from traditional associations of homework, grades etc. Other encouragements can include, for example, putting up a monthly Top 10 list of the most popular titles. This kind of peer-to-peer recommendation often has greater influence on students than recommendations made by the teacher and should not be overlooked. However, different strategies work with different classes. The best thing is for teachers to use their imagination, experiment and see what works best for a particular group.

The Survey: Aims

This survey was conducted for two main reasons. Firstly, as the number of books read per year varied considerably from student to student, more was needed to be known about how the students themselves felt. Was the notion of reading “for pleasure” merely a teachers’ assumption? It comes as no surprise that most students consider reading to be more pleasurable than doing grammar exercises, but would they read extensively if they were not required to? Secondly, many authors (notably Waring, 2001) lament the lack of conclusive research done into ER. Robb and Susser (1990) call most research “contradictory, inconclusive and generally unhelpful”, while Day and Bamford (in Donnes, 1999) talk of the need for more research into “the extent to which students continue to read in the target language once the extensive reading class is over”. Thus, a questionnaire was devised to shed light on students’ attitudes in general and the following questions in particular:

1. Has their attitude towards reading changed since starting the ER programme?
2. Did students feel the ER programme was beneficial?
3. Was ER enjoyable?
4. Did students voluntarily undertake any other English reading?
5. If so, what material did they most enjoy reading outside school?
6. Did they feel motivated to carry on reading in English in the future?

The questionnaire was given to a class of thirty-six students during their final year at high school.

The Survey: Findings

The results were encouraging in a number of areas. Firstly, the total number of books read by the class increased from 153 in the first year to 261 in the second year. (see Appendix, Figure 1).

Equally encouraging were the apparent changes in attitude (see Appendix, Figure 2). Before starting the course, only three students thought that reading in English would be enjoyable. Indeed, when the ER programme was explained to them at the start of the course, many students appeared a little incredulous at the idea of reading books in English at home, as they had never done so before. Nevertheless, by the time of the survey, twenty-five stated that sometimes they now read in English purely for pleasure, and six students said they often did.

As for the kind of books they most enjoyed, the results were as follows:

Romance: 13
 Mystery/Thriller: 12
 Adventure: 6
 Ghost/Horror 5
 Non-fiction: 2
 Detective: 1

However, as can be seen in Figure 4 in the Appendix, the most popular choices for home reading material were pop song lyrics and magazines, with graded readers coming third. This underlines the fact that graded readers, while immensely useful, are not the only way to get students to read. What it does seem to indicate however is that, despite never having read anything in English before starting the course, many students were now actively seeking out their own reading materials.

As for the question of whether students would continue to read in English after finishing the course, all but four students answered positively (see Appendix, Figure 3). While this question is inevitably vague, it is at least indicative of their current attitudes and future intentions.

Naturally though, there are caveats. Questionnaire-based research tends to produce general impressions rather than hard evidence and there is always a danger that students may circle the answer they think sounds best, rather than what they actually believe. Furthermore, it must be noted that while twenty-two students thought the ER programme was a good idea, three thought it was a bad idea and eleven thought it was “too much work”. These last two categories account for approximately a third of the class. One student thought that ER was “useless” because it wouldn’t help her with her university entrance exams. Another said that ER didn’t help her because the books were too easy. Another stated that she enjoyed reading but thought that time should be set aside within the Reading class, rather than done at home. It should be borne in mind that this survey was carried out in students’ third and final year at high school, when students are largely preoccupied with preparing for the all-important university entrance tests.

These findings highlight some of the difficulties of setting up an ER programme at high school level, and may account in part for the lack of such programmes at the time of writing. In short, given high school students’ already heavy workload, it is not always easy to convince them of the benefits of undertaking extra, “voluntary” reading, no matter how enjoyable we suppose it to be. Certainly, flexibility and sensitivity must be used when setting targets, so that “reading for pleasure” does not just end up becoming homework under another name. Indeed, one of the lessons of this survey is that, while it is easy for teachers to have an idealized view of the benefits of ER, seeing only the positive side, not all students will automatically share this view.

Once again, this underlines the importance of communicating with students, taking time to find out what they enjoy reading and, indeed, if they enjoy reading at all. It is on the basis of such talks with students that I have assembled the following short list of suggestions that I hope might prove useful to any teacher considering setting up an ER programme.

Suggestions

1. Make sure you offer students material at the right level. Nothing turns them off quicker than having to wade through a story that requires constant use of a dictionary. This is perhaps the single biggest cause for the failure of an ER programme. As a rough guide, I find that books which are at least one level below that of the Class Reader are usually suitable for most students. Series such as Oxford's Bookworm Starters or Penguin's Easystarts are good examples of suitable levels for most Senior 1 students, and should dispel any "I can't read English books" fears.
2. Don't be afraid of offering them something you think is too easy. Remember back when you were learning a foreign language, and the satisfaction you felt at being able to read even a simple piece of "real" language." Students will soon ask for something more challenging when they're ready for it. But, see (3).
3. Make sure you have a variety of levels to choose from, including some more difficult titles. Remember that one of the students in the survey complained that ER was of no use because it was "too easy." The level of reading ability is unlikely to be homogenous in any one class, and different students progress at different rates.
4. A good variety of genres is also essential. As a teacher, you may well believe that classic English literature is inherently more edifying than a sci-fi fantasy, or the book of the latest hit movie. Your students, however, may disagree, and they are the ones who are supposed to enjoy the reading.
5. Continually encourage students, ask them questions about the books they're reading, show interest. Use classroom activities that stimulate home reading. Day and Banford's *Extensive Reading Activities for Teaching Language* (2004) is a veritable treasure trove of ideas. If interest in ER seems to be flagging, for instance, try the idea for a Reading Marathon (*idem*, pp. 63-66).
6. Get involved in recommending books to your students. They won't know all the titles and are often hesitant about committing themselves to making a choice. Ask them what genres they like and make suggestions accordingly. Tell them what titles you have enjoyed.
7. Get to know your students and their preferences, and try to order material accordingly if possible. To help with this, I find that a short questionnaire about their reading likes and dislikes can be very enlightening. It's no use trying to force feed them detective mysteries if most of them want to read romance
8. Get to know the books yourself. You can't make helpful recommendations otherwise. Be a reader role model! They won't take your exhortations to read very seriously if they never see you read!
9. ER is not a magic formula. A collection of graded readers left to gather dust on a shelf is of little benefit to anyone. To work well, it will require regular input and encouragement from you the teacher.
10. Above all, communicate with your students. Not just to find out if they enjoyed a particular book or not, but also to find out why they are not reading, if that is the case. Maybe they just don't like reading. Either way, if you don't ask, you can't know, so you won't be able to help.

As teachers, we often assume that everyone must like reading, but it's not necessarily the case, especially when students have so many other distractions to fill what little free time they get (TV, video games, internet, e-mails etc).

Conclusions

Firstly, it must be recognized that a small survey such as this one cannot expect to provide conclusive evidence. It must be also borne in mind that all the students involved in this survey chose to specialize in English, and might therefore be expected to have above-average motivation. Furthermore, it must be emphasized that ER is not a universal panacea - every class has its reluctant readers. As previously stated, questionnaires tend to give general impressions rather than concrete proof.

However, the general impression gained from this survey is that a majority of students did find the programme very useful, even if it did become difficult to maintain, alongside their other work in their third year. The survey also provided some useful insights into students' attitudes. Not only did the majority of students apparently come to enjoy and benefit from home reading but also, having developed the reading habit, many voluntarily went on to engage in reading tasks of their own choice, according to their interests. Furthermore, it appears that they intend to keep up their reading habit after they have left school.

Thus, there is enough evidence to suggest that an Extensive Reading programme would be a valuable complement to existing methodologies. As Colin Davis (1995, cited in Mutoh, Bamford and Helgesen 1998), said: "Any ESL, EFL or L1 classroom will be poorer for the lack of an extensive reading programme of some kind and will be unable to promote its pupils' language development in all aspects as effectively as if such a programme were present."

Aside from any statistical evidence, perhaps the most encouraging results of all came in the follow-up comments some students made after completing the questionnaire. Here is a small selection:

"Reading book in English is difficult but it is enjoyable".

"I think reading in English is very good way to progress our English ability".

"I hated reading before, even Japanese too! But now I like to read English story better than before."

"If I didn't come to this course I didn't read any book".

As language teachers, we have a responsibility to see that all our students get the chance to discover for themselves the pleasure and benefits that reading can bring. The role that Extensive Reading can play in this process should not be overlooked.

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Appendix A
SURVEY RESULTS

Figure 1: Total number of books read

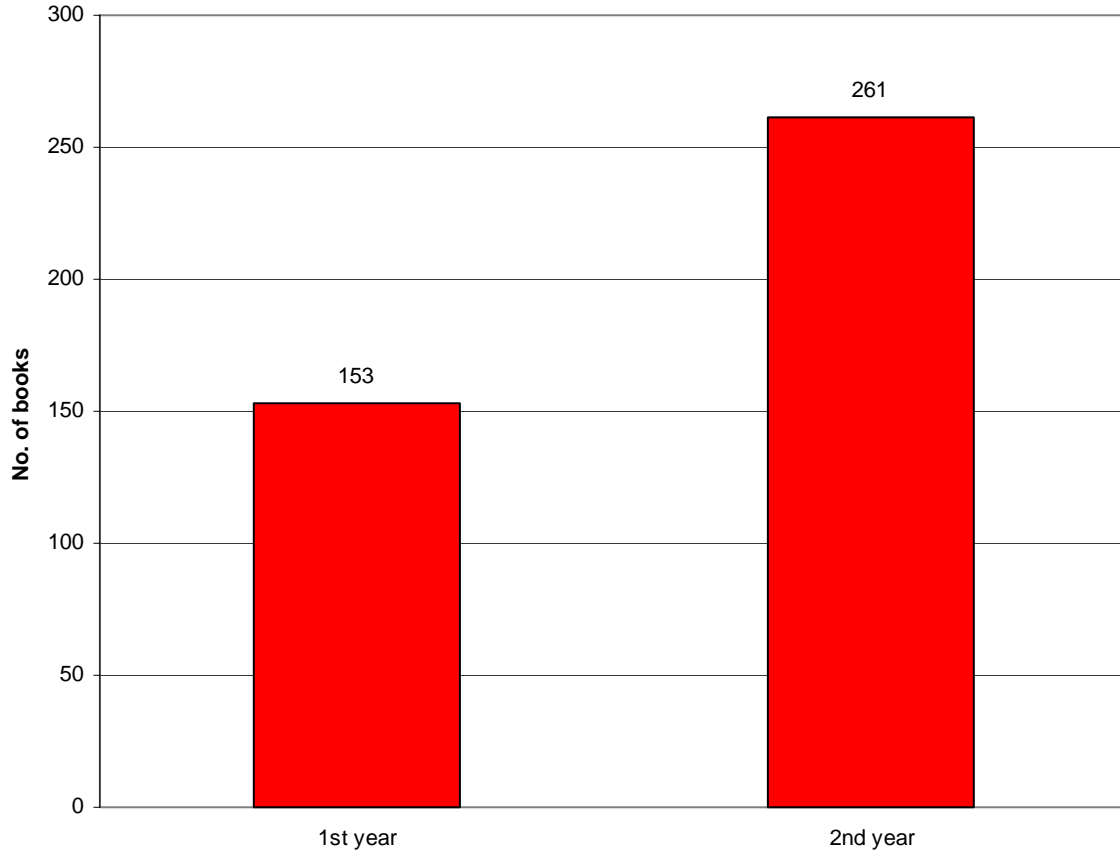


Figure 2:What students thought of reading before and after the course

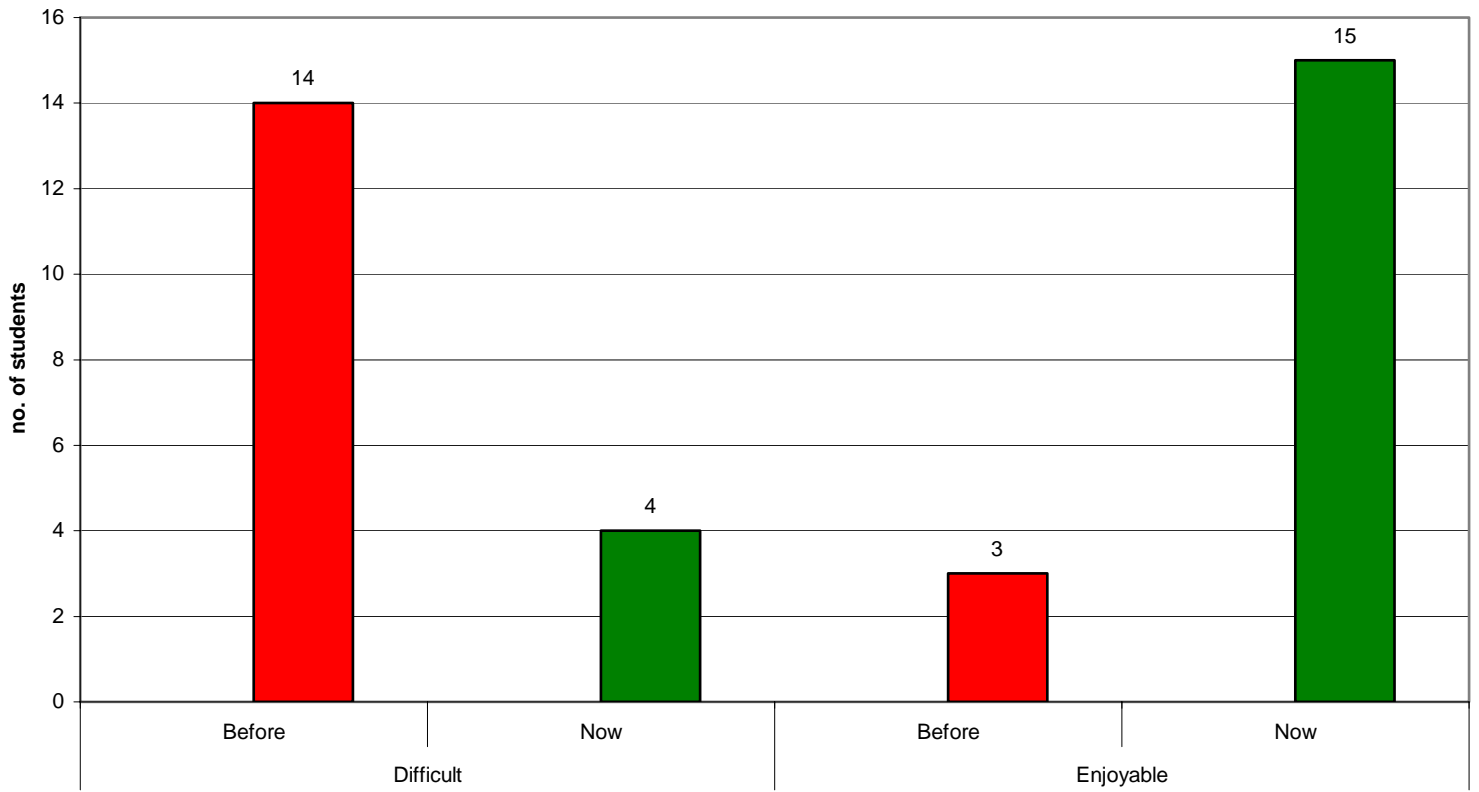


Figure 3: How many students expect to continue reading in English after leaving school

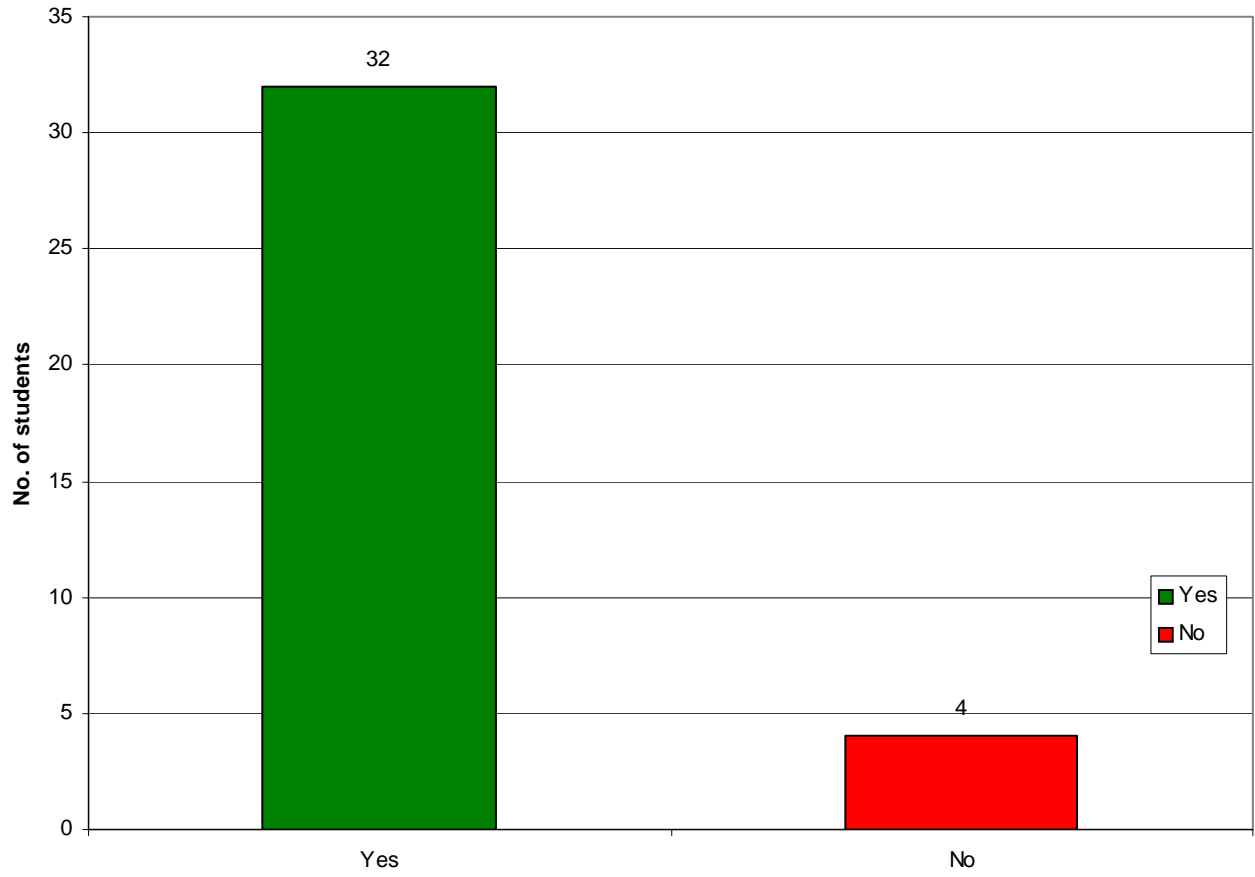


Figure 4: Voluntary Reading: Preferred Material