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INCREASING READING INPUT IN JAPANESE HIGH SCHOOL EFL CLASSROOMS: AN EMPIRICAL STUDY EXPLORING THE EFFICACY OF EXTENSIVE READING

Hiroya Tanaka, Graduate School of International Media and Communication, Hokkaido University

higoezo@ybb.ne.jp

Paul Stapleton, Hokkaido University

paulstapleton@gmail.com

Abstract

A lack of reading quantity in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) classrooms has remained one of the most serious problems faced by teachers of English in Japan. Although the extensive reading (ER) approach is regarded as having significant potential in addressing this problem, it is not used in many EFL classrooms. This study investigates the effect of a quasi-extensive reading program on Japanese high school EFL learners' reading comprehension, reading speed, and their perceptions of the program. The participants in the treatment group were 96 high school students who engaged in a reading activity with teacher-made materials for the first five to ten minutes of class for approximately five months. Some of these students also read graded readers outside of class. Progress in reading comprehension and speed was measured against a parallel control group that received no treatment in a pre- and post-test format. Results revealed that the treatment group, especially those who read graded readers, scored significantly higher in reading speed and comprehension than the control group. The findings suggest that Japanese high schools and more broadly, English teachers in input-poor EFL settings should increase reading input within the students' linguistic levels both inside and outside of the classroom.

Introduction

Extensive reading in EFL settings has received increasing discussion over the past decade or two as an approach for improving learners' reading fluency. This form of reading, first coined by Palmer (1917, 1968) can be defined as the reading of materials in the target language in a rapid and casual way with a focus on quantity rather than quality. ER is often assumed to be contrasted with intensive reading, which is most commonly associated with a line-by-line, or grammar-translation approach to learning to read in a foreign language (Palmer, 1964). ER has been the subject of considerable discussion in recent scholarly books and journal articles. In addition, several publishers have series of graded readers aimed at the EFL market which serve as evidence of the growing acceptance of the merits of ER.

While there is abundant evidence that reading plays a significant role in learning a foreign or second language (Camiciottoli, 2001; Constantino et al., 1997; Gradman and Hanania, 1991; Janopoulos, 1984), many studies have also stressed the benefits of ER, such as its positive effect on

reading comprehension (Bell, 2001; Elley & Mangubhai, 1983; Lai, 1993; Mason & Krashen, 1997; Robb & Susser 1989; Sheu, 2003), vocabulary knowledge (Elley, 1991; Lao & Krashen; 2000, Sheu, 2003), writing performance (Elley, 1991; Hafiz & Tudor, 1990; Lai, 1993; Mason & Krashen, 1997), grammatical competence (Elley, 1991; Elley & Mangubhai, 1983; Sheu, 2003), and affect (Asraf & Armad, 2003; Hafiz & Tudor, 1989; Kanatani et al., 1991; Leung 2002; Powell, 2002). These studies cover a wide range of learners' ages and were conducted in a variety of settings, both ESL (English as a Second Language) and EFL, both inside and outside of set curriculums and schools, and as mainstream or supplementary activities.

Although many studies have reported the positive impact of ER, and publishers have responded accordingly, this approach is still not widely practiced in EFL classrooms. Studies (Davis, 1995; Urquhart & Weir, 1998) have pointed out several problems in implementing ER programs such as the considerable cost and effort required to set them up, and the curriculum time demanded for private reading, and supplementary reading schemes.

The Japanese Context

These issues are especially applicable to Japanese high school settings (the location of the present study) where the curriculum is often heavily focused on preparation for university entrance examinations. Moreover, opportunities for teachers to include supplementary classroom activities beyond the content prescribed in nationally authorized textbooks are quite limited. The usual class size of 40 students, plus the small budget allotted for materials at public high schools only underscore the difficulties mentioned above.

Despite the general acceptance that reading plays a significant role in learning a foreign language, Japanese EFL teachers rarely encourage students to read extensively (Noro, 2000). Rather, high school English teachers in Japan tend to focus exclusively on intensive reading, concentrating on the teaching of grammar and vocabulary in relatively short texts via post-reading exercises, while often ending up demanding a translation of the passage into Japanese. The pedagogical result of this approach is a student body which reads slowly and without a communicative purpose. This situation is summarized by Nuttall (2000) who called it, 'the vicious circle of reading': "reading slowly, not enjoying reading, not reading much, and not understanding" (p. 127). Other researchers (Kadota Noro, 2000; Kanatani, et al., 1991) have also criticized the deficiency of extensive reading among Japanese high school students. Despite the oft-held belief that the 'reading'-centered curriculum in Japan has made reading the strongest skill among Japanese learners, a recent study has indicated that Japanese high school students actually compare poorly in reading with their counterparts in China and Korea (Benesse Corporation, 2004).

Increasing the amount of exposure to a target language remains an outstanding issue in the national language education policy in Japan. In a reaction to increasing globalization, Japan's Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) established an action plan in order to "cultivate 'Japanese with English Abilities'" (MEXT, 2003a, p. 1). The plan includes "improving teaching methods, improving the teaching ability of teachers, and improving the selection system for school and university applicants as well as creating better curricula" (p. 1). The action plan, however, does not refer to any increase in the hours of instruction; thus, English teachers in Japan are left on their own to devise effective ways to increase the quantity of input within the present number of class hours.

Developments in foreign language reading in the Japanese context have witnessed considerable recent coverage (see Mori, 2002; Taguchi & Gorsuch, 2002; Waring & Takaki, 2003);

however, much of this research has been at the university level. In one of the few studies conducted at the high school level, Powell (2005), in a survey-based study of his class found that both attitudes toward reading as well as reading ability improved due to the influence of ER. Other previous research on extensive reading in Japanese high school classrooms has either been conducted on a small sample (Powell, 2002) or with learners joining the program voluntarily (Kanatani, et al., 1991; 1992). Additionally, these studies conducted in Japan have provided little empirical evidence about the effectiveness of ER toward improving the level of reading comprehension in Japanese high school students.

Teachers' perception

In a lead up to the present study, a questionnaire was conducted by the first author of this study to examine teachers' general perceptions on the teaching of reading. The participants were 49 high school English teachers from Hokkaido prefecture, in the north of Japan. The schools included comprehensive schools (40) and specialist schools (9) at various academic levels. The participants were recruited at two seminars for English teachers in Hokkaido Prefecture in 2003 and 2004. The average length of teaching experience was 11.9 years.

The responses revealed that although more than half of the teachers felt there was a lack of reading input in their classrooms, 62.5% of the teachers did not finish the content of their textbooks in any given year. More surprisingly was the fact that 20.4% of the teachers did not even finish half of the textbooks. Considering the results of the comparative study among three Asian countries (Benesse Corporation, 2004), there remain concerns about the low amount of reading input at the high school level. These results further underscore the point that Japanese English teachers in high schools put emphasis on intensive reading, which stresses the teaching of grammar and vocabulary in relatively difficult and short texts.

In an effort to provide more empirical evidence with regard to the actual impact of ER in a Japanese high school setting, the present study takes a control and treatment groups and measures their reading test scores before and after ER treatment in order to investigate the efficacy of exposing Japanese high school students to ER techniques.

This study will specifically examine the following three questions:

1. Do Japanese high school EFL learners advance in reading comprehension and reading speed by increasing exposure to easier texts than their usual textbooks?
2. Do Japanese high school EFL learners who read graded readers at home improve their reading comprehension and speed at a greater rate than students who do not?

Method

In this study, the first author, a high school teacher, designed a program called the "Home Reading Program" as an easy and feasible way to introduce ER. Its effect on learners' reading comprehension and reading speed was examined via pre- and post-tests. In addition, the student participants received a questionnaire on the reading program examining their perceptions and attitudes toward the treatment of increasing reading input in the target language.

Definition of ER

In this study, ER programs and procedures loosely followed the "Top Ten Principles of Extensive Reading" (Day & Bamford, (2002) (see below). While it appears difficult to reach an

agreement on how much reading should be done in ER, Susser and Robb (1990) suggest that “the quantity of reading is not an absolute number of hours or pages but depends on teacher and students’ perceptions of how ER differs from other reading classes” (section 2.2¶3). In Japanese senior high school EFL classrooms, students usually read less than 8,000 words in a textbook within a year. Given that the participants in this study included many students who avoided reading in English, and that the course required teachers and students to engage in many other activities other than reading, this study considers ER as reading a total of more than three times the number of words found in the class textbook.

The Top Ten Principles for Teaching Extensive Reading (Day & Bamford, 2002. pp. 137-139)

1. The reading material is easy.
2. A variety of reading material on a wide range of topics must be available.
3. Learners choose what they want to read.
4. Learners read as much as possible.
5. The purpose of reading is usually related to pleasure, information and general understanding.
6. Reading is its own reward.
7. Reading speed is usually faster rather than slower.
8. Reading is individual and silent.
9. Teachers orient and guide their students.
10. The teacher is a role model of a reader.

The first author of this study, who was the instructor in the experimental group, also carefully explained to the students in his group how the reading process in ER should differ from other usual reading skills in other parts of the class: The students should not refer to dictionaries as much as they usually do; they should read for general understanding of the content; they do not have to translate English into Japanese; and they should read more if they have enough confidence in reading the materials used in the Home Reading Program.

Participants

The participants were 226 first grade students (aged 15-16) in a Japanese public senior high school in Sapporo, Hokkaido. Initially there were 113 students in the treatment group, and 113 students in the control group. Most of the students had studied English in their three previous years in junior high school. At the beginning of the study, students had studied for six months at the senior high school. They took five English lessons per week: three in English Course I and two in Aural/Oral Communication I classes. English Course I aims “[t]o develop students’ basic abilities to understand what they listen to or read and to convey information, ideas, etc. by speaking or writing in English, and to foster a positive attitude toward communication through dealing with everyday topics” (MEXT. 2003b). Aural/Oral Communication I aims “[t]o develop students’ basic abilities to understand and convey information, ideas, etc. by listening to or speaking English, and to foster a positive attitude toward communication through dealing with everyday topics” (MEXT. 2003b).

Based on the scores of the entrance examination for all Hokkaido Prefecture public high schools, the participants’ overall English abilities were comparatively lower than the average level of senior high school students in Hokkaido. At the beginning of the school year before the study started, some students were given graded readers from Penguin Reader’s “Easystarts” (200

headword level) or Oxford Bookworm's "Starter" (250 headword level) but most students answered that the readers were too difficult to read on their own.

Materials

The Home Reading Program

The Home Reading Program consisted of materials created by instructor. The primary reason for this was the lack of published reading materials aimed at the students' low proficiency level. Another reason was the rather prohibitive cost of setting up an ER program (Davis, 1995; Urquhart and Weir, 1998).

The Home Reading Program consisted of 38 passages either custom-written by the first author or passages chosen from books and media to coincide with the students' interests (Appendix A). The selected passages were chosen to accord with perceived student interest and then adapted, for ease of reading. Topic familiarity and ease of reading are two of the principle tenets of ER. The topics included sports, music, movies, cultures, current events, etc. Topics such as these are often avoided in authorized textbooks because they easily go out of date, and they are considered too 'light.' The adaptation was largely based on limiting the passage lexicon to words in the vocabulary list of the class's junior high school English textbook and familiar syntax. This was to make certain that the researcher could control the vocabulary level appropriate to students' proficiency and vocabulary level based on previous studies conducted to explore appropriate difficulty levels for second language readers. Although the results of previous research differ, Walker (1997) concluded that "a 95% minimum level of comprehension for extensive reading is a figure which seems to be generally accepted" (p.127). In a study of the relationship between unknown vocabulary and degree of comprehension, however, Hu and Nation (2000) implied that "learners need to know at least 98% of the running words in the text" in ER for the purpose of language growth (p. 423). The average number of words in the materials in each Home Reading Program passage was 171.2 and the instructor restricted each passage to fewer than six unlearned words so that the percentage of unknown vocabulary did not exceed 5% of the total text and came close to 2% as Hu and Nation suggested. When it was impossible to keep the number of unlearned words to less than five, Japanese annotations were added for some important words at the end of the text.

Simple follow-up activities such as vocabulary quizzes and comprehension checks were included after each passage, although follow-up activities are used less frequently in ER programs than other reading programs. Including these was a difficult decision for the researcher because students could consider such activities burdensome and lose interest in the readings. If there were no follow-up activities, however, the students may not have read the material. This is usually the case with students who are not interested in learning English or other subjects. Nevertheless, the researcher thought it necessary for the students to feel some responsibility for reading in the program, even if, strictly speaking, such activities went against the spirit of ER.

Graded readers

The students in the experimental group were encouraged to read graded readers if they felt confident in reading the material of the Home Reading Program. Graded readers are "extended texts, mostly fiction, written in language reduced in terms of structures and vocabulary" (Hill, 1997, p. 57). They are regarded as a major teaching resource for many instructors in language learning. Hill noted, however, that graded readers are "generally disparaged by applied linguists and native-

speaker teachers of EFL on the grounds that they are not authentic” (p. 57). Hill insists that “the authenticity of graded readers is irrelevant,” as most non-native English teachers’ experience of using readers to learn English “encourages [students] to exploit the most versatile resource ever developed for teaching a language” (p. 57).

At the beginning of the program, only 16 graded readers from Oxford Bookworms series Starter (250 headwords) to Level 2 (700 headwords) and Penguin Readers Easystarts (200 headwords) to Level 2 (600 headwords) were introduced to participants. The researcher gradually increased the number of graded readers to 60 titles by the end of the five-month program based on feedback from students about their interests and the level of texts.

Textbook and worksheets

An authorized textbook served as the core source of reading in the class. Generally, textbook publishers issue three textbooks for English Course I of varying difficulty and lengths. For example, Tokyo Shoseki, a textbook publisher, has issued three English Course I textbooks. The advanced type contains 7,896 words in its running texts, the intermediate type 4,224 words, and the elementary type 1,866 words. None of these types can be said to provide learners with sufficient input for one year’s use. However, as noted above, many teachers still do not finish all of the lessons in the textbooks, meaning that learners read even less than the number of words listed above. The textbook which was used in this course was at the intermediate level.

The instructors of the course designed worksheets for each lesson so that the students in both the treatment and control groups could do the same activities based on the syllabus and the textbook. The worksheets contained sections such as vocabulary, reading comprehension, pronunciation, writing, and sentence pattern exercises.

Procedure

The experimental treatment was done in English Course I. Here, the Home Reading passages were distributed in each lesson and the students were told to read them before the next lesson. At the beginning of each lesson, the instructor first explained the topic to the students in easy English and read the passage to the students aloud. In the Shared Book approach at elementary school levels (Elley & Mangubhai, 1983), teachers and learners share reading experiences with the teacher reading the texts aloud for learners while allowing time for learners to discuss the contents among themselves. In other ER programs, however, self-sustained silent reading is the mainstream activity. The instructor noticed that many students had difficulties in decoding even simple words that should have been learned before entering high school and decided to read the texts aloud so that the students could reflect on letter and sound recognition. After reading the text once, the instructor checked students’ understanding of some key words listed below the texts by asking them the meanings of the words. Then, the reading was concluded by checking some comprehension questions on the texts.

The whole procedure took from five to ten minutes. The length of time was important because most of the class time in EFL classrooms at the researcher’s school must be devoted to activities related to authorized textbooks. ER must take a secondary role to these activities because the objectives of the course are not only to improve reading proficiency but also other skills. The ER treatment (consisting of the Home Reading Program plus encouraging the reading of graded readers outside of class) began in October and continued to the end of March with some breaks for the winter holidays and term examinations. The number of passages covered amounted to 38 with a total of 6,505 running words (excluding words in the exercises). This is not a large amount of

exposure to the target language if it is compared with other ER programs. However, if the total number of words in the textbook is taken into account, this compares favorably and has a reasonable impact. The textbook had a total of ten lessons, six of which were finished by the end of the school year. The total number of words in the passages of these six lessons was 1,636, so the number of words in the Home Reading passages was almost four times as large as that of the textbook.

The control group was instructed by two teachers at the same school. The class activities and worksheets were conducted based on the authorized textbook in the same way that the treatment group experienced it except for the Home Reading treatment. The instructor in the treatment group sped up the procedures and omitted the number of times some review work was repeated in order not to fall behind the control group.

In addition to reading the teacher-made materials in the Home Reading Program, the students in the experimental group were encouraged to read graded readers if they felt confident with the reading materials in the Home Reading Program. The guidelines featured in the “Top Ten Principles of Extensive Reading” by Day and Bamford (2002) were distributed to the students. Then, the instructor brought graded readers to every class so that the students could borrow them at any time. The students who read graded readers kept records of their reading in their own Personal Reading Record sheet. They also rated their interests and understanding on a 5-point scale and wrote their impressions or thoughts about the books and learning through extensive reading. In the end, some violations of the Top Ten Principles occurred, such as the use of dictionaries, and the advice given as to reading content; however, considering the level of the students, this appeared unavoidable.

Pre- and post-tests

The reading comprehension part of the STEP Test in Practical English Proficiency (the STEP Test) developed by the Society for Testing English Proficiency was utilized as the reading test in this study. The STEP test is authorized by the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology and regarded as one of the most reliable English tests in Japan.

The third and fourth grades (out of seven total) were chosen for the pre- and post-tests. Both tests had 10 sections with five items in each section, totaling 50 items in each test. The pre-test had 3,399 words including reading texts and questions, and the post-test had 3,404 words. The first five sections were from the fourth grade test and the latter five were from the third grade test.

Both the pre- and post-test were administered in 30 minutes, which was quite short for most of the students to finish all the items. As the STEP test at these levels largely assesses vocabulary and grammar with questions written in English, the number of items that the students answered was utilized as an approximate indicator of students’ reading speed (research question #2), while the differential in pre-and post-test scores was used as an indicator of achievement (research question #1).

The pre-test was done in the middle of October 2003. The researcher supervised all three classes in the treatment group, and the two other teachers supervised the three classes in the control group. In order to avoid any difference in directing the testing procedures, a guide for supervisors was designed by the researcher. However, there were some small differences in the way the students wrote the test. The post-test was done in the middle of March 2004, and at this time, all six classes in the treatment and control groups were supervised by the researcher to avoid any differences.

Results

Reading comprehension

When the program started, there were 113 students each in the experimental and control groups. Over the course of the study, 17 students in the treatment group and 19 students in the control group were eliminated from the data because of their absence either during the pre- or post-test.

Descriptive statistics of the reading tests and the terminal examinations are presented in Table 1. While the pre-test scores showed no statistical difference between the two groups', the post-test scores for the treatment group revealed that they significantly outperformed the control group ($t = 2.50$, $p = 0.01$).

In order to examine the effect of reading graded readers, pre- and post-test scores of the treatment group excluding the students who had read graded readers ($n=18$), and the scores of the control group were compared. The results in Table 2 show that although the treatment group's scores were higher than the control group's they were not significantly so ($t = 1.31$, $p = 0.19$). The results of these two comparisons indicate that reading graded readers appeared to have had a larger impact than reading in the Home Reading Program. In other words, the gains in the treatment group were mainly brought by the students who had read graded readers.

Table 1
Mean Scores of Term Examination, Pre- and Post- Reading Tests

	Treatment (n=96)		Control (n=94)		t(188) /
	means	sd	means	sd	
Pre-Test	22.01	5.50	21.23	6.22	0.90
Post-Test	24.35	6.77	21.83	7.17	2.50*

*= $p < .05$

Table 2
Mean scores of Term Examination, Pre- and Post- Reading Tests excluding ER students in the Treatment Group

	Treatment (n=78)		Control (n=94)		t(170) /
	means	sd	means	sd	
Pre-Test	21.28	5.34	21.23	6.22	0.05
Post-Test	23.17	5.99	21.83	7.17	1.31

*= $p < .05$

Reading speed

In order to determine the treatment's effect on reading speed, the two groups were also compared in terms of the number of responses they made to items in the reading test (Table 3). A greater number of responses was taken to mean a faster reading speed. While the two groups had no significant difference in the pre-test, in the post-test, the intact treatment group significantly outperformed the control group ($t = 3.00$, $p = 0.01$).

Table 4 compares the treatment group excluding the students who had read graded readers with the control group for reading speed. This reduced experimental group also outperformed the control group significantly in the post test ($t = 2.46$, $p = 0.01$).

Table 3

Mean Number of Responses by the treatment group and the control group

	Treatment (n=96)		Control (n=94)		t(188)
	means	sd	means	sd	/'
Pre-Test	28.84	5.81	29.96	8.09	-1.09
Post-Test	36.00	8.28	32.41	8.17	3.00**

**=p<.01

Table 4

Mean Number of Responses excluding ER students in the Treatment Group

	Treatment (n=78)		Control (n=94)		t(170)
	means	sd	means	sd	/'
Pre-Test	28.69	5.87	29.96	8.09	-1.15
Post-Test	35.50	8.18	32.41	8.17	2.46*

*=p < .05

Reading of Graded Readers

One of the major goals of the Home Reading Program was to introduce and invite the students to read graded readers. As a result of the treatment, 18 students out of 96 read graded readers, or 18.6% of the students in the treatment group, although there were three more students who read graded readers but missed either the pre-test or the post-test. The average number of books they read was 3.8 with a maximum of 9 and minimum of 1. Any books that the students gave up reading were not counted in the total.

Discussion*Pedagogical Implications*

The treatment employed in this experiment appeared to have benefits in both reading comprehension and speed. However, most of the comprehension benefits appeared to accrue as a result of exposure to graded readers, as opposed to the Home Reading Program. Additionally, this improvement in comprehension came largely from a small group (18.6%) of students who voluntarily chose to read the graded readers. In addition, responses to an informal questionnaire indicated that students believed the Home Reading Program was both effective and enjoyable. These findings suggest various pedagogical implications.

While the graded reader element of the present study was limited to students who voluntarily read these readers, the positive impact of this type of ER could well have benefited all of the students had it been made a compulsory part of the class. However, the experience in the present study suggests that if ER using graded readers were to become widespread, teachers should have a thorough knowledge of their students before implementing such a program at this level. If either the level or the content-area is inappropriate, or if the variety of titles is insufficient, students may not approach their ER with the same enthusiasm or reap the same benefits. For example, students in the present study appeared to be most comfortable with readers at the 300-400 headword level whose

content was contemporary non-fiction (as opposed to other genres such as classic novels). Further study on the content and level of graded readers could fine-tune these elements for high school students. Nevertheless, Day and Bamford (1998) advocate a wide variety of these readers “so as to encourage reading for different reasons and in different ways” (p. 8)

In any event, the positive impact that graded readers appeared to have in an ER context provides compelling support for their wider use in Japanese high schools. This finding which also accords with similar findings in other contexts (Kanatani et al. 1991; Lai, 1993; Lao & Krashen, 2000; Robb & Susser, 1989; Shue, 2003) may also serve as a hint to Japanese education policy makers to consider the efficacy of ER in their curriculum design. Publishers of graded readers may also wish to consider the potential that may exist in Japanese high schools which has its own set of specifications as to the level and content-area of readers required.

While reading speed generally has a lower, if not a low priority, in the Japanese English-reading curriculum, its importance should not be understated. Increased reading speed not only allows more time for extra reading, it can also improve students' performance on examinations, which are clearly a high priority in the Japanese high school context. It is suggested that the increased reading speed attained by the treatment group in this study was largely due to the rise in the number of words that students needed to read (in the Home Reading Program). The treatment increased the total number of words read by students by a factor of four over the amount that was read by students in the control group who were exposed only to their textbooks. Accordingly, we strongly suggest that curriculums consider significantly raising the count of words that students read over the course of the school year. Naturally, such a suggestion could be met with resistance by overworked teachers now struggling to squeeze in the present number of words. However, we recommend that the words be augmented in the spirit of ER, in other words, not as texts to be studied intensively and scrutinized for grammatical patterns and then translated into Japanese, but rather, to be read as unobtrusively as possibly, with minimal follow-up exercises. Although such a proposition appears to fall outside of the examination-driven mandate of most high schools, if implemented, it could actually serve to help increase reading speed, which could well have positive effects on examination scores.

Learners' Evaluation

The results of an informal questionnaire revealed that the students highly evaluated the treatment in spite of their increased workload in classes. The students showed approval for the program's effectiveness in 'English learning,' 'reading ability,' and 'vocabulary.' The questionnaire results also showed that the students preferred extensive reading to the standard intensive reading. A few reasons can be identified for this tendency. First, the workload in extensive reading is lighter than that of intensive reading. In the program, the students were told that they should read the material for general comprehension and that they did not have to translate the sentences into Japanese or remember grammar rules. Second, the topics of the reading materials were more in line with the students' personal interests. Third, the level of the materials in the program was easier than the textbooks. Although, many students answered that the materials of the program were still difficult for them, they claimed they still wanted to read materials with the same difficulty level in future programs. In summary, as highlighted above, these findings suggest that ER brings positive outcomes, in this case via enhanced motivation to read

Limitations and further study

The Home Reading Program and graded readers appeared to have a positive effect on reading comprehension and speed and the students receiving the treatment had favorable attitudes towards it. However, somewhat surprisingly, the Home Reading Program alone did not have a positive impact on reading comprehension. Several limitations of the present study may explain this. First, the total amount of reading input was insufficient when compared with previous research. Susser and Robb (1990) suggest that in an EFL situation such as Japan, reading about ten times as much as in an intensive reading program would be perceived as 'extensive' at the university level. Second, the length of the treatment period was only five months including a four-week-long winter vacation. This period may be too short for the students to achieve gains. Other research (Kanatani, et al. 1991, 1992; Lai, 1993) conducted over shorter periods revealed their ER programs' positive effects on reading comprehension, but the total amount of reading input in these studies was much larger than that of this study. Additionally, there may be a possibility of a latent period for the effects of extensive reading to appear. Kanatani et al. (1991, 1992) revealed that it took six months after the program for positive effects to appear in the scores of reading items and other fields in English proficiency tests. Third, the total time engaged in reading was too short for about half the students in the treatment group, who answered in the questionnaire that they didn't usually read the materials before the class. It follows that they read for only five to ten minutes in the program in each class. As the students evaluated the effects of the Home Reading Program highly, further research is required to examine whether learners will advance in reading comprehension and speed with increasing reading input both in the class and at home.

While the students who read graded readers appeared to benefit, how they take advantage of graded readers remains a matter to be investigated further. Also, even among the students who tried to read graded readers, there was a wide gap between those students who read them enthusiastically and those who read only one or two books. It is possible that individual affective elements can explain these differences; on the other hand, further study may reveal that a tweaking of the readers' level and content avoids the attrition rate found in the present study. These issues could be examined through qualitative methods such as follow-up interviews.

Another limitation lies in the design of the measurement. This study tried to measure the students' reading speed and comprehension in a single measurement. The students in the treatment group showed a significant increase in the number of responses in the reading test, but the design of the measurement prevented the researcher from analyzing the impact of the treatment meticulously.

Despite such limitations, the study revealed the need for further investigation. First, a longer treatment period may provide further confirmation of ER's efficacy. Second, although graded readers appeared to increase reading comprehension and speed in this study, whether extensive reading with graded readers has an impact on vocabulary or other skills remains a matter to be further examined in input-poor EFL settings. Research shows evidence of incidental vocabulary learning while reading; however, it is debatable whether it is effective or even possible at beginning levels as in this study (Coady, 1997; Laufer, 2003).

Conclusion

This study examined the impact of increasing exposure to reading input in Japanese high school EFL settings by a quasi-extensive reading program with teacher-made materials and graded readers. The results indicated that the students who were exposed to a great deal of easy input gained reading speed. Though it was not significant, there was a tendency for improvement in relation to the amount of reading students did; furthermore, there was an improvement in reading comprehension by those students who read graded readers outside of class.

These results suggest a need for a shift in Japanese high schools towards a reading pedagogy that appreciates the spirit of the ER approach with its focus on reading for pleasure and information.

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Hiroya Tanaka has been a teacher of English at public senior high school in Hokkaido Prefecture in Japan for 12 years. He is currently working at Hokkaido Sapporo Nanryo High School. He is also a doctoral student at Graduate School of International Media and Communication, Hokkaido University. His research interests include reading, vocabulary learning, and learning strategies. E-mail: higoezo@ybb.ne.jp

Paul Stapleton's current research area is research methodology in education with a particular focus on second language academic writing and critical thinking.
E-mail: paulstapleton@gmail.com

Appendix A

Nanryo Home Reading Program Story No. 37

Title Sapporo Snow Festival 1



*A sculpture at the
2004 Snow
Festival*



*The 2004 Snow
Festival poster*

The Sapporo Snow Festival is a really big event. Every year in February, we have the Snow Festival for about a week. This year, the Festival 2004 was held from February 5 to 11. About 2,000,000 people come to see the Snow Festival every year. About 20,000 of them are from foreign countries all over the world.



*One of the snow sculptures at the first Snow Festival in 1950.
This is a work by junior and senior high school students.*

Do you know how the Snow Festival started? In 1950, students in junior and senior high schools in Sapporo started the festival. They made six snow sculptures. At the festival, they also had a snowball fight. There were about 50,000 people who visited the festival. Then, Sapporo city decided to have the festival as one of the city's events.

From 1955, people from *Jieitai*, or the Self Defense Force, joined the festival and they made big snow sculptures. 1972 was a big year for Sapporo Snow Festival. Can you guess why? We had the Winter Olympic Games in 1972, and people all over the world knew about the Snow Festival in Sapporo.

(169 words)

[Question]

- (1) How many people visit the Snow Festival every year?
1 About two hundred. 2 About two thousand. 3 About two million.
- (2) Who made the snow sculptures at the first Snow Festival?
1 People from Self-Defense Force. 2 Some junior and senior high school students.

[Vocabulary] Do you know the meaning of these words?

event / foreign / sculpture / Self Defense Force / guess /