

A Preliminary Study of Developing Extensive Reading Materials for an EFL Program in Japan

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Abstract

The development of reading skills is viewed as one of the most important aspects of EFL language programs. While numerous studies have explored the effectiveness of extensive reading in EFL language programs, few have focused on developing reading materials that meet the target readers' needs (Kirin, 2010; Lyutaya, 2011; Fujita & Noro, 2009; Stoeckel, Reagan & Hann, 2012). The paper reports a preliminary study of developing extensive reading materials for an EFL program in Japan, where limited budget and resources are hindering the successful implementation of extensive reading programs. The study indicates the need to develop reading materials that match the levels and interests of target readers, in this case, undergraduate English-major students who are studying international studies in Japan.

Keywords: Extensive reading, In-house reading material, EFL.

1. Introduction

Reading in English as a foreign language (EFL) has always been one of the most important aspects of teaching and learning in Japan. National curriculum as well as entrance examinations to universities often adopt reading as the most important criteria to evaluate students' English ability (MEXT, 2010, 2011). Extensive reading (ER) refers to the idea that learners read many texts without the help of dictionaries or translating them into their own language (Day and Bamford, 2002). While the major concern of ER studies focuses on its effectiveness, little has been said about the possibilities of developing in-house reading materials that correspond with the needs of learners and institutions (Chen, Chen, Chen, & Wey, 2013; Lee & Hsu, 2009; Yamashita; Robb & Kano, 2013; Ishizawa, Yoshida, & Fukuda, 2010). In this article, the writer will first review the relevant literature concerning ER studies in the EFL environment, and then discuss an issue that has not been addressed – the possible pros and cons of developing in-house reading materials. The paper will then report the linguistic features of authentic and graded readers to use the results as a source for the development of in-house reading materials for ER.

Day and Bamford (2002) proposed the ten principles of ER:

1. The reading material is easy.
2. A variety of reading material on a wide range of topics is 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.

(p. 137-141)

Day (2015) claims that a “pure” ER program uses all ten ER principles, while a “modified” program uses “many” ER principles, and a “light” program only uses some of the ER principles. Numerous studies have implemented ER programs using the principles, some strictly adhering to the ten principles (Mermelstein, 2015), and others partially adopting them (Arnold, 2009). Mermelstein (2015) conducted a study regarding the effectiveness of ER on writing abilities using 211 undergraduate EFL learners in Taiwan. The study revealed that the treatment group with a “pure” ER program showed significant gains in writing. Arnold (2009) reports that while materials were unselected and thus some learners intentionally “challenged” themselves to read difficult texts, many learners showed gains in motivation and self-confidence. Day (2015) analyzed 44 articles that describe ER programs and found that the three most frequently practiced principles are: learners read as much as possible; learners choose what they want to read; and a variety of reading materials on a wide range of topics is available. Based on the findings, he arranged six core principles of ER in the following order:

1. Learners read as much as possible.
2. Learners choose what they want to read.
3. A variety of reading material on a wide range of topics is available.
4. The reading material is easy.
5. The purpose of reading is usually related to pleasure, information and general understanding.
6. Reading is individual and silent.

The ultimate goals of our ER program, therefore, aim to utilize these six principles.

The studies listed below are relevant to the current study. Table 1 lists a number of recent studies that have implemented ER into EFL contexts. The researcher searched ER articles in the EFL setting by using the keywords “extensive reading,” and “EFL” on Google Scholar search, and received 34,000 articles. It was narrowed down to 20,300 articles when limited to articles published within the last decade. The researcher then read the 50 most cited articles and chose 25 articles that correspond to the present research. The researcher read

the full text of the 25 articles to identify ten features: a) the type of reading material, b) material size, c) text medium, d) duration of the program, e) institution where the program was held, f) the level of integration into the classroom hours, g) number of participants in the study, h) reading requirements (if any), i) post-reading activity, and j) country.

Table 1 Studies on the ER programs in EFL contexts

Study	Reading Material	Size	Text Medium	Duration	Institution Level	Integration	Participants	Reading Requirements	Post-reading Activity	Country
Chen, Chen, Chen, & Wey (2013)	Graded Authentic	NA	Online	10 weeks	Tertiary	Outside	89	2 hours per week	Comprehension check worksheet	Taiwan
Lee & Hsu. (2009)	Graded (<i>Oxford and Penguin</i>)	530	Print	1 year	Vocational college	Inside (50 min. per class) Outside	86	1 book per week	Reading log Summary sheets	Taiwan
Yamashita (2013)	Graded (<i>Oxford, Cambridge, Heinemann, Penguin</i>)	500	Print	15 weeks	Tertiary	Inside (45 min. per class) Outside	61	NA	Book report	Japan
Mermelstein (2015)	Graded (<i>Oxford, Penguin</i>)	600	Print	1 year	Tertiary	Inside Outside	211	3 page per day	Reading record	Taiwan
Robb & Kano (2013)	Graded	NA	Print	NA	Tertiary	Outside	NA	5 graded readers	Quiz	Japan
Ishizawa, Yoshioka, & Fukada (2010)	Graded Authentic	1,500	Print Audio	NA	College	Inside Outside	NA	NA	Logbook	Japan
Al-Homoud, & Schmitt (2009)	Graded (<i>Oxford, Longman, Cambridge</i>)	150	Print	NA	Tertiary	NA	70	NA	NA	Saudi Arabia
Al-Mansour (2014)	NA	NA	NA	Two months	Tertiary	NA	48	NA	NA	Saudi Arabia
Kirin (2010)	Graded	NA	NA	15 weeks	Tertiary	Inside	34	NA	Reading record	Thailand
Lytaya (2011)	Graded Authentic	NA	Print Online	12 weeks	NA	Inside	NA	NA	Reading log	NA
Fujita & Noro (2009)	Graded (<i>Oxford, Longman</i>)	540	Print	4 months	High school	Inside (10 min. x ten times)	76	NA	Reading record	Japan
Stoeckel, Reagan & Hann (2012)	Graded	275	Print	1 semester	Tertiary	Inside	177	10 graded readers	Quiz Oral reports	Japan
Song & Sardegna (2014)	Graded Authentic	150	Print	15 weeks	Secondary	Inside	24	1 book per week	Oral reports Presentation Reading log Book report	Korea
Wang (2013)	Graded	40	Print	15 weeks	Tertiary	NA	45	NA	NA	Taiwan
Guo (2012)	NA	NA	NA	1 semester	5-year college	NA	25	NA	NA	NA
Lee, Schallert, Kim (2015)	Graded	900	Print	2 semesters	Middle school	Inside	124	1 book per week	Short summaries	Korea
Takase (2012)	Graded (<i>Oxford, Longman, Step into Reading, Usborne</i>)	NA	Print	1 semester (3 months)	Tertiary	Inside (80 min.)	94	100 books minimum	Reading log	Japan
Morgado (2009)	Articles	120	Print	3 semesters	Tertiary	Inside (45 min.)	30	NA	Activity sheet	Venezuela
Rezaee, & Nourzadeh (2011)	Graded Authentic	29	Print	4 weeks	Tertiary	Outside (homework)	51	1 book per week for 4 weeks	NA	Iran
Meng (2009)	Graded (<i>Cambridge, Heinemann, Longman, Oxford</i>)	40 per class	Print	NA	Tertiary	Inside (20 min.)	NA	NA	Short record Oral report Discussion	China
Huffman (2014)	Graded (<i>Macmillan, Oxford, Cambridge</i>)	237	Print	15 weeks	College	Inside (30 min.)	66	NA	Book report	Japan
Pazhakh, & Soltani (2010)	NA	5 per person	NA	10 weeks	Language institute	NA	80	1 story per week	Summary	Iran
Alqadi, & Alqadi (2013)	NA	NA	Print	6 weeks	Tertiary	Outside (assignment)	60	2 pages per week	Summary	Jordan
Nakanishi, & Ueda (2011)	Graded (<i>Oxford, Longman, etc.</i>)	NA	Print	One academic year (27 class)	Tertiary	Inside Outside	42	NA	Reading record	Japan
Belgar, Hunt & Kite (2011)	Graded (<i>Penguin, Oxford, Cambridge, Heinemann</i>) Authentic	180	Print	28 weeks	Tertiary	Inside (90 min.) Outside	97	NA	Worksheet Reading report	Japan

Regarding the types of materials used in ER programs, nearly 60% of the programs used graded readers only, while 20% used both authentic texts and graded readers (Chen, Chen, Chen, & Wey, 2013; Lyutaya, 2011). Apart from the four studies that have not provided information about the types of reading materials, none of the programs used authentic books solely. The majority used print materials, while two programs adapted online materials. Most ER programs were implemented at university-level institutions, although several secondary-level, vocational colleges, and a language institution were included. For example, the program by Fujita and Noro (2009) reported that early exposure to ER was beneficial for increasing motivation to read extensively. Many programs encouraged the participants to read outside the classroom while instituting approximately 30–60 minutes of reading in the classroom. Yamashita (2013), for example, reported that, after participating in group activities for 45 minutes, students read books silently at their own pace for the latter half of the 90-minute class. Participants of the study ranged in number from 24 to more than 177, and program duration was usually a semester, ranging from 10 to 15 weeks, although four programs lasted for a year. Nearly half of the programs (44%) established reading requirements, ranging from one book per week to two hours of reading per week. In the program reported by Mermelstein (2015), for example, participants were required to read at least three pages per day outside the classroom. Many programs also adopted post-reading activities for monitoring students' amounts of reading and their comprehension. The most popular post-reading activities was keeping a reading log; for this, participants maintained a record of the number of pages they read at one time, with the title of the work they read and short comments about its content (Lee & Hsu, 2009; Fujita & Noro, 2009).

Apart from two studies, one for which students were required to bring in their favorite articles to build a reading library (Morgado, 2009) and another where students were encouraged to buy books (Lyutaya, 2011), all the programs purchased books or used donated books; these collections ranged from 150–1,500 books in different programs. A major problem of commercially produced reading materials is their cost; as is the case at the institution where the researcher works, there are no individual budgets for classroom materials or a place to keep books. In these cases, no matter how much an individual practitioner strives to implement ER programs in his or her classroom, the issues of cost and storage for books tend to hinder the successful implementation of an ER program. In-house reading materials can be produced at relatively low costs and, therefore, appear to be the most applicable solution; however, it is difficult to produce readable and usable texts for several reasons. First, authentic texts are always favored for their content. Since these texts are produced to entertain readers or provide information, their use corresponds with ER principle 5, which states that the purpose of reading is usually related to pleasure, information, and general understanding. That is, the material has to be informative and a pleasure to read. Second, an ER library should stock books with a “wide range of topics” so learners can “choose what they want to read (ER principles 2 and 3).” As the listed studies suggest, no fewer than 100 books are a prerequisite even for a small-

sized class. Finally, and presumably most important for English language classes, in accordance with ER principle 4, reading materials have to be easy to read. Many graded readers are advantageous in this aspect since the levels of the books are included and information is provided about how easy or difficult the text is to read. For example, Macmillan has divided its graded readers into 12 levels, and gives approximate headwords and total numbers of words included in the text. The present paper, therefore, aims to identify the linguistic features of both authentic and graded readers in order to use the information for the development of in-house ER materials.

2. Materials and Methods

The researcher chose 26 authentic texts based on three criteria: a) no more than 100 pages per book, b) priced affordable for students to purchase, and c) available to buy within a week. For comparison with authentic texts, 12 graded readers from Cengage Publisher and Macmillan were chosen. (See appendix for a list of authentic materials and graded readers.)

Three pages without illustrations or extensive blank space were randomly selected from each book. The researcher transcribed the pages into a Microsoft Word file. The transcribed texts were then copied and pasted into the software program VocabProfile by Lextutor and submitted for analysis. VocabProfile was adopted to measure the level of vocabulary of authentic materials and graded readers. This online program sorts the vocabulary data into four categories: the 1,000 most frequently used words (referred to as “K1”), the next 1,000 most frequently used words (K2), the 570 most frequently used academic words (AW) (as proposed by Coxhead, 1998), and other words (OFF). VocabProfile also provides lexical density (LD), which indicates the ratio of content words used (e.g., nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs) to function words (e.g., articles and prepositions).

3. Results & Discussion

As shown in Table 2, approximately 90% of authentic texts contained more than 5% OFF and AW, while only 60% of graded readers contained more than 5% OFF and AW words. Moreover, the lexical density of authentic texts was higher than for graded readers. The mean number of words per sentence was 13 for authentic texts, while graded readers had only 10 words per sentence on average. Among all of them, many of the authentic texts were a collection of short cases (See the *Encyclopedia Brown* series, for example), where each case contained no more than 10 pages with fewer than 1,000 words. Examples of words listed as OFF include Oliver, Carol, Karenina, and carnival.

Table 2. Linguistic features of graded readers and authentic texts

Authentic Texts	Features	Graded Readers
13	Average number of words per sentence	10
20	Average number of sentences per page	12
260	Average number of words per page	220
75	K1 (%)	87
8	K2 (%)	7
1	AWL (%)	1
15	OFF (%)	5
55	Lexical density (%)	51

Nation (2009) stated that many non-native speakers of English and some native speakers read at a speed of fewer than 300 words per minute (wpm). Carver (1982) claimed that reading at a rate of 250–350 wpm is most efficient for comprehending text, and EFL reading textbooks encourage EFL readers to read at a rate of 300 wpm (Takeuchi, Sasaki, & Yamaoka, 2018). Many ER programs integrate individual reading periods into their classroom hours, approximately 20–30 minutes per lesson. If a typical EFL reader reads a text at 100–200 wpm, then he or she can read 3,000–6,000 words per lesson, allowing the reader to read at least one book that contains fewer than 3,000 words.

The results appear to indicate that there are three major linguistic elements that should be considered in developing in-house reading materials. First, a book should not exceed 2,000 words in total so that students can finish reading it in one reading activity that lasts 20 minutes. Second, the lexical density should not exceed 50%. Finally, proper nouns, especially place names and surnames, should be used judiciously, since many OFF listed words include place names and personal names.

4. Conclusion

Although the development of in-house reading materials for the successful implementation of an ER program is a prerequisite, especially for low-funded, small-sized classes, several factors should be considered. This small-scale study highlights the need to provide reading texts that are affordable and appropriate in regard to levels of reading difficulty. The study has several limitations, especially its small sample size. In future studies, there is a need to explore the content of existing materials to meet EFL readers' needs.

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Appendix

A list of authentic materials and graded readers

Authentic Materials

Encyclopedia Brown, Boy Detective

Encyclopedia Brown Cracks the Case

Encyclopedia Brown and the Case of the Secret Pitch

Encyclopedia Brown Keeps the Peace

Encyclopedia Brown, Super Sleuth

Encyclopedia Brown Finds the Clues

Encyclopedia Brown Gets His Man

Encyclopedia Brown Takes the Case

Encyclopedia Brown Shows the Way

Encyclopedia Brown Tracks Them Down

Encyclopedia Brown and the Case of the Soccer Scheme

Encyclopedia Brown and the Case of the Carnival Crime

Encyclopedia Brown Saves the Day

Encyclopedia Brown and the Case of the Secret UFOs

Encyclopedia Brown Solves Them All

Encyclopedia Brown Leads a Hand

Nancy Drew and the Clue Crew 13: Chick-napped

Nancy Drew and the Clue Crew 11: Ski School Sneak

Nancy Drew and the Clue Crew 10: Ticket Trouble

Nancy Drew and the Clue Crew 9: The Halloween Hoax

Nancy Drew and the Clue Crew 8: Lights, Camera... Cats!

Nancy Drew and the Clue Crew 25: Buggy Breakout

Nancy Drew and the Clue Crew 23: Babysitting Bandit
Nancy Drew and the Clue Crew 17: Wedding Day Disaster
Nancy Drew and the Clue Crew 14: The Zoo Crew
Nancy Drew and the Clue Crew 7: The Circus Scare

Graded Readers

The Stranger (Cengage Learning Level 12)
Battle for Big Tree Country (Cengage Learning Level 11)
The Boathouse (Cengage Learning Level 10)
The Yellow Field (Cengage Learning Level 9)
The Run from the Sky (Cengage Learning Level 8)
A New Song for Nina (Cengage Learning Level 7)
Best Friend (Cengage Learning Level 6)
Gone (Cengage Learning Level 5)
All or Nothing (Cengage Learning Level 4)
The Lift (Cengage Learning Level 3)
He's Mine (Cengage Learning Level 2)
Somebody Better (Cengage Learning Level 1)
Around the World in Eighty Days (Macmillan Language House Level 1 Starters)
A Tale of Two Cities (Macmillan Language House Level 2 Beginner level)
Christmas Carol (Macmillan Language House Level 3 Elementary Level)
A Midsummer Night's Dream (Macmillan Language House Level 4 Pre-intermediate)
Bristol Murder (Macmillan Language House Level 5 Intermediate Level)
Anna Karenina (Macmillan Language House Level 6 Upper intermediate)