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Author	Shea, David P.
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Extensive Reading in a University EFL Classroom: Issues of Fluency, Vocabulary, and Proximity

David P. Shea

Abstract

As universities move to offer content classes in the medium of English, students face the challenge to handle large amounts of reading. Research in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) suggests that extensive reading (ER) can strengthen fluency as well as improve attitudes toward reading. While most ER researchers recommend graded readers, sociocultural approaches suggest that shared texts may also prove effective. In this paper, I report on a qualitative investigation of a required first-year reading class which incorporated selective components of ER: a large quantity of interesting text, read for enjoyment with a focus on meaning, not translation. Students overwhelmingly endorsed ER, reporting faster reading speeds and more positive attitudes, yet a number of students felt that their vocabulary declined, due to skipping unknown words. However, diagnostic tests suggested that although academic vocabulary may have declined slightly, general vocabulary likely increased. While a modified ER approach may be effective, it may be helpful to supplement reading with vocabulary practice and to “sell” students on the idea of ER.

Introduction

With the spread of globalization, there is increasing pressure placed on universities in Japan to offer classes that deliver authentic academic content in English (Brown, 2014). The Ministry of Education has endorsed a university curriculum where “Japanese people can acquire the necessary English skills” to take classes with foreign students in the country (MEXT, 2012, p. 17), and the situation is arguably similar in other parts of Asia (Kirkpatrick, 2016). This increase of English medium instruction (EMI) raises questions about the balance between content and language skills, between studying English as a foreign language versus

studying an academic subject in English. There is some overlap, depending on the context. Content-based instruction (Lyster, 2007) places emphasis on academic subject matter, with a simultaneous concern for various elements of linguistic structure and discourse. Carty and Susser (2015) note, however, that with most EMI, there is usually little if any provision for language learning, which suggests that for many Japanese students, EMI is a sink or swim situation. Advanced “returnee” students may have the language proficiency to take classes in English, but “regular” students face an imposing hurdle.

Perhaps the biggest challenge for intermediate first-year university students who hope to enroll in upper level EMI courses is learning how to deal with the large amount of required reading (Spack, 1997). For many students at this stage, there is a strong tendency to rely on an ineffective and time consuming word-for-word approach to reading, which involves the “close study of short passages, including syntactic, semantic, and lexical analyses and translation into the L1 to study meaning” (Susser & Robb, 1990, p. 161). An intensive approach, however, simply does not give students the skills to deal with large amounts of reading material.

Although the character of English education is slowly changing, with the recent introduction of public international schools (Noguchi, 2015) and educational initiatives for high-level returnee education (Kanno, 2003), the goal of reading instruction in many high schools is typically word-for-word translation, with explanation of associated grammar patterns, often in the L1 (Nishino & Watanabe, 2008). Informal surveys of incoming students in my first-year classes regularly confirm that many have never read an entire book in English. The problem is compounded when students report that not only have they had little practice reading, they basically do not like to read. The challenge for instruction thus involves developing both more positive attitudes as well as more effective reading practices. As Lees and Althomsons (2015, p. 74) point out, “non-fluent readers may be trapped in a vicious circle; by reading slowly and with little comprehension, they do not enjoy what they read, which in turn causes them to read less and further stunts their reading attitude and skill development.”

Extensive Reading

A good deal of educational research suggests that extensive reading (ER) is an effective approach that improves fluency as well as attitudes toward reading, giving students the skills to deal with large amounts of text. In Spack’s (1997) study of the academic socialization of

a Japanese student at an American university, for example, one of the turning points was the student's decision to read extensively over the summer vacation, which improved confidence as well as proficiency.

One of the strongest proponents of ER, Nation (2015), has stated that the "single most significant change that a teacher could make to a language learning course would be to include a substantial extensive reading program" (p. 139). Nation (2001) has also argued that reading is "strongly related" to English L2 proficiency, pointing out that the amount of reading learners do outside class is the "most important direct contributor to TOEFL test performance" (p. 154). In reviewing empirical studies of "book floods," Elley (1991) found that engagement in reading programs using ER produced strong gains on text comprehension measures, as well as increased motivation to read. Bell (2001) noted that extensive reading produced higher comprehension than intensive methods focused on short texts with grammar and vocabulary tasks. Robb and Susser (1989) found that university students who were engaged in ER activities performed equal to students engaged in a traditional skills-based approach, but with greater interest and enjoyment. Other research (e.g., Day & Bamford, 1998; Dupuy, Tse, & Cook, 1996; Krashen, 2000) has provided compelling evidence that ER is a positive means of developing English proficiency.

Although there are common practices that define extensive reading (Stoller, 2015), ER is perhaps most widely associated with use of simplified graded readers controlled for vocabulary and grammatical complexity (Bamford & Day, 1997; Hill, 1997; Nation & Wang, 1999). Within a graded reader program, students typically choose books that they read individually, either inside or outside class. According to Day and Bamford (1998), students select only books in which they are interested, with "the freedom to stop reading when they want to, with no questions asked" (p. 27). Within this paradigm, reading is an independent activity with the teacher's role not to instruct, but to encourage students as a model reader, an "active member of the classroom reading community" (Day & Bamford, 1998, p. 8). Prowse (2002) has argued that most instructional follow-up activities such as tests and comprehension questions are inappropriate because they preclude the natural engagement with books that stems from intrinsic interest rather than compulsory assignment.

In endorsing ER, Nation (2015) points out that while reading for meaning provides a good opportunity to develop incidental acquisition of vocabulary, students need to understand 98% of running words if they are to effectively comprehend a text. A large amount of reading is needed to acquire new vocabulary incidentally, so that the repeated meeting of new words

strengthens the “small amounts of knowledge gained from previous meetings” (Nation, 1997, p. 15). Along similar lines, Waring and Takaki (2003) concluded that students need a good deal of repeated exposure if they are to successfully acquire vocabulary through reading for meaning. However, Waring and Takaki argue that the primary “aim” of ER is not vocabulary growth, but development of already known vocabulary. The point is that for ER to be successful, it is critically important that students understand the books they are assigned. Nation (2001, p. 21-22) recommended conducting a diagnostic vocabulary levels test as a “reliable, valid and very practical” means to determine word recognition ability.

Many ER approaches refer to Krashen’s (1985) theory of acquisition via comprehensible input, which hypothesizes that reading itself improves achievement – as long as the text is understandable and interesting, so that the “more students read, the better they become at it” (Day & Bamford, 1998, p. 4). In the classroom, the focus on natural acquisition often revolves around sustained silent reading (Chow & Chou, 2000), an approach where students devote time in the classroom to reading, typically accompanied by the teacher.

A number of teacher-researchers, however, advocate a more social approach, seeking to balance learner development and collaborative interaction (Barfield, 2000). Within this view, the teacher adopts a proactive role, guiding interaction in class and facilitating understanding of the text through discussion and follow-up activities. Casanave (1993), for example, argued that students “should think, talk and write about what they read, before, during, and after” engagement with a text (p. 149), and she proposed that students write reflective journals in response to reading assignments, with the goal not to reproduce textual facts, but engage with ideas and generate thoughtful response. Renandya, Rajan, and Jacobs (1999) incorporated a number of post-reading tasks into classroom activities, especially group-based discussion and found that in-class peer interaction not only reinforced learning vocabulary, it also gave students a sense of progress and broader understanding. Similarly, Jacobs and Gallo (2002) integrated cooperative learning into ER classes, producing higher reading scores and more positive attitudes. Both Dupey, Tse, and Cook (1996) and Hill and Van Horn (1997) stress the importance of talking about books, discussing themes and critical issues, and addressing open-ended questions related to character motivations, plot features, and related personal experience. It is important, Dupey, Tse, and Cook (1996) argue, to give students relevant cultural and historical information to facilitate understanding, a point that seems especially relevant in Asian contexts.

While the rationale for integrating follow-up activities into an ER program often refers

to Swain's (2000) output hypothesis, which suggests that productive expression, both oral and written, enhances acquisition, Swain (1993) herself argues that output is not as much about pushing students toward more conscious awareness of increased grammatical accuracy, as it is about situating engagement with texts in productive activities where students are involved in expressing and exchanging opinions. A few ER advocates (e.g., Jacobs & Hannah, 2009) have grounded an extensive approach to reading in the Vygotskyian notions of scaffolding (Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976) and shared cognition (Moll, 1990) which view learning not as individual but collaborative social activity.

Methodology

This paper is a report of a small-scale, action research project (Burns, 2009) involving reflective practice (Walsh, 2011), which investigated the effectiveness of using extensive reading in a required first-year university English course. I was particularly interested in adopting ER, but given the administrative, institutional, and organizational difficulties in setting up a graded reader program, I opted to use shared texts (Rosszell, 2010) that students read together as class assignments. As a result, a modified ER approach was adopted: a large quantity of interesting but accessible English text, read for enjoyment with a focus on meaning, not translation or skill-based exercises.

There were two sections of the same class which met weekly over two semesters, with approximately 30 students in both sections (attendance varied significantly from week to week). The two required texts were *Holes* (Sachar, 1998) and *Molly Moon's Incredible Book of Hypnotism* (Byng, 2002) critically acclaimed young adult novels filled with action, humor, and adventure. In total, students read more than 600 pages of text over the course of the academic year, at a rate of approximately 20-25 pages per week. I provided a basic glossary for both novels that students could use as they read. At the beginning of each class, there was a brief short-answer quiz with the stated purpose of encouraging students to keep up with the reading. Quizzes were designed to review plot details, and students who did poorly on a quiz were allowed to write a short summary as a make-up exercise. In-class activities were organized around discussion of the reading, and students made short presentations explaining selected passages. They wrote journal entries that they sometimes read aloud. I gave mini-lectures explaining key vocabulary terms, central themes, and culturally specific background information. I also talked about my own response to the reading and asked students to do the same.

On the first class at the beginning of the academic year, I administered a vocabulary levels diagnostic (Nation, 2001, p. 416) to obtain an approximate idea of vocabulary recognition at the 2,000 (2K) and 3,000 (3K) levels, as well as the academic word list (AWL). Overall scores for all students on the 2K diagnostic averaged 27 on a 30 item scale (90%), suggesting a basic-intermediate reading proficiency. Scores on the AWL and 3K tests were slightly lower. Average scores measured 22/30 on the 3K (77%) and 18/30 on the AWL (60%).

Individually, two students scored low (below 20) on the 2K test. Five students scored below 20 on the AWL, and 12 students on the 3K. A preliminary estimate of the reading level of *Holes*, based on a selected excerpt, suggested that the book would be broadly accessible to a reader with a strong command of the 2,000 word level, with approximately 95% of the vocabulary at the 2K level, excluding proper names and words likely familiar to a Japanese reader. It was fairly clear that most students would not have 98% coverage of the vocabulary of the novels.

In terms of overall language proficiency, individual student scores for the reading segment of the TOEIC IP placement test ranged from 115 to approximately 300, reflecting noticeably disparate abilities, from low to mid-intermediate, a common situation in university EFL classes. Most students were diligent and attentive in class, although 5-6 students were absent three or more times per semester, and 4-5 students regularly showed up 10-15 minutes late. Two students had trouble staying awake in class, though they were attentive when not drifting off. Four students had lived abroad for periods of six to nine months as exchange students during high school.

Individual learning styles were noticeably mixed. For example, Aki (all names are pseudonyms) was attentive and consistently received A's on quizzes, but he scored low on the vocabulary levels diagnostic (73% at the 2K level). Similarly, Taka scored high on the vocabulary index (97% at the 3K level) but was often absent and rarely spoke in class. In contrast, Nori was a returnee who had what seemed to be near native proficiency coupled with the highest vocabulary level scores (100% at 3,000, 83% at 5,000 level) but, until the last third of fall semester, was disinclined to make an effort to participate in class discussion or keep up with assignments (i.e., he read in spurts, usually at the last minute). Kazuko, on the other hand, asked for extra reading after quickly finishing both texts and in fact read two far more advanced novels, including *Jurassic Park*. Most students were characteristically shy and reluctant to talk in English, even in small group contexts.

At the end of the academic year in January, I asked students to complete Form B of the

vocabulary levels diagnostic, to obtain a broad baseline comparison. Because of absences, late registration and other factors, only 50 students took both diagnostics (Form A in April and Form B January). Scores on the two forms, A and B, were compared to indicate broad changes in vocabulary recognition. I also asked students in January to complete a 38 item evaluation questionnaire using a 4 point Likert scale (strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree), with open-ended questions and space for comments. Responses were anonymous. The intention was not to find statistical significance, but to get an indication of the effectiveness of ER. Feedback from students was evaluated within a qualitative paradigm (Patton, 2015), using interpretative, inductive analysis (Hubbard & Power, 1993; Thomas, 2006) to generate a grounded understanding of student attitudes. I tabulated survey answers in terms of a simple calculation of percentage. I report the findings in the section below.

Results

First and foremost, there was a near unanimous endorsement of ER as an effective approach to English study. A clear majority of students (77%) thought that their reading improved because of ER. Almost everyone (88%) said that they read faster, with greater understanding (96%) and increased enjoyment (96%). Taken together, all students (100%) reported that they felt either speed or comprehension had improved. There was one student who thought his reading speed didn't increase, but his comprehension did, while six students responded that comprehension had not improved, but reading speed had. A large majority of students (87%) stated that they understood the gist of the narrative, defined as more than 75% of the story, and two of the eight students who said they only understood only 50% of the story actually made A's in the class, consistently scoring well on quizzes and the final exam.

Perhaps more significantly, most students felt that they had developed more positive attitudes toward reading because of ER. Though not all were unreservedly positive, either in evaluations or class participation, nearly every student asserted more favorable orientations toward English. The majority (75%) indicated that, after taking the course, they enjoyed reading more than at the beginning of the year. Nearly two thirds (62%) attributed their more positive attitudes toward English to ER. Most (80%) said that they would take another ER class if offered, and 57% stated that they were more likely to read an English book in their free time because of ER. Taken together, all but a handful of students (95%) asserted that they either enjoyed reading more, were more positive about English in general, or would take another ER course given the opportunity.

The change in attitudes among students who were either reluctant readers or negative about English was particularly striking. Eighteen students reported at the beginning of the academic year that they did not like English in high school. Of the 18, almost all (16) said that at the end of the ER course they enjoyed reading more or were willing to enroll in another class with similar reading requirements. Some of the attitudinal changes were dramatic. For example, Matosuke commented: “I hated English in high school because it was not fun. There were too many things to memorize and the teacher let us read only boring sentences. But we can read interesting novels in ER and I’m enjoying studying now.” Ayami, another student who didn’t like English in high school, said: “I really didn’t like English. I knew it was useful, but I thought that studying was hard and boring. But now I enjoy reading more than before and I think it’s because of Molly Moon! I really enjoy reading this book.”

There was also a shift in attitudes among enthusiastic students. For example, Chikako, said that the way she thought about reading improved:

Until I took this class. I always had to translate each word. Studying for the entrance exam, learning grammar, reading difficult texts, I couldn't enjoy the content of what I was reading.... And at first, with the homework for this class, I translated every word as I had always done, but that amount decreased the more I read, and I was able to guess even words I didn't know before. Because of that, my reading speed became a lot faster and since I didn't have to stop reading in the middle of the story, I could enjoy the story much more. [original in Japanese; translations are mine]

Similarly, Taka, a reluctant student who rarely demonstrated outward enthusiasm but who scored very high on the 3K vocabulary test (97%), said that he was “thankful” for the class because it gave him a new orientation toward English:

I like to read English books a little more than before. I will try to read English books for myself. This class is an opportunity to start to read English in private.

Choice of Texts

Nearly all students found the two novels interesting. All but three (88%) said they liked *Holes*, and all but one (96%) said they enjoyed *Molly Moon*, suggesting that perhaps attitudes became more positive as reading proficiency increased over the year. Although there was

more to the class than simply reading, the overwhelming majority of students (96%) said that they enjoyed the course as a whole. The only student who said he enjoyed neither the class nor *Molly Moon* was Aki, who was nonetheless positive about ER. He replied that the class had been helpful, and said that his reading confidence and speed, as well as vocabulary and overall English proficiency, all improved by taking the class. Importantly, Aki's grade for the class was a solid A. He scored consistently high marks on the quizzes and participated actively and attentively in class discussion.

Only a minority of students (25%) expressed a desire to choose their own individual book to read. A full three-fourths of students said that they would rather have the entire class read the same book chosen by the instructor. Students who said they wanted to read different texts were divided into two fairly clear categories. Most (11 of 15) were strong readers with high vocabulary test scores who reliably completed reading assignments and participated actively in class. A few (4 of 15) were more passive in class and either had trouble with attendance or completing reading assignments. In other words, class readers were positively received by the majority, with little resistance to a shared text. In fact, a number of students noted that they were able to complete the reading precisely because of the structured nature of the assignments. A full 80% of students admitted that, were they not enrolled in the ER class, they would likely not have read as much or as regularly. Only 12 of the stronger, more independent students reported that they would likely be reading English even if they had not had the class assignments.

The weekly quizzes, designed to structure the reading in terms of pace and attention to details of plot and character, were not overly popular. At the same time, most students seemed to accept the value of the quizzes. Only slightly more than half (53%) agreed that they actually liked having quizzes. At the same time, 62% admitted that, without the quizzes, they would likely not have read as consistently or as carefully. By far, the large majority (92%) admitted that the quizzes served as a useful review of the story and were a good check of comprehension.

Vocabulary

In spite of the positive attitudes and strong endorsement of ER, almost half of the students (47%) thought that their vocabulary did not improve doing ER. Only a slim majority (53%) said their vocabulary increased. A few even felt that their vocabulary had actually decreased because of ER. Apparently, some students thought that the emphasis on quantity adversely

affected the quality of reading. Certainly, the practical exigencies of reading 20-25 pages per week pushed students to focus on understanding the bigger picture of the story rather than the particular details of word meaning. Given this tendency to read pragmatically and skip unknown words, some students seemed to feel that they were not acquiring new vocabulary incidentally. Further, the skepticism about vocabulary development did not seem to be related to not doing the reading. While eight students who stated that their vocabulary did not increase admitted that they sometimes skipped reading assignments, the other 20 students who said their vocabulary did not improve reported doing homework conscientiously.

Student impressions about vocabulary acquisition seem rooted, at least in part, in the practice of guessing, a reading strategy which appeared prevalent. Students almost universally (97%) reported guessing the meaning of unfamiliar words encountered in the course of reading. Although most (73%) seemed to feel that guessing actually helped to learn new words, many seemed to automatically assume that guessing was not productive and in fact, even constituted a kind of academic laziness. For example, one student explained that his vocabulary did not improve because, he said, "I skip a lot of words." Another student used almost exactly the same reasoning: "The disadvantage is that I skip words I don't know, so it's difficult to learn new words." Still another drew a distinction between comprehending the story and learning vocabulary:

When I came across a word that I didn't know, I skipped over it and kept reading. More than before, I got used to reading a lot of text. On the other hand, I think my knowledge of vocabulary decreased as a result. – S22 [original in Japanese]

Apparently, some students felt that, when they skipped words (sometimes whole sections) in order to grasp the "gist" of the story without stopping to look up unknown vocabulary, they missed something important. In other words, students seemed to be assuming that they could not learn if they did not pay explicit attention, arguably an attitude rooted in the intensive approach to reading developed in high school English classes.

Student intuitions were not supported, however, by the vocabulary levels tests which offered a more complex picture, suggesting that students may have in fact gained vocabulary, at least the kind associated with reading novels. There may have been a slight decline in recognition of academic vocabulary terms that do not usually appear in fiction but that students typically study in preparation for university entrance exams, but the loss appeared to be small.

On the whole, average vocabulary scores for the three levels (2K, 3K and AWL) showed distinct trends. On the 2K test, average scores showed little decline over the course of the year. If anything, class averages suggest a slight increase. The average score in April was 27.4 of 30. The average score at the end of fall semester was 27.7, a largely insignificant change. Interestingly, however, four students showed changes of five or more points, and three of the four were positive gains. For example, Josaburo, who demonstrated the biggest shift, scored 18/30 (60%) on the 2K diagnostic in April, and 27/30 (90%) in January, which was a noticeable increase.

On the AWL diagnostic, the average score showed a slight decline over the year. Total scores for both classes dropped a total of 137 points, and the average individual score dropped from 23.8/30 to 21.1/30, a little more than two words per student. Among individual students who demonstrated a noticeable shift of 5 points or more, eleven students showed declines, while only one showed an increase. Etaya, for example, dropped from 24/30 (80%) to 15/30 (50%), which was one of the two largest shifts. The downward trend suggests that on the whole, students may indeed have lost some command of the academic vocabulary they studied prior to entering university, perhaps reflecting a decline that follows the intensive study associated with exam preparation. In the words of Sakio, "You may have a good ability to understand and read English when you enter college, but it declines day by day because you study less than before." The lower scores seem to reflect how students slowly lost some of the complex vocabulary they had memorized.

However, scores for vocabulary at the non-specialized 3K level of frequency demonstrated a markedly different trend. Diagnostic results showed an increase at the 3K level more pronounced than the decline in academic vocabulary. Scores for all students increased 151 points, while the average individual score showed an increase of more than three words per student, rising from 21.3 to 24.4. In particular, sixteen students demonstrated a shift of 5 or more points, with four students making gains of 10 points or more. Guriko, who lost 10 points on the AWL test, gained 23 points at the 3K level. Matosuke gained 10 points and Sasuko gained 11. In sum, the increases in recognition of non-specialized words at the 3K range surpassed the AWL decline, both in overall totals and individual scores.

The increase in vocabulary was particularly noticeable in students who scored low on the diagnostic test at the beginning of Spring semester. Two students scored below what might be considered a minimum criterion of 20 points (66%) on the 2K diagnostic, and 12 students scored below 20 on the 3K test. At the end of the year, all 14 students demonstrated

increases, all more than five points each. On the AWL diagnostic, six students scored below 20, and there was little noticeable change, though one student increased six points. All students who scored low on the AWL, however, showed increases on the 3K.

While the vocabulary levels tests provide only approximate measures of word recognition, they do suggest that students might not be losing vocabulary in the way they imagine. Explanations students made in open-ended comments are instructive on this point, in part because they illustrate a flawed dichotomous logic. For these students, it was either understanding content or skills development. For example, S11 said:

I could enjoy reading English because I didn't have to translate. However, I need to improve my English grammar and vocabulary, so I wanted more grammar explanation and vocabulary tests in class.

Student S14 concurred, for a similar reason:

I like extensive reading better... But when I found the word I didn't know, I almost never used a dictionary, so my vocabulary has not improved.

These students admitted that they enjoyed extensive reading, but at the same time, they did not feel that enjoyable reading counted as language learning.

In effect, ER seemed to be too pleasurable, too much fun to be study. Elley (1991, p. 403) mentioned this point, though in reference to elementary school administrators and parents, not students. In several of the studies he reviewed, Elley notes that skeptics viewed ER as students “merely enjoying themselves, rather than learning.” Yu (1997, p. 3), also noted that students regarded ER “an optional extra, a luxury” rather than an effective means to foster a “reading culture.” Certainly, the notion that learning requires diligence and conscientious effort is deeply rooted in traditional attitudes toward education. Evidently, some students seem to have internalized a conception of English study that equates learning not with using the language, but with explicit and earnest attention to its constituent parts.

Proximity

Another notable finding involved the way students thought about themselves vis-à-vis English. There was a perceptible shift in terms of proximity, as many students stated they felt

closer to English because of ER. For example, Guriko said, “I’m not afraid of reading English now” and Tahoya remarked that English had “become familiar” through ER. In part, the shift in proximity was related to the way students understood English, as the language became less a subject of study that required correctness and attention to detail, and more a tool of communication. In particular, students began to relate to English through the enjoyment and excitement of narrative. Many students made a point to contrast ER with the traditional grammar-translation approach, which nearly everyone (92%) reported using to some extent in high school. With ER, “I’ve been able to feel the enjoyment of English,” Jofumi noted, adding that “I feel that I’ve drawn closer to English.” Similarly, Banichi commented that when he “studied for the entrance exams,” he “hated” English, while now he “enjoys reading more.” Junoya said, “My way of reading changed because I don’t translate English into Japanese anymore,” and Moyuki insisted that while he had learned English in the traditional intensive style for years, he now thinks it “useless” because extensive English is “more fun.”

The shift in proximity generated a sense of ownership and connection, as students began to appropriate English as something they related to personally. Manami said, for example, “I learned to read English as English. Now I seem to understand how people using English feel.” Similarly, Haseo commented, “I don’t translate English into Japanese. Rather, I now think in English as I read. I feel absorbed in English as it is.” In other words, student identities began to change through ER. Students developed, in Hakui’s words, “English brains” as they began to think in English and see themselves as readers to whom English belonged. Rather than locating English externally, as a subject of study for exams with right and wrong answers, English became rooted in the imagination and personal sense of value.

Part of the shift in identity was generated by the growing ability to engage with extended narrative. That is, the reading was tied to creative involvement. Students read successfully because they were able to construct the story, which worked in turn to attract them as readers. This narrative engagement was evident in the adventure and excitement of the plot, the appeal of the characters, and the relevance of underlying themes. For many, however, affective engagement was neither immediate nor intrinsic to the story; rather, it was an active process of construction that developed over time, only with persistence and concerted effort. For example, Goto, one of the most skeptical students in class commented:

The book itself is relatively easy. If it were Japanese, even elementary school kids would understand. But I’m not good at English (especially reading) and doing the homework

every week was really difficult. The only thing that saved me was the interesting story. You don't often find this kind of atmosphere in Japanese novels, and I like it. What's more, I can empathize with the heroine, who is weak and unattractive.

For Goto, it was the connection he was able to construct with the story that allowed him to deal with the workload and the challenge of getting through the reading assignments. More specifically, Goto's ability to get involved with the story provided the stimulus to keep reading.

The connection that other students built with the narrative was also strong, though the focus differed. For example, Saiko pointed to Molly, the protagonist's changes of heart and stated, "I was encouraged by Molly." Makiko commented on the vicarious excitement of imagined delinquency: "I experienced committing a robbery with Molly and Rocky. Though robbing a bank is bad, I enjoyed the thrill." Another student, Etaya, talked about the excitement of travel to America: "This book taught me something important about my life. I also learned about American culture. I want to go to America." And Mami remarked that, like Molly, she too "wanted to use hypnotism!"

However, a number of students found the reading difficult at first, which made the story hard to relate to. Sansuke, for example, noted how the level of difficulty changed as he began to become involved in the story and make connections with the protagonist:

Until I caught the story, I thought it was difficult to read and there are many vocabulary words I didn't know. But as I became used to reading, I began to like Molly, who noticed that hypnotizing is a dangerous power while she lived a gorgeous life.

Similarly, Manami pointed to her initial skepticism of the main character, because of what she saw as the heroine's selfishness:

The first part of this book is so disgusting. I disliked Molly's character and the idea that she could make anyone do what she wanted by hypnotism. I thought again and again that I wanted to give up reading, but the story turned good. Molly changed, and I like her now. This book is so enjoyable.

Until Manami thought the story had a moral point to which she could relate, her basic dislike worked as an impediment and held her back to the point where she was ready to give up.

What is significant here is that these comments express connections with literature that experienced readers make. Students were able to go beyond reading the text as an assignment and make contact with the narrative, developing an emotional investment in the story. In addition, students were able to read beyond their competence, and develop increased proficiency because they were drawn into the story by the narrative. However, the emotional involvement did not come automatically. Understanding was a constructive process which took place over time within the supportive structure of the class as a whole.

Discussion

In this paper, I have reported on a local investigation of using a modified ER approach in a first-year university reading class. The evidence suggests that in reading the two novels extensively, most students felt that their reading fluency (speed and comprehension) increased. Further, interest in English and attitudes toward reading also improved for many, with some students expressing a noticeably stronger sense of proximity to the language. A small but significant number of students felt concerned that reading extensively did not develop their vocabulary, because attention was focused on meaning, not explicitly learning new words. The diagnostic tests suggest, however, that while academic vocabulary may have indeed dropped slightly, vocabulary at 3K level (that is, non-specialized words that appeared in the novels) may actually have increased.

Research in ER often talks about the inherent motivation of enjoyable texts (e.g., Stoller, 2015), but it seems that it may be important, not simply to trust the intrinsic power of ER, but to “sell” students on the idea, explicitly reminding them of the value of reading for meaning and the particular challenges that the approach entails. Given the experience many first-year students have with English in high school, it would also seem to be helpful to address unstated assumptions about how the language is acquired and remind students that not only does learning and enjoyment often go together, but that an important aspect of second language proficiency is acquired in the tacit focus on meaning and authentic content.

At the same time, evidence from this study seems to suggest that it would probably be a good idea to supplement ER with additional vocabulary study, even if assigned outside class, a position that Nation (2013) advocates as a matter of course. Browne, Culligan, and Phillips (2013) have updated the academic word list and placed it online with flash-card exercises that provide excellent individual practice, with the potential to not simply stem possible attrition, but actually develop academic vocabulary. While there is a strong argument to be

made that ER is more about fluency, narrative interpretation, and response, a supplementary practice component would likely prove effective in addressing student concerns about losing vocabulary.

Some critics might contend that popular fiction has no place in the university EFL classroom, which demands a more serious approach to content. A focus on academic content involving larger social issues is needed, the argument goes, to prepare for upper-level EMI courses and, after graduation, a professional career in a globalizing world. Certainly this is the ideal, which is possible for students already proficient in English, but intermediate learners who lack fluency and tend to be skeptical about reading in general need an alternative pedagogy that strengthens language skills. Findings from this study suggest that a modified ER approach using popular fiction may in fact prove effective in strengthening fluency and positive attitudes toward both reading and English itself. In sum, learning to read with speed and enjoyment in the EFL classroom can play an important role in preparing first-year intermediate students to deal successfully with upcoming challenges, including English medium instruction.

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