

# The Initial Stages of an Extensive Reading Programme at Toyama Medical and Pharmaceutical University

Elizabeth Hollanders

## Abstract

Research has shown that Extensive Reading advantages students in a variety of ways when learning a foreign language. Students gain an understanding as to how the new language is used, as well as developing their vocabulary and reading skills. Due to such benefits, an Extensive Reading programme was started at TMPU in 2001. The first stages of the programme were rudimentary due to limited resources and problems with programme implementation. However these stages were very useful in gaining information from the students as to how they thought such a programme could be beneficial.

## 1. Introduction

### 1. 1 What is Extensive Reading (ER)?

Another name for ER is Pleasure Reading, and as the name suggests it should be enjoyable. Students read a range of material of their own choice, which is at a level at which they can read without a dictionary and without hindrance from translation or complex grammar. They should be able to read quickly, and in order to ensure this happens, students are expected to read a large number of books in a relatively short period of time. The purpose of such a programme is to increase language proficiency. According to Nuttall (1982) "an extensive reading programme ... is the single most effective way of improving both vocabulary and reading skills in general".

## 1. 2 Extensive Reading Vs Intensive Reading

Most Japanese students have not had much experience of ER, as the kind of reading usually taught in High School is known as Intensive Reading, i.e. short texts are used to build language knowledge by looking closely at the grammar and vocabulary. This kind of reading is often taught by the translation procedure, and while it may be useful for decoding at the sentence level, it has not been found to be particularly successful for understanding whole texts (Robb & Susser 1989). Most medical students require English reading skills in order to read medical journals in the future, hence they need training in strategies for reading long texts and not the short texts traditionally found in ESL reading textbooks. Kembo (1993) suggests that extensive reading is valuable in developing students' confidence and ability when faced with these long texts.

When teaching my first reading class at a Japanese University, I came across a big barrier. The students didn't know how to read in the way I had expected. They were excellent translators, and grammar analysts, and they had a broad vocabulary, but they didn't have any reading skills useful for skimming a whole text for the main ideas - skills that my whole course was based upon. When choosing my text, I had taken a look at the books that the students were reading in other reading classes with Japanese teachers, and chosen a text of a similar level. However the students were having great difficulties with my text and it wasn't until the middle of the course that I realised why - the text was too difficult for my students to 'read'. They could only translate and study the articles - sentence by sentence or even word by word. Although this kind of reading is important for building language knowledge, the aim of the course was to improve reading fluency, but the level of the textbook being used, coupled with the students previous experience of reading made this impossible.

When reading intensively, students learn new vocabulary and have the chance to practice grammar, but there is very little practice in the skill of reading. This is due to the fact that the text is relatively short, and tends to be of an English level slightly more difficult than the students' level in order that they might learn something new. Hence, because many words are new or difficult, the learner needs to consult a dictionary frequently, so cannot read quickly or smoothly. All the students in the class read the same material regardless of their ability, so some students find it more difficult than others. By contrast, when reading extensively, large amounts of text of an English level equal to

or slightly below the students' level must be read in order to ensure that a dictionary is unnecessary to understand the story, hence building reading confidence and fluency. Due to the large amount of text read, the student reads the same vocabulary and grammar again and again hence reinforcing meanings and the way English is used. Each student chooses what material they want to read, so the interest factor is high, as well as the level being appropriate for each individual student. According to Krashen in 1982, "extensive reading will lead to language acquisition providing certain pre-conditions are met. These include adequate exposure to the language, interesting material and a relaxed tension-free learning environment." (Bell 1998)

## 2. Method

The Extensive Reading Programme at TPMU was started in October 2001 with a Reading Class of 1<sup>st</sup> year Medical students. The students were expected to read a total of 350 pages over the course of the semester, and complete a summary sheet (Appendix 1) for each book read, so the number of books read could be monitored. The students were told not to spend more than about 20 minutes on the written task, and it was not corrected for grammar etc, as the writing was not the skill being tested. Due to the fact that writing is a productive skill and reading a receptive one, it was important that the completion of the sheet did not become more difficult than the reading itself. The graded readers were taken to the classroom each week by the teacher and 15 minutes at the end of each class was given to exchanging books. Students were free to visit the teacher's office any time throughout the week to exchange books as they needed. The ER programme was only a part of the English course (30%) and the reading was all done out of class. Every 3 or 4 weeks, activities - usually in the form of group discussions - would take place in the classroom about favourite books etc, and at the end of the course the students completed a questionnaire giving their opinions of ER (Appendix 2).

The books available for the students to read for the ER course are known as Graded Readers (Oxford University Press). These books have been written especially for language learners by using simplified grammar and vocabulary and they are divided into 6 levels. These levels range from books which have a vocabulary of 400 headwords i.e. the 400 most useful or frequently used words in English, (Level 1) to books with a vocabulary of 2500 headwords (Level 6). However the number of pages or words in each book varies and

although the Level 6 books are longer than the level 1 books, this is not a feature of the levels - only the range of vocabulary used varies from level to level. On average, level 1 to level 3 books contain about 40 pages, level 4 books about 60 pages and level 5 and 6 books about 80 pages. In the first lesson, each student was given a photocopy of the first page from a book of each of the 6 levels, and they were asked to read them and decide which level they felt comfortable reading smoothly with only 1 or 2 unknown words on the page. Students were not restricted to reading that level, but it was the suggested level for them to at least start with.

### 3. Results

44 students completed the questionnaire and the results for each question can be seen below.

Qu1 How many books did you read?

5 books – 6 students  
6 books – 15 students  
7 books – 7 students  
8 books – 12 students  
9 books – 3 students  
10 books – 1 student

Qu2 How many books did you enjoy?

The answers to this question have been grouped into 3, students who answered they enjoyed all the books they read (A), students who answered they enjoyed more than half of the books they read (B), and students who answered they enjoyed less than half the books they read (C). No students answered that they didn't enjoy any of the books they read.

#### 1. Group A

7 students answered that they enjoyed all the books they read. The results of questions 3 and 4 for these 7 students are shown below.

Qu3 What level was your favourite book?

Level 1 – 1 student      Level 2 – 2 students      Level 3 – 3 students

Level 4 – 1 student

Qu4 Did you find the reading      a enjoyable      b so-so      c not enjoyable?

Why?

All students said they found the reading enjoyable, for the following reasons

I'm happy to know that I can read books in English if the level is right (1)

I like reading (4)

Reading books is the best way to learn English (1)

I don't know (1)

## 2. Group B

25 students answered that they enjoyed more than half of the books they read. The results of questions 3 and 4 for these 25 students are shown below.

Qu3 What level was your favourite book?

Level 1 – 9 students      Level 2 – 6 students      Level 3 – 7 students

Level 4 – 2 students      Level 6 – 1 student

Qu4 Did you find the reading      a enjoyable      b so-so      c not enjoyable?

Why?

8 students said the reading was enjoyable, for the following reasons

I like reading (3)

I like reading ENGLISH books (2)

Gradually, I learn to read fast (2)

NO ANSWER (1)

17 students said reading was so-so, for the following reasons

I enjoyed it but not always (1)

NO ANSWER (2)

It helped my English (2)

The story is easy to understand (1)

It helped my English BUT it needs time (3)

I become to read fast (2)

Too difficult (2)

I could read English every week (1)

There are difficult and easy books (1)

It's useful but boring (1)

I didn't read books before this class, but I found books move me sometimes (1)

Interesting but difficult (1)

I become used to read English books (1)

### 3. Group C

12 students answered that they enjoyed less than half of the books they read. The results of questions 3 and 4 for these 12 students are shown below.

Qu3 What level was your favourite book?

Level 1 – 4 students    Level 2 – 2 students    Level 3 – 5 students

Level 4 – 1 student

Qu4 Did you find the reading    a enjoyable    b so-so    c not enjoyable?

Why?

All 12 students said the reading was so-so, for the following reasons

Some books did not interest me (3)

NO ANSWER (3)

I don't like reading (1)

It's very useful for reading speed (1)

No time (2)

It's a good way to touch English (1)

I like reading (1)

Pleasure Reading is good (1)

It's difficult (1)

It's forced on us (1)

I have a part-time job as an English teacher - I teach this to my students (1)

Qu5 Do you think the reading helped you in the following areas

1. reading speed	yes	maybe	no
2. learning new words	yes	maybe	no
3. understanding English	yes	maybe	no
4. writing	yes	maybe	no

#### READING SPEED

- 28 students said YES
- 15 students said MAYBE
- 1 student said NO

#### LEARNING NEW WORDS

- 9 students said YES
- 30 students said MAYBE
- 5 students said NO

#### UNDERSTANDING ENGLISH

- 26 students said YES
- 16 students said MAYBE
- 2 students said NO

#### WRITING

- 2 students said YES
- 23 students said MAYBE
- 18 students said NO
- 1 student didn't answer

#### 4. Discussion

One of the concerns before starting this programme was the way the students would react to having to complete such a task out of class. When asked if they found the overall reading enjoyable (Qu 4), 34.1% of the students answered 'yes', with the rest of the group - 65.9% - answering 'so-so'. However, it must be stressed that no one answered 'no'. 72.7% of the students answered that they enjoyed reading more than half of the books they read (Qu 2). When asked the reasons they liked or disliked ER, 3 main points were raised - limited time, level of difficulty and level of interest of the books. This poses a difficult situation for the teacher, as ER is supposed to be enjoyable. The more enjoyable the students find it, the more benefit it will have for them, as they will read more. It is also important that the students read as much as possible. ER is only effective if the students read a lot of material so they are meeting the same vocabulary and phrases again and again, and seeing them used naturally in different situations. In order to do this the number of books the students are required to read cannot be reduced, but to make it more enjoyable, the post-reading task could be changed slightly and made less time-consuming, less like a task. Ideally the students shouldn't need to complete a post reading task, but in order to ensure task completion and give students a grade it was deemed necessary.

It is interesting to note that 31.8% of the students stated that their favourite book was a level 1 book, 22.7% of the students stated a level 2 book, 34.1% a level 3 book, 9.1% a level 4 book and only 2.3% a level 6 book. No one chose a level 5 book. These figures show that 88.6% of the class preferred a book at level 3 or lower. This would be expected, as a lower level book would be easier to understand hence more enjoyable. However, as the level of the book increases, the plot becomes more complex, the characters are more developed and the stories are more interesting for students who can understand them. These points motivate students who are able, to read books of a higher level.

When asked if the students thought ER helped them improve their English, 97.7% answered yes or maybe to increasing reading speed, 88.6% answered yes or maybe to learning new vocabulary, 95.5% answered yes or maybe to understanding English and 56.8% answered yes or maybe to improved writing skills. The students could have answered yes or maybe for a whole variety of reasons not necessarily related to improved English skills, such as misunderstanding the question, not being used to evaluating their own performance, poor quality of questionnaire, etc. However, the comments made by the



students in answer to “Did you find the reading enjoyable? Why?” (Qu4) reflect the results above, that is that many students found ER to be beneficial. Comments like the following show that the students gained an insight into the books read, which would not have been possible reading short passages and answering comprehension type questions. The comments also suggest that the benefits of ER have been realised by some students, hence increasing motivation.

“I didn’t read books before this class but I found books move me sometimes”.

“I become to read fast”

“I have a part-time job as an English teacher - I teach this to my students”

“It’s a good way to touch English”

“I become used to read English books”

These results are very encouraging and suggest that the ER course should be continued at TMPU in the future.

## References

Nuttall, C. (1982) ‘Teaching Reading Skills in a Foreign Language’. London: Heinemann Educational.

Robb, T. and Susser, B. (1989) ‘Extensive Reading Vs Skills Building in an EFL Context’. Reading in a Foreign Language. 12/2.

Bell, T. (1998) ‘Extensive Reading: Why? And How? The Internet TESL Journal. IV/12.

Kembo, J. (1993) ‘Reading: Encouraging and Maintaining Individual Extensive Reading’. English Teaching Forum 31/2.

*A useful website for anyone interested in finding out more about Extensive Reading especially in Japan: [www.kyoto-su.ac.jp/information/er/index.html](http://www.kyoto-su.ac.jp/information/er/index.html)*

## NOTE

Since this paper was written the number of graded readers available for students' use at T MPU has more than doubled and the administration procedure of exchanging the books has been taken over by the university library. This makes the implementation of the ER programme much more convenient, with more class time being available for activities related to the reading. Due to more books being available the programme is now running with several English classes - of both Medical and Pharmaceutical students.

Since the initial course (discussed above) the way of recording the books read has changed slightly. Instead of the students completing a reading record as previously (Appendix 1), they must keep a reading journal in which the books read can be recorded in any way. Some suggestions and ideas (which came from both the students and the teacher)

- are : summary of the story

- description of the main character - either written or drawn

- family trees - showing the relationships between the characters

- posters advertising the book

- descriptions / drawings of a favourite scene

- reactions to the book

- a written ending to the book that the student would have preferred

The reason for this change of reporting is to try and minimise the written 'task', which might hinder the reading. The number of books that the students must read has also been increased to 15. The reading journal is handed in at the end of the course and the students are given a grade, which is 50% of their final grade.