

## Developing reading fluency and the many benefits it can bring.

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In this modern hi-tech world of blog, tweet and Wii, reading a (story) book may have lost its appeal for some. However for the language student it remains an invaluable learning resource. The aims of this short paper are three fold. Firstly to highlight the importance of reading in general and extensive reading (ER) and graded readers in particular in the development of reading fluency and their role in the learning of a foreign language. Secondly to outline the setting up of an ER program here at Fukuyama City University (FCU) and thirdly and equally as important, to spread the good wERd a little further!

Keywords : extensive reading program, reading fluency, skills development, graded reading books.

### 1. Introduction

Why don't you go and read a book? How many times have I heard myself saying this to my own teenage children only to be met with a look (over the top of their smart phones) that says 'Oh dad, give me a break'. This reaction is by no means confined to my family. As part of my work here at FCU I include a class focusing on 'likes and dislikes'. One of the questions posed is 'Do you like reading books?' While I wasn't setting out to deliberately survey opinions on reading habits, it never the less became clear that for a significant number of my students, reading books (outside of study) is not very popular. When I asked if anyone ever read any books in English, the response from some was to laugh. Well, it was said tongue in cheek. Unfortunately, reading books (in any language) is not high on the list of leisure pursuits for many these days. Indeed the idea of reading for pleasure in English may even be considered a contradiction in terms by some Japanese students! The wide availability of more modern, exciting multi-tasking forms of entertainment is helping to put reading and reading books further onto the back

shelf! A sign of the times it may be but certainly not helpful if you are a foreign language learner.

### 2. The importance of reading

The average Japanese student is of course expected to do a great deal of reading during the period of their language studies, from class course books to worksheets and handouts, to test papers and teachers' board work. All are text based. With so much reading on the language learning menu it will come as no surprise that the better a student is at reading the language they are studying, the more successful they are likely to be as a learner of that language. Professor Rob Waring makes this quite clear when he says...  
"...a learner who has a good reading ability has more access to language and has more opportunities to learn than a learner who is poor at reading." Waring R. (2005)

These 'opportunities to learn' are far reaching. According to Ann Hilferty, Assistant Professor of English at the Massachusetts College of Pharmacy and

Health Sciences:

"...as skills in some aspect of oral language increase, they help development in reading, and as a person improves his reading skills, that improvement seems to enhance further improvement in the spoken language. This seems to be a continuing spiral."

(and)"...as people develop stronger reading skills, they further enable their development of more sophisticated speaking skills." Hilferty A. (2000)

And as M Hoey is quoted as saying:

"Commonsense would indicate that as we meet more language, more often, through reading, our language acquisition mechanism is primed to produce it in writing or speech when it is needed." Maley A. (2009) quoting Hoey M. (2005)

There is here in Japan a slow but growing movement towards a more pragmatic approach to English study. The introduction of 'Eigo note' in the elementary school system recently, the drive towards learning English in English set to debut in high schools from 2013 and the English communication classes that many university students are expected to take, illustrate this trend. It would seem therefore that good reading abilities are going to become even more important in the future.

### 3. Types of reading

The type of reading we do is determined by what we are reading and why we are reading it. Our interaction with text when reading a novel for example is very different to that when using text to study the grammar of a language. Types of reading can be divided into two main categories, intensive and extensive.

#### 3.1 Intensive Reading

The main focus of intensive reading, when studying English, is to help practice and learn the grammar and vocabulary of the language. The learner is involved in

reading the text carefully and methodically. They are looking at its component parts and how it fits together. The material is usually provided for the student by the teacher and often contains a large amount of vocabulary and grammatical forms that may be challenging, and new, to the learner.

#### 3.2 Extensive Reading

Extensive reading on the other hand is all about reading for meaning, understanding the context and seeing the bigger picture. It is the kind of reading we do when reading a novel for example. In this case, the learner reads large amounts of text that is well within their reading level. The aim of extensive reading (ER) for the language student is to develop reading fluency, and in turn a confidence with (rather than a fear of) text. ER is usually done with the help of Graded Reading books. These are books where the content has been carefully written and graded at a variety of levels so the learner, by choosing a book at an appropriate level for them, can easily access the text and understand the content.

Intensive and extensive reading are of course not mutually exclusive. Far from it. To become an effective reader (and in the process improve one's overall language abilities) students need a balance of both intensive and extensive reading experiences. Unfortunately however while high school and indeed many university students here in Japan are likely to be exposed to a considerable amount of intensive reading in English, they are far less likely to have had much in the way of extensive reading practice.

### 4. Lopsided readers!

Traditional English education in Japan (eigo), places great importance on the study of grammar and vocabulary. What is labeled as 'Reading class' is often just another way of presenting grammar. Course book texts, particularly at senior high school level are

often long and weighty, and full of complex sentence structures awaiting intensive dissection and translation. There is little in the way of extensive reading practice. The result is a lopsided reader, who when presented with text of any length is by habit too busy trying to unlock the secrets of the grammar to access the meaning of the text as a whole. Students' actual reading skills therefore are often very weak even after six years of English study. A further implication of all this is that many students understandably have a rather negative image of reading and as such are even less likely to want to read more than they have to.

Getting the balance right between intensive and extensive reading opportunities is crucial if students are to benefit fully from their reading studies and become effective readers. As we will see, extensive reading practice is in fact highly supportive of the grammar and vocabulary learning that many schools so favor.

## **5. Redressing the balance. The importance of ER and the benefits it can bring.**

There is a considerable body of research to support the idea that regular extensive reading (ER) using graded reading material can be enormously beneficial to the language learner in a number of different ways. See: Waring R. (2000) Maley A. (2009) as examples.

Below is a summary of what I consider to be the most important of these.

### **5.1 The skills package**

**5.1.1 Reading skills.** Through extensive reading, students gain familiarity with textual style, flow and pattern. This helps the reader to develop more efficient reading strategies and so improve their reading speeds. In turn this can lead to greater fluency and improve students overall comprehension of texts.

**5.1.2 Vocabulary reinforcement.** ER helps students

consolidate vocabulary through repeated exposure to words and phrases all embedded in context. This 'contextual aspect' of vocabulary presentation also makes it easier for students to deduce the meaning of new words they encounter.

**5.1.3 Writing skills.** Through the reader's extensive contact with text, they encounter time and time again examples of grammatical structure, expressions, vocabulary, spelling and writing style.

**5.1.4 Speaking skills.** To quote Rob Waring:

"When retelling or reporting stories in speech or in writing, certain language structures will always be needed, such as connectives, time sequencers, past tenses, descriptive adjectives, and so on. Thus retelling stories provides extremely useful practice in the basic components of speech." Waring R (2007)

**5.1.5 Improving test scores.** Being able to read more fluently may also help to improve test scores. Dr Stephen Krashen of the University of Southern California, in a recent letter to the Japan Times, highlights research done by professor Beniko Mason of Shitennoji University Junior College which states that, ".students (learning English) can gain about 15 points a month on the TOEIC just from freely selected pleasure reading in English".

He further quotes that, "Research also shows that English programs that include some time for self-selected reading ("sustained silent reading") produce better results on a wide of variety of tests." Krashen S. (2012)

### **5.2 Additional benefits**

**5.2.1 Building general knowledge.** By reading across a wide range of different topics students can build up their general knowledge base. The more you read, the more you can learn about the world. This educational attribute of ER must be considered another of its great strengths.

**5.2.2 ER based activities in the classroom.** Although ER is generally considered to be an extra curricula

activity conducted in the students own time, there are many opportunities available to the teacher for extended language activities should he or she wish to incorporate ER more directly into the classroom. These may include students retelling stories to each other or presenting their book to the class, writing tasks such as a book review or describing a character and should you choose a class reader there are many opportunities for discussion such as predicting future events and outcomes or even offering advice to the characters!

“Retelling stories can be very supportive for less confident and low ability learners because they have a predictable framework within which to produce language.” Waring R (2007)

**5.2.3 Learner independence.** Having a reading book to take home helps bridge the gap between class-based study and the outside world. It creates an element of learner independence as students are able to work on reading skills without the aid of a teacher present so in effect increasing the amount of study time for the learner.

**5.2.4 Enjoyment.** Last but by no means least, ER is a relatively stress free and certainly in my opinion an enjoyable (learning) activity. As such, particularly if students are aware of the benefits to be had, it may well help to kick start and hopefully keep up the ‘reading habit’.

## **6. Setting up an Extensive Reading program at FCU**

So how to encourage our students to become active extensive readers?

I believe that setting up an extensive reading (ER) program at FCU, is a very pro-active step on the path to regenerating student interest in books and reading. As ER is by nature a pleasure activity, where in this case students will be able to choose from a wide selection of interesting graded material, free from the constraints of testing, students will hopefully find this appealing in itself.

One of the keys to success will be the initial presentation of the idea. In addition to providing enough suitable graded reading material and making it readily available, students will need to be made clearly aware of the potential gains to be had with a small but regular investment of time in ‘pleasure reading’. The fact that good reading skills are keys to successful language learning cannot be over stated.

### **6.1 The reading material**

Graded readers lie at the heart of the program. There is a wealth of excellent material available today, well written, often colorfully illustrated and attractively presented, all designed to encourage you to ‘pick one up and have a go’!

Graded reading books for the library will provide students with 6 grade levels of material.

While students will be free to find their own starting level, it is envisaged that most will initially choose books from levels 1 and 2.

Book types include romantic novels, crime and mystery stories, play scripts, classics, world stories, true stories, thriller and adventure stories and fact files (nonfiction) covering topics such as recycling, rainforests ,information technology (IT) and Great Cities of the World.

In the meantime organizing a suitable place in the library in which we can display the books and create an ER browsing come reading corner is currently being discussed. Again, much of the background research I have done and many of the teachers I have spoken to on this subject suggest that this aspect of an ER program should not be overlooked.

## **7. Starting the program**

Once the ER library is in place an announcement will

be made to the student body to invite them to 'An introduction to ER', and the books available. To help students get a clearer idea of what ER is and how it can help they will be provided with:

1. a clear explanation of ER and its benefits in both English and Japanese.
2. an introduction to the ER books in the library and where to find them.
3. clear guidelines on to how to choose a suitable level book and what to do if they wish to change their reader at any time.

### **8. Keeping track of the (ER) program**

Students will be encouraged to borrow books regularly and read as much as possible. In addition to the library's digital check out system, there will be a paper sign out / sign in file kept in the ER area. This data will enable us to easily monitor how many students are borrowing ER books, how often and which titles seem to be most popular.

There will also be space provided in this file for students to write short comments regarding the book they have just read. This information will also be useful when considering future book orders.

### **9. ER in the English course**

ER will form part of the Advanced English courses 1 and 2 that I will be running as of April 2013 and through these courses I hope to be able to encourage more students into the program. While most of the reading will be done out of the classroom I do intend to make time to do some in class silent reading. Students will also be required to write and give a presentation to the class on one of the books they have read during the course.

These then are my initial thoughts concerning the need for an ER program at FCU and its initial set-up. No

doubt in time, as the program gets underway there will be many more considerations and ideas to include.

### **10. A final note**

While this paper is primarily directed at ways of improving students reading skills in English, the basic principles and benefits of Extensive Reading apply to any language, including Japanese. It is in the interests of all of us involved in education to promote and encourage reading. Whatever developments the future brings, there is one guiding principle that will remain forever constant and that is...

'A good book is a good book (in any language). Being able to read and enjoy it is ER great thing!'

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## 読書力をつけることと、その利益

スティーブ・ハンプシャー

### 要旨

ブログ、ツイッター、ウィーなどが普及した現代では、読書は魅力のないものになりつつあるかもしれない。しかし、言語を学習する学生にとっては、読書は計り知れない貴重な学習方法である。この論文の目的は三つある。第一には、読書力をつけるための読書の大切さ、特にレベル分けされている書籍を多読することの重要性を強調することである。第二には福山市立大学で英語多読のプログラムを始めることである。第三には、多読を通しての教授法を広めることである。

キーワード：多読プログラム、読書力、読書力の向上、レベル分けされている書籍

