Extensive Reading in College EFL Programs

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Introduction: EFL learners entering college - the effects of yakudoku instruction

Most Japanese students who enter college and university have never really learned to read in English. They previously endured six years of yakudoku instruction in junior and senior high school English classes. (Yakudoku means translation-reading, but is commonly referred to as grammar-translation.) This approach to the teaching of English as a foreign language (EFL) reading essentially takes the following form in the classroom (as described by Day, n.d.; Gorsuch, 1998; and Takeda, 2002). The teacher reads aloud to the students a short passage in English while they follow along in their textbooks. Then the teacher reads the passage again, sentence-by-sentence, and the students read each sentence aloud after the teacher. This is followed by oral word-for-word, sentence-by-sentence translations offered by the students. The teacher corrects their translations and provides grammatical explanations along with a model translation. The objective of this instruction is for students to understand the exact Japanese translation. Thus, instead of working within the English language text itself, the students concentrate on the Japanese translations. Meaning, therefore, is taken wholly at the sentence level and is constructed through the medium of Japanese, not directly from English. This is not reading.

This understanding of reading, however, is so deeply ingrained in students that when they are given an English reading assignment in college, the teacher had better make very clear that they are not to write a sentence-by-sentence translation of the text. Without such an explicit injunction, it is very likely that many students in the class will write out a translation between the lines of the text or in a notebook.

The excuse that is perpetually given by Japanese teachers of English (JTEs) for this undying instructional approach is the necessity of preparing students for university entrance examinations. However, Mulvey (1999) completed an exhaustive and careful study of the relationship between junior and senior high school classroom reading pedagogy and textbook content in Japan and English entrance examinations for universities. His findings and conclusions serve to smash the myth of the necessity of the yakudoku teaching methodology to meet the requirements of these exams. He concluded: “The content of these exams can neither explain nor justify the extreme inadequacy of the methodology currently used to teach English reading skills in the overwhelming majority of Japan’s junior and senior high schools” (p. 125). He noted that “the reading passages on entrance exams are generally native-speaker level in complexity, with the relevant questions that the students must answer most often integrative/comprehension in nature, i.e., ones that demand advanced structural and lexical recognition skills” (p. 130). Yet the reading pedagogy employed by JTEs “generally produces – and indeed seems designed to produce – students with limited context-recognition skills, poor vocabularies, inadequate rhetorical/schematic preparation, and deficient
cultural background knowledge, i.e., just the areas that a truly ‘test-centered reading curriculum’ would seemingly emphasize” (p. 133); indeed, areas that would be included in any good foreign language reading development program. In short, the yakudoku methodology is irrelevant for aiding students to pass the English reading sections of university entrance examinations. The reasons for its continued prominence in practice are beyond the scope of this article, but some clues are offered by Gorsuch (1998) and the interested reader may pursue this investigation.

As a result of this manner of instruction, most Japanese college and university EFL learners never get past the sentence level of reading. They are stuck with slow and painful, line-by-line decoding of words with a dictionary, which, in fact, is not reading at all. Thus, students believe that reading English is both difficult and unpleasant, and they are discouraged and demoralized from reading in English at all. Hino (cited in Robb, 1998) summarizes their predicament: “The yakudoku habit clearly is a severe handicap for the Japanese student. It limits the speed at which the student reads, induces fatigue, and reduces the efficiency with which s/he is able to comprehend.”

**Intensive reading and reading skills building in college EFL curriculums**

EFL reading instruction at college and university level is usually presented in the form of intensive reading. This refers to “the careful reading of shorter, more difficult texts with the goal of complete and detailed understanding. Intensive reading is also associated with the teaching of reading in terms of its component skills” (Day & Bamford, 1997, p. 6). Intensive reading focuses learners’ attention on features of the text important for comprehension and critical analysis, such as the following listed by van Wyk (2003): lexical elements, syntax, cohesive devices, discourse markers, and other features especially important for academic reading: discriminating and understanding the difference between main ideas and secondary ideas, grasping the relationship between ideas, separating fact from opinion, evaluating claims and detecting weaknesses, drawing inferences and conclusions, and deducing the meaning of unknown words. Intensive reading usually involves also the explicit teaching of reading strategies such as activating background knowledge and monitoring understanding while reading, as well as techniques such as skimming, scanning, and summarizing.

Susser and Robb (1990) (citing Alderson and Urquhart), however, point out: “Such a pedagogic practice – of focusing on the language of a text – may be justified as a language lesson, but it may very well be counterproductive as a reading lesson. Often what is known as ‘intensive reading’... is actually not reading at all: the lesson consists of a series of language points, using texts as points of departure. Reading texts, in other words, are sources of language exercises, rather than reading exercises.” While not denying that language training is an essential part of an EFL curriculum, they assert that these kinds of lessons are not reading lessons in the strict sense. They suggest that these “skills” and “strategies” are all aspects of the act of comprehending which cannot be separated into discrete skills.

But the greatest problem with intensive reading and skills-based reading instructional approaches in college and university EFL curriculums is that most Japanese students are not at all fluent readers of English and in reality fall back on word-for-word processing of the reading text,
sentence-by-sentence. Indeed, in the case of most JTEs, intensive reading invariably includes translation into the students’ first language in the manner of the yakudoku approach. Consequently, the objectives of such courses, in fact, are barely, if at all attainable. Furthermore, the difficult, tedious, and mostly unrewarding effort made by most students in such reading courses is not very likely to motivate and inspire them to pursue any more reading in English after the conclusion of the course. Though they may survive and attain a passing grade in the course, they are not very likely to develop a lifelong habit – or love – of reading in English.

My experience with oral reading presentation by students of short, short stories and poetry as part of a course in public speaking demonstrates a further aspect of this dilemma, which Takeda (2002) has addressed. He accurately states that many Japanese students simply “cannot read words independently because they do not know the sounds of letters which constitute the words; i.e., they cannot connect the letters of the alphabet with their sounds” (p. 17). This is simply because they are rarely taught English phonics. I commonly witness students hesitating and stumbling in their oral reading over even the simplest of words that they know perfectly well to hear or to use themselves in speaking and writing, let alone more difficult and unfamiliar words.

So, what can be done for Japanese EFL learners to become better readers in English and to have positive attitudes toward reading in English generally? What approach to reading instruction provides a solution? The factors that have been discussed lead to the imperative of incorporating extensive reading in the EFL curriculums of junior and senior high schools and colleges and universities. This article will address the subject in the context of tertiary institutions.

Extensive reading in college EFL programs

The purpose of this section is to introduce and explain extensive reading, to report the specific benefits of this approach to reading and its vital importance and efficacy in EFL instruction, and to present in outline some ways in which it may be integrated into the curriculum of a college or university EFL program.

Extensive reading is a procedure in which students read large quantities of easy and interesting reading materials for pleasure and for general understanding and meaning. Day & Bamford (1998, pp. 7-8) list the following ten characteristics found in successful extensive reading programs. (See also Day & Bamford, 2002, for an expanded account of these ten principles.)

1. Students read as much as possible, perhaps in and definitely out of the classroom.
2. A wide variety of materials on a wide range of topics is available so as to encourage reading for different reasons and in different ways.
3. Students select what they want to read and have the freedom to stop reading material that fails to interest them.
4. The purposes of reading are usually related to pleasure, information and general understanding. These purposes are determined by the nature of the material and the interests of the student.
(5) Reading is its own reward. There are few or no follow-up exercises to be completed after reading.

(6) Reading materials are well within the linguistic competence of the students in terms of vocabulary and grammar. Dictionaries are rarely used while reading because the constant stopping to look up words makes fluent reading difficult.

(7) Reading is individual and silent, at the student’s own pace, and, outside class, done when and where the student chooses.

(8) Reading speed is usually faster rather than slower as students read books and other material that they find easily understandable.

(9) Teachers orient students to the goals of the program, explain the methodology, keep track of what each student reads, and guide students in getting the most out of the program.

(10) The teacher is a role model of a reader for students - an active member of the classroom reading community, demonstrating what it means to be a reader and the rewards of being a reader.

“Reading is an interactive process between the reader and the reading material... The reader brings the knowledge that he or she has about the world to interact with the text to create or construct meaning” (Day, n.d.). The research of all reading experts indicates that one learns to read by reading. This applies to both first language and foreign language learning. Krashen (cited in Day & Bamford, 1998, p. 38) makes the point crystal clear. “Reading is the only way, the only way we become good readers.” And this means that only by reading large quantities of material that are well within their linguistic competence will language learners become fluent readers. As will be explained in the next section, this kind of extensive reading, especially for beginning and intermediate level students, means reading mainly graded readers or “language learner literature”.

**Benefits of extensive reading**

Extensive reading clearly surmounts the disadvantages of the two other reading approaches that have been discussed previously. The specific benefits of extensive reading are manifold and wide-ranging. They have been cited by many teachers who have been deeply involved in this instructional approach for a very long time. From Day & Bamford (1998), Hill (2001), Nation (1997), Prowse (2003), Robb (1998), and Waring (1997) the following benefits of extensive reading are reported.

- Extensive reading builds automaticity of word recognition.
- Automatic recognition of a word allows lexical access - the automatic calling up from memory of a word's meanings and its phonological representation.
- Extensive reading builds vocabulary knowledge.
- Comprehension and fluent reading depend on automatic word recognition and vocabulary knowledge, and thus are advanced through extensive reading.
- Fluent reading allows the reader to move from word-by-word decoding to the processing of ideas, which is essential to higher level reading and thinking skills.
• Extensive reading builds awareness of grammatical structures and the ability to quickly and accurately process sentence structures.
• Extensive reading enhances learners’ background knowledge.
• Extensive reading promotes learners’ positive attitude toward reading. It fosters their confidence and motivation to read.
• Extensive reading increases exposure to English. The important role of “comprehensible input” in foreign language learning has been strongly demonstrated by Krashen (1993).
• Extensive reading reinforces a grasp of language that is taught in class. It provides students with an excellent opportunity to consolidate what they have learned, which is an essential aspect of foreign language learning.
• Research studies also show that extensive reading improves learners’ writing skills, listening and speaking skills, and examination results.

Numerous research studies have consistently provided empirical evidence for these effects of extensive reading in language learning. See Day & Bamford (1998), Nation (1997), and Sheu (2003) for lists and summaries of studies on the results of extensive reading programs.

**Graded readers: Language learner literature**

There are many different kinds of good reading material available for extensive reading from carefully chosen English language books, magazines, and newspapers. This article, however, will refer solely to graded readers as they are, simply put, “a superb source for learning and teaching English” (Hill, 2001, p. 300). They are well known by both teachers and students, readily available, generally of high quality, easy to use, and very effective for the purposes of extensive reading.

Graded readers are fiction and non-fiction books written or adapted for language learners of various ability levels. Grading means the material has been simplified according to vocabulary, phrasing, sentence structure, and information. Illustrations and other reading aids may be included within the text. There is a rich variety of genres available which are appropriate to college and university students of many interests, including modified versions of popular novels, novels based on popular movies or TV shows, classics, original stories written for EFL language learners, science fiction, biographies, travel books, other non-fiction works, and so on. Hundreds of titles are available from the principal publishers of English language teaching materials.

Many graded readers now are skillfully and excellently written. A great variety and quantity of high-quality books is published for English language learners of all ability levels. Day and Bamford (interviewed in Donnes, 1999, p. 5) speak strongly on the authenticity of these reading texts for EFL learners.

"Writing for language learners is like any other kind of writing in that the writer tries to communicate in a way the intended audience will understand. The defining characteristic of an audience of language learners is its limited linguistic ability.... As a result of [the writers']
communicative intent, they write authentic, natural, fully-formed discourse.... [These books] deserve the name 'language learner literature,' analogous to children's literature and teenage literature. Increasingly skilful writing and enlightened editing have given language learner literature the two characteristics teachers want: appropriateness and authenticity.”

Further on the matter of the authenticity of graded readers, Swaffer (cited in Day & Bamford, 1998, p. 60) clarifies the issue in a convincing manner. “The relevant consideration here is not for whom [the text] is written but that there has been an authentic communicative objective in mind.”

Certainly the three most outstanding series of graded readers are the Oxford Bookworms Library, the Cambridge English Readers, and the Macmillan Heinemann ELT Guided Readers. The Penguin Readers series, too, offers a very large and varied collection of titles at all levels with some that are very well done, but is fairly evaluated by Hill (2001, p. 317) as “an uneven, inconsistent, and unwieldy series.” All of these publishers provide teacher’s materials in the form of detailed guides, handbooks, activity worksheets, and other support materials, most of which are provided free of charge.

As both Prowse (2002) and Hill (2001) have observed, teachers also should consider exploiting the recordings that are available for many graded readers from these publishers. The rationale is explained well by Hill (p. 306): “Audio-cassettes can also be very helpful in weaning learners away from a word-by-word style of reading. When listening and following the text at the same time, the learners are pulled through the text faster than before, as well as benefiting from being able to match the spoken and written forms of a word.”

Clearly the most useful and detailed survey reviews of graded readers are those written by David Hill (1997a, 1998, 2001), with the Edinburgh Project on Extensive Reading (EPER). As Sheu (2003, p. 22) correctly points out, “effective extensive reading programs rely heavily on the teacher to make good judgment about the purchase and use of appropriate reading materials and rely as well on the teacher’s ability to effectively guide students in their choices.” Thus, for teachers setting out to establish a graded reader library and to implement an extensive reading program with these books, it is imperative that they consult these invaluable guides.

Graded readers - language learner literature - merit a major role in the EFL programs of colleges and universities. The effortful task of setting up an extensive reading library cannot be minimized. Day and Bamford (1998, p. 107) list the following major tasks in setting up an extensive reading library: deciding the size of the program, making a budget, determining the students’ reading levels, discovering student interests, purchasing the reading materials, cataloging and organizing the materials, deciding where to place the materials, setting up a checkout system, and displaying the materials. However, this is an enterprise most worthy of strong commitment and students should not be denied this rich source of English language learning material in an extensive reading program.

Orienting students and implementing extensive reading
The essence of an extensive reading program involves learners reading a large quantity of easy material for enjoyment and understanding. This approach to reading is very different from the previous classroom experience of Japanese students in secondary school, as discussed in the opening section of this article. Furthermore, some students may hardly ever read in their own language. Thus, Day and Bamford (1998, 2002) emphasize the necessity of providing students with a careful orientation to extensive reading and guidance in their work. They must explain in simple terms the rationale, purposes, and procedures of extensive reading. Day (interviewed in Donnes, 1999, p. 5) uses a very apt analogy.

“At the beginning and intermediate levels, we have to use material that is specially written for students at those levels, that is, 'language learner literature.' Material for fluent native readers is just too difficult. It's like learning to play the piano: Students don't start off playing Beethoven or Mozart or Bach. They first learn to play music specially written for beginners, and move gradually to more difficult pieces. The end product is Beethoven, not the beginning.”

Students need to be introduced to the procedure of self-selection of books from the different levels, including their right to stop reading a book that is too difficult or not interesting; understand that they will read independently, without the help of the teacher and without using dictionaries; and be assured that there will be no tests after reading, indeed, not even comprehension checking on the material. On this last point, Hill (2001, p. 305) properly warns teachers that applying the same methodology as with intensive reading is terribly wrong. He comments bluntly: “This approach kills the best reader stone dead.” Widdowson (as cited in Prowse, 2002) offers reinforcement of this vitally important point relating to extensive reading. “Comprehension questions... commonly require the learner to rummage round in the text for information in a totally indiscriminate way, without regard to what purpose might be served in doing so... Reading is thus represented as an end in itself, an activity that has no relevance to real knowledge and experience and therefore no real meaning.”

Teachers can keep track of what and how much students read, and give them the opportunity to express some response to what they have read, by using a simple record sheet that should not take more than a few minutes for students to complete after finishing a book. It is also interesting and helpful for students to hold a class session once in a while in which they can talk about books they have read and make recommendations to their classmates.

At the same time, a class reader could be made a component of the syllabus and supplement the individual reading students do independently. A class reader is a book that all members of the class read simultaneously. It serves as a springboard for a variety of classroom activities. Day and Bamford (1998), Hill (2001), and Prowse (2003) outline a number of advantages of this use of graded readers. The teacher can guide and stimulate students' reading, check their comprehension, provide input that enhances their appreciation of the story, and utilize the content of the book for speaking and writing activities by drawing on students' shared reading experience. Greenwood's (1988) Class readers is a very helpful source of ideas for activities with class readers. Bamford & Day (2004) and Jacobs, Davis, & Renandya (1997) are excellent resources for extensive reading.
activities. And the major publishers of graded readers offer ample support for teachers for each title in their series.

All authorities on extensive reading emphasize the essential importance of the teacher's attitude. First of all, they must be seen as role models of readers. They must demonstrate a genuine enthusiasm for reading and offer encouragement to their students. Mason (1992) succinctly adds: "I think the most important thing is that the teachers themselves must become believers in the approach.... They need to learn about extensive reading and, then, experience for themselves what extensive reading is like. They must be convinced that it is beneficial for both themselves (especially when the teachers are non-native speakers of English) and also for their students."

**Forms of extensive reading courses**

Hill (1997b) advises teachers setting up an extensive reading program at once to “think big and start small” (p. 17). He invites us to see the grand design of a complete and fully operational program that is functioning as a major component of one's institution’s English curriculum. At the same time, he tells us that we can start by trying out a small scheme in one of our classes. Helgesen (1997) describes the well-developed extensive reading program at his college in Japan as a model that other teachers may follow and adapt to their particular needs. Robb (1998), too, offers on his website a great amount of information about the extensive reading program at his university in Japan that is very instructive for interested teachers. I would like to conclude this article with a brief description of a small scheme for extensive reading that I incorporated into a reading course at a two-year foreign language college in Osaka. Perhaps an account of this modest success along with a study of the grand designs in the above references will give other teachers impetus and confidence to start on their own or in collaboration with their colleagues to implement an extensive reading program for their students.

Day & Bamford (1997, 1998) outline the different forms that extensive reading may take within a reading curriculum, such as a full, separate course; the main element of a reading course; a supplement to an existing reading course; or an extracurricular activity. Some years ago, when I taught a reading course in the intensive English program of a two-year foreign language/vocational college (semon gakkou), I decided to incorporate extensive reading as one of the principal components of the syllabus. Although the English department had already had a limited number of graded readers, no one had previously made extensive reading an integral part of their reading syllabus. I was able to obtain a reasonable budget from the school administration and acquired a total of 180 titles of graded readers, along with duplicates of several titles, especially those within the lower reading levels. I classified, catalogued, and color-coded the books and organized them on a library cart.

The reading course was for 18 second-year students. It met for two 50-minute periods on separate days of the week for a total of 60 periods in the school year. (This is equivalent to 33 ninety-minute koma.) In aggregate, 22 of the 60 periods (37% of total class time) were used for sustained silent reading. (Sometimes the full 50 minutes were used, sometimes half the period).
Sustained silent reading is when students silently and independently read self-selected material. It is important to include this time for extensive reading in order to give students the opportunity to develop a habit of such reading and for the teacher to observe their reading habits and be present to offer advice and answer questions. The remainder of the class time (63%) for the course was used for intensive reading and skills-building instruction using poetry (see Porcaro, 2003) for 30/60 periods and short non-fiction articles from a low-intermediate level reading text for 8/60 periods.

The graded readers were brought into the classroom on the book cart. Initially, students were oriented to the purposes and procedures of extensive reading, as discussed in a previous section of this article, and the particular mechanics of using the books in our class. The target was to read at least one book per week or at least 500 pages per semester. Targets (i.e., in fact, minimum requirements) are a necessity in most instructional settings or else little reading may be done. Out-of-class reading, of course, was a necessity in order for students to keep to the prescribed quantity of reading. They kept a simple, neat record sheet which I created to account for what they read and when they checked out each book and returned it. They wrote a short summary and response to the content of each book on another sheet that was easy to complete in about five minutes. These papers were submitted to me weekly.

Knowing the overall level of English proficiency of the students, I could recommend to them a starting level with the graded readers. I told them that it should be a level at which they could read comfortably and without a dictionary, generally with not more than a couple of unknown words per page, especially at the lower levels at which most of them began. (Teachers may be helped by examining the EPER levels of language learner literature that are coordinated with TOEIC and TOEFL scores in Hill [1997, p. 25]. Also, Oxford University Press, as well as other publishers, has a chart for all its reading materials that coordinates with these scores, too, as well as Eiken levels.) Students usually advance to higher levels, by the way, after reading 10 –15 books at a given level (Hill, 2001).

Simply put, with this the class venture into extensive reading took off and progressed smoothly throughout the year. It proved clearly to be a success. The students readily got into it, enjoyed it, and benefited much from it. I look forward to having another opportunity to teach a reading class and being able again to bring extensive reading into the English language learning experience of my students.

Conclusion

Extensive reading certainly is not the entire answer to the teaching of reading in EFL circumstances. Intensive reading and skills building may be appropriate and efficacious avenues of instruction. Literature courses as well may be advantageous and appreciated. Certainly in some settings instruction in academic reading is a necessity, particularly in the field of English for science and technology (EST). I taught for several years, for example, a one-semester elective course for third-year university Earth Science majors that focused on the rhetorical devices of scientific discourse to enable students to read more easily and efficiently material in academic journals which would be imperative in their graduate research and professional work.
The last word goes to Richard Day, who along with Julian Bamford, frequently referenced in this article, has written extensively on extensive reading and provided invaluable instruction and direction to teachers such as myself. Interviewed in Donnes (1999, p. 7):

“Teaching extensive reading, like all teaching, requires hard work and involvement. It just doesn’t just happen. Teachers who incorporate extensive reading into their classrooms need to offer guidance and support continually. They need to be role models themselves. And the process takes time. Our students will not become L2 readers overnight. But the rewards are definitely worth the time and energy.”

References


