

A Case for Extensive Reading as a Component of English Language Education in Japan

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Abstract

As a result of reliance on grammar-translation and rote approaches to study, many students display a lack of motivation towards learning English. Most will complete their education without having read even one page of a foreign language purely for pleasure. Consequently, it must be assumed that they will not have had the chance to experience any of the benefits typically ascribed to extensive reading.

The fact that Japanese are generally avid readers but reluctant speakers even in their native language would seem to indicate that a reading-for-pleasure approach would be well received as a component of a foreign language curriculum. In this light, it is not hard to conclude that extensive reading has the potential to play an important role in English language education in Japan. This paper proposes that the introduction of a systematic and sustained program of extensive reading (ER) as component of English language education could help alleviate many of the problems currently seen in foreign language education in this country.

Background: The Current Situation

Given the impressive range of benefits ascribed to extensive reading, it is surprising that so far it has attracted relatively little interest among Japanese teachers of English. This is particularly unfortunate when, as a nation, Japan lags significantly behind other Asian countries in English language proficiency. That the situation must change if Japan hopes to maintain its economic and political clout is clear. However, despite attempts by the Ministry of Education to encourage a more communicative approach to the teaching of English, the school system is still geared almost exclusively to preparing students for university entrance exams. This situation has favored the perpetuation of the traditional grammar translation methodology, and means that in many cases students today are studying largely the same body of knowledge which their parents studied to pass similar exams 25 or 30 years ago. This in turn has meant that while reading has been highly emphasized in secondary and even tertiary education, it has been almost exclusively of the intensive

kind, which as Alderson and Urquhart (1984) observe “may be justified as a language lesson, but is actually not reading at all.”

In practice, students’ struggles interpreting short, lexically dense passages has nothing to do with reading as such, and even less to do with pleasure. All too often for students, reading in English merely means doing things they do not enjoy with texts they do not want to read. Clearly this does little to promote interest either in reading or in English in general. Yet so entrenched is this method that Kitao and Kitao (1995) found that “most Japanese students read by replacing all English words with Japanese words one by one.” Not surprisingly, they feel lost if asked to read without looking up every single new word in the dictionary.

It is troubling that in Japan the educational authorities and the majority of public school English instructors have so far for the most part ignored extensive reading, as there is considerable evidence to suggest that it would be both particularly well suited and easily adapted to Japanese education. According to Hill (1997), extensive reading programmes would be “particularly helpful” in Japan, where students find it “embarrassing to speak English before they feel confident of their use of lexis and syntax.” Furthermore, as Kumiko Torikai (2000) has pointed out, “even with their native language, the Japanese tend to value written language much more than spoken language”. Thus, extensive reading outside school would provide students with an excellent opportunity to practice in private and improve their lexical-syntactical knowledge. This would have a positive effect on their overall comprehension, which would in turn help boost their confidence and foment a more positive attitude to learning and using the language.

Language in Memory

For a number of years, slow reading has been widely recognized as a problem faced by learners throughout the ESL/EFL world. (Hamp-Lyons 1983; Cooper 1984). The cause has often been linked to reading lessons whose primary focus is the development of language knowledge, or knowledge about language, rather than on the development of reading comprehension skills. A body of research exists which comments on common practices during intensive reading lessons of treating texts as vehicles for the presentation, practice, manipulation, and consolidation of language points, rather than the encouragement of developing reading skills (Nuttall 1982:20; Alderson & Urquhart 1984:246-7; Bartram & Parry 1989:7; Hyland 1990:14; Susser & Robb 1990:161-162). Slow reading as a problem for learners has been defined by Brown & Hirst (1983:140) as a “weakness independent

of the purpose of reading”, involving the processing of information at such a slow rate that the reader is unable to hold enough detail in short-term memory to permit decoding of the overall message. In addition, more recent research has indicated that weak (i.e., “slow”) readers have recourse to a limited number of skills and strategies, while more proficient readers make use of a wider variety of strategies and skills. Typically, the reading strategies employed by Japanese students and the interruptions to the flow of reading necessitated by frequent dictionary look-up promote decoding rather than fluent comprehension of texts. This in turn inhibits students from learning or inferring vocabulary from context and integrating the words and their contexts into existing knowledge.

Research in psycholinguistics has shown that language is stored in memory as part of an associative network which includes other non-linguistic knowledge, and that it is best recalled when it is integrated with existing knowledge and personal experience. Language which resides in memory syncratically (i.e. as unintegrated information) will soon be forgotten. Language which does not enter into long-term memory as part of a larger network will not be successfully retained. Anderson (1983) concluded that memory for concepts can be increased by increasing the number of related ideas (associations) present at either the time of learning or the time of recall, particularly if the associations are well integrated with prior knowledge. Cohen and Aphek (1980) demonstrated that learners’ attempts to form associations involving target vocabulary lead to better retention, while Stevick (1976), Johnson-Laird (1983) and Brown and Perry (1991) have confirmed that integrative strategies have a positive effect on retention because words are stored in associative networks. According to Carter and McCarthy (1988:56) “The principle of vocabulary learning ... is that the more words are analyzed or are enriched by imagistic or other associations, the more likely it is that they will be retained”.

Frequency of Exposure and Lexical Recall

Repeated exposure to new lexical items using a variety of means aimed at aiding retention is the most consistent predictor of successful recall. The greater the number of associations we have for a specific word, the more likely it is to be remembered, because it will be firmly anchored to other words as it becomes part of a larger conceptual or associative network. In other words, the more we learn the easier it becomes to learn more.

Recall is enhanced when items are well integrated with both sensory experience and linguistic knowledge. Language which does not enter into long-term memory will not be retained. Knowledge

which is at some level personally meaningful is easiest to recall. The focus of the various aspects of keeping a learner dictionary should involve the learner in a variety activities which he or she will find meaningful on a personal level, and encourage the use of a variety of different cognitive skills in making entries, writing sentences, providing illustrations, generating synonyms and making associations, manipulating word form and entering information on pronunciation, stress and grammar. The practice of making entries will gradually become easier, in part because the process has become familiar, but also because students will become more adept at the skills necessary for maintaining the dictionary.

Increased exposure to new language using a variety of means is a consistently reliable predictor of successful learning, in so far as successful language learning can be taken to mean increased proficiency. Time spent analyzing language, associating images, feelings and personal experiences with language, and integrating newly acquired and existing language knowledge will all promote increased retention and recall. The use of visual, verbal, tactile, textual and sonic memory aids can and should be introduced to learners as viable means of improving their ability to recall words. Because each learner has his or her own individual learning style, and because different students will naturally react differently to different strategies, it is important that learners be presented a number of strategies from which to choose. In addition to increasing the range, depth and recall of vocabulary, these techniques also offer learners the opportunity to become more aware of their individual learning styles, an important step on the path to becoming more confident and autonomous learners.

Intensive vs. Extensive Reading

Most English reading instruction in Japanese English classrooms can be characterized as intensive. The primary goal of intensive reading instruction as practiced is to help students learn the grammar and vocabulary of the target language through reading. This type of reading is called intensive reading because the learner is intensively involved in looking inside the text at the vocabulary and grammar, and is concentrating on a 'careful reading' of the text. Intensive reading aims to develop language knowledge rather than reading facility, fluency or skill.

Typically, features of an intensive reading approach are that:

- 1) the material is usually selected by the teacher, not the students;
- 2) all the learners read the same material at the same time (usually in class);

- 3) the text is quite short (often these texts are no more than 300 words);
- 4) there is a heavy emphasis on using the text to learn vocabulary and grammar;
- 5) there are many difficult words (the aim is to teach them);
- 6) vocabulary is taught by translation;
- 7) there is a pre-reading task (an activity before the reading begins);
- 8) comprehension is tested;
- 9) there are 'post-reading' grammar and vocabulary exercises;
- 10) students rarely meet the same vocabulary items presented in earlier chapters again in later chapters. (Day and Bamford, 1998)

Traditionally, Japanese students of English have encountered most new lexis in the form of texts. Textbooks and materials tend to feature short reading passages used to introduce or highlight new vocabulary and grammatical structures. Furthermore, the materials are usually specified by the teacher or the curriculum. These texts are often designed to be read with the support of a teacher, or supporting materials such as dictionaries or vocabulary glosses. However, they are typically above the level at which the learner is able to read comfortably, much less fluently.

Shortcomings of Intensive Approaches to Reading

With this type of approach, there is very little practice of the skill of reading, because very little text is being read. The learner will not be able to read quickly because many of the words are unknown. The learner frequently stops reading to use a dictionary, ask for a definition, or analyze the text word-by-word, due to the frequent occurrence of unfamiliar lexis or grammar. The learner will not be able to read at her own level of reading ability, because all the learners must read the same material. The text may or may not hold interest for the learners because it was selected by the teacher. There are few chances to learn the patterns in English because there is typically very little text to read.

Japanese students are still often expected to approach the acquisition of English lexis as discrete items in much the same way as they approach the learning of Japanese kanji. The aim is to master long lists of decontextualized, low frequency words which are then translated into their native language. Unfortunately, this more often leads to forgetting than to retention, as the number of items to be learned is greater than the students can successfully integrate into existing linguistic knowledge in a short time. More recently encountered vocabulary displaces vocabulary which has not yet been integrated, leading to forgetting.

Research by Tanaka (1985) Kitao, Yoshida and Yoshida (1986) and Kitao and Kitao (1995) found that standard reading strategies such as skimming, scanning and the use of contextual clues to derive meaning are not taught at most Japanese high schools. Additional studies by Kitao et. al. (1985) found that word relationships, such as those between synonyms and antonyms, are overlooked in high school reading classes. Moreover, Kitao and Kitao (1995) found that top-down strategies such as scripts, schema development and the use of real-world knowledge or personal experience to provide a context for readings are not typically presented to students of English in Japanese public schools.

Perhaps to compensate, Japanese learners have come to rely heavily on Japanese-English bilingual dictionaries as a source of information about English words and their meanings. Compounded with the lack of classroom instruction in effective reading strategies, the inability on the part of many learners to use a dictionary appropriately further impedes many Japanese learners' development of an adequate second language vocabulary. In this context, the increasing popularity of electronic bilingual dictionaries should be seen as a mixed blessing. While their physical size and ease of use make it more likely that students will have a dictionary on hand, and that they will employ it more frequently, observational evidence suggests that students become reliant on electronic dictionaries as a substitute for acquiring even a basic sight vocabulary of English. Words which do not come readily to mind in the course of reading or conversation can be quickly entered and a result obtained. Students who employ electronic dictionaries in this fashion frequently enter native-language "equivalents" for the English word they need, view a list of items from which to choose, and have difficulty proceeding from that point. When going from English to Japanese, inexperienced users tend to take the first lexical item presented on the screen in their native language as the word they need without pausing to consider its grammatical role, usage or appropriacy. Finally, such an approach reinforces the impression shared by many learners that lexical items in different languages have a one-to-one correspondence, leading them in turn to ignore larger issues of context and collocation. Ironically, had students initially foregone the use of dictionaries and instead engaged in extensive reading from the outset of their foreign language study, they would naturally have developed many of these abilities in the course of reading.

Nevertheless, intensive reading does offer the learner the opportunity to learn new vocabulary, practice grammar, and become more familiar with the topic of the text, all of which are, of course, necessary. However, intensive reading alone is not sufficient; the learner needs practice to develop

the skills used by fluent readers, which is more easily accomplished through extensive reading.

Decoding vs. Reading: Interaction with the Text

If a student is required simply to decode texts, then his or her eyes are not being trained to move rapidly and smoothly over the page. This makes it difficult for the student to read at the “idea” level, where the meaning of the text resides. Too much intensive reading discourages the development of fluid eye movement which facilitates interaction with the text and “chunking”, assigning meaning to larger pieces of text, and establishing the connection between these “chunks” and relating them to the writer’s ideas or purpose. To remember a text well, we need to work with ideas, not simply words. This is why, up to a point, the faster we read, the better we comprehend. The ability to read faster is in turn comprised of various other skills that facilitate text comprehension, skills best developed in the context of extensive reading for pleasure. This is one reason that the texts used in graded or extensive reading programs should be *easy to read* – in fact, they should be below the students’ current level of reading ability. If the text is too difficult, reading becomes a decoding (intensive) task rather than a reading task, and the aim of developing fluent readers by encouraging extensive reading for pleasure will not be reached. Reading material which is “too easy” will allow learners to read faster, encouraging them to use a different set of skills than would be the case in “intensive” reading.

Text Comprehension and Recall

Experienced or fluent readers will comprehend in terms of ideas or “propositions”, and recall the content in terms of these concepts. The transition from “word” to “meaning” is vital because at this juncture the learner has ceased working solely with letters and words and begun working with ideas. From this point forward, the learner can begin to infer, and to make more efficient and effective use of background and schematic information to aid comprehension, replicating the process used by fluent first-language readers. These are exactly the skills that would enable our students to cope more successfully with the challenges presented by the reading section of the TOEIC examination; rather than employ “bottom-up” strategies in attempting to read the passages, they would first identify the passage by genre and purpose, apply their relevant knowledge of such texts, and proceed from that point, “top-down”.

Strategies often employed by proficient readers include: 1) successfully inferring the meaning of new words from context; 2) efficient, effective (e.g.: limited) dictionary use; 3) recognizing sound/spelling

correspondences; 4) learning to find and recognize the main ideas in texts and within paragraphs; 5) developing word-part knowledge (affixes and word stems); 6) pronoun and synonym reference to parts of a text; 7) skimming and scanning; 8) understanding text types and genres; 9) understanding patterns of organization within a text; 10) comprehending implied messages in a text.

While the skills and strategies typically gained by extensive reading are not specifically intended to improve reading ability as measured by standardized tests such as the TOEIC, students who are able to employ these skills should in all probability be more competent readers, and thus find the reading section of the test easier than those who apply only the limited range of skills developed in their first 6 years of English study. Anecdotal evidence gathered from students indicates that one of their biggest difficulties with the reading comprehension and grammar sections of the TOEIC exam is a lack of vocabulary or the inability to understand the meaning of words originally learned in isolation in other contexts. I would venture that the intensive reading approach employed at public schools, coupled with the lack of instruction in basic English reading strategies, is one reason for this.

Extensive Reading Defined

The term “extensive reading” was originally coined by Palmer (1917) to distinguish it from “intensive reading” - the careful reading of short, complex texts for detailed understanding and skills practice. It has since acquired many other names: Mikulecky (1990) calls it “pleasure reading.” Grabe (1991) and others use the term “sustained silent reading”, while Mason and Krashen () call it simply “free reading”.

Despite these pedantic quibbles regarding nomenclature, the characteristics generally include the relatively fast reading of a large amount of longer, easy-to-understand material, with the reading done mostly outside of the classroom and at each student’s own pace and level. There are few, if any, follow-up exercises, because the aim is for overall understanding rather than word-by-word decoding or grammar analysis. For the same reason, there is minimum use of dictionaries. Most importantly, instead of an inflexible curriculum saddling students with texts they neither enjoy nor understand, with extensive reading the material is generally chosen by the students themselves, who can thereby enjoy some small measure of responsibility for decisions affecting their learning, a basic tenet of communicative language teaching.

According to Day and Bamford (1999), in an extensive reading program:

- 1) *Students read as much as possible*, perhaps in and definitely out of the classroom.
- 2) *A 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.

The material used is often graded readers, what Day and Bamford (1999) call “language learner literature”. Indeed, the terms graded readers and extensive reading are often used almost synonymously. While there is no reason why extensive reading should be limited exclusively to graded readers, these simplified texts have been shown to have a number of benefits (see Day and Bamford 1999; Waring 1997).

The Benefits of Extensive Reading

Gains in vocabulary are among the most commonly cited benefits of extensive reading. Nuttal (1982) maintains that “an extensive reading programme is the single most effective way of improving both vocabulary and reading skills in general.” Mason and Krashen (1997) are among the many others who support the gains in vocabulary thesis. Nevertheless, this cannot be taken for granted. As previously stated, extensive reading usually means the reading of easy texts with little or no

dictionary consultation. Indeed, research by Laufer (1989) suggests students should be familiar with 95% of the words in a text in order to comprehend it.

This being the case, it seems somewhat contradictory to suggest that students can make extensive gains in vocabulary from extensive reading, when so little of the vocabulary is “new”. In fact, Nation (1997), Bamford (1999) and Waring (2001) all concur that students can only hope to make small, incidental gains in vocabulary knowledge from extensive reading. Nevertheless, while expected gains in new vocabulary may have been overstated, the increased familiarity with known lexis is a critical factor in increasing reading speed. The importance of extensive reading’s role in developing sight vocabulary, or automaticity of word recognition - words and collocations students meet so often that they recognize them automatically, without having to stop and think (see Day and Bamford (1999), Grabe (1991), Nation (1997) cannot be easily disregarded. This in turn means students can increase their reading speed and process language (written or spoken) more quickly, thus boosting their confidence, improving reaction speed as well as comprehension, and contributing to the overall development of their language ability.

In fact, Mason & Krashen go even further and, quoting research by Krashen (1993), Elley (1991) and Mason and Krashen (1997), affirm categorically that “it is firmly established that free reading leads to increased second language competence.” Grabe (1986) called extensive reading a “major way to round out a reading program”, and in 1991 went on to sum up simply and forcefully the many benefits of extensive reading by arguing: “students need to read extensively. Longer concentrated periods of silent reading build vocabulary and structural awareness, develop automaticity, enhance background knowledge, improve comprehension skills and promote confidence and motivation.” (p. 396)

The benefits of extensive reading are manifold. Many reading experts view extensive reading as an essential part of any reading program, be it L1 (Nagy, Herman, and Anderson, 1985) or L2 (Nation, 2001). Extensive reading can lead to improved reading ability through more highly automatized word recognition (Adams, 1990; Devine, 1987; Grabe, 1991; Koda, 1994; Montali & Lewandowski 1996; Perfetti, 1986, 1991; Shankweiler et al., 1999; Stanovich, 1991; Weber, 1991). When learners begin to read, it is a slow, deliberate, attention-intensive process. As learners increase the number of times they successfully read any given word, their memory for that word becomes stronger. At a certain point, recognition becomes automatic and the attention that was previously required to recall it can

now be used for other, higher-level tasks such as attending to overall text meaning.

There is also evidence that learners pick up new vocabulary, and increase vocabulary depth through ER (Nation, 2001; Waring & Nation, 2001). Even when learners understand a basic meaning for a word, knowledge about collocation, register, metaphorical use, and other senses often remains unknown. By exposing learners to vocabulary thousands of times in a wide variety of comprehensible contexts, as happens in ER, this information, which is difficult to teach explicitly, can be learned naturally. The same is true of various points of grammar (Elley, 1991; Tudor & Hafiz, 1989). This is especially important with grammatical points that are particularly difficult to explain or overlooked in traditional grammatical syllabi.

Nation (1997) has documented the linguistic benefits gained by students who read extensively in a foreign language as being: 1) increased reading speed; 2) lexical speed access; 3) reading fluency; 4) the ability to move from working with words to working with ideas. Renandya et al, (1999) found that there are significant increases in reading speed and comprehension for 'extensive' readers versus 'intensive' readers. Bell (2001) indicated that extensive reading is a significant predictor of second language proficiency, while Constantino et al (1997) have provided evidence from young adult learners that extensive reading is 'a strong predictor of TOEFL scores'. In addition, Nuttall (1982:41) has made the claim that "successful reading makes successful readers: the more students read the better they get at it, and the better they are at it the more they read". Elley (1991:387) noted "the spread of the effect from reading competence to other language skills - writing, speaking and control over syntax. The two significant points here are that reading improved all the language skills and that these experiments contrasted using a textbook with reading programmes." Perhaps most striking is Krashen's assertion that "When [second language learners] read for pleasure, they can continue to improve in their second language without classes, without teachers, without study and even without people to converse with". (1993:84)

Conclusion

In recent years, an impressive body of evidence has appeared in favor of extensive reading as a means of improving not only students' reading level but also of raising their general proficiency. Many researchers have found extensive reading to have a positive correlation with listening, writing and other areas of language competence. (see Mason and Krashen, 1997). Indeed, Robb and Susser (1989) were surprised at the extent of writing gains made by an extensive reading group. Nation

(1997) also claims benefits not just for reading fluency but “in a range of language uses and areas of language knowledge”, including, significantly, affective benefits. This view that extensive reading helps improve students’ overall attitude toward studying English is supported by many others, including Mason and Krashen (1997).

One obvious attraction of the approach is that it combines the universally understood pleasure of reading a good story with the satisfaction inherent in accomplishing a meaningful task in the target language, while still at a relatively low level of fluency. This vital pleasure factor effectively prepares the ground in which language acquisition can then germinate. Krashen argues that students can acquire language on their own provided a) they receive adequate exposure to comprehensible language and b) it is done in a relaxed, stress-free atmosphere. Extensive reading satisfies both these conditions since, as stated above, it involves reading large amounts of relatively easy material, at home and with little or no follow-up work or testing. Furthermore, Krashen held that the unconscious process of language acquisition, such as occurs when reading for pleasure, is more successful and longer lasting than conscious learning.

This is one of the reasons why extensive reading, with its large amounts of roughly-tuned input, is held by many to be more effective than the conscious study of finely-tuned input. In particular, extensive reading has been shown to be a highly successful way of reinforcing, confirming and deepening knowledge of vocabulary and expressions hitherto only imperfectly known, and of developing an implicit understanding of when and how words are used, by experiencing language in context, according to Nation (1997).

Equally importantly, by eliminating follow-up checks and exercises, students are encouraged to focus on understanding the general meaning rather than detailed comprehension. In order to comprehend meaning, students read in “chunks” and are gradually weaned off word-by-word decoding at the sentence level, which is a critically important transition for Japanese students. Day and Bamford (1999) offered a simple summary of the theory behind extensive reading, saying that “students who read large quantities of easy, interesting material will become better readers and will enjoy the experience.” In other words, to use the catchphrase, “students learn to read by reading”.

Finally, by allowing students to make their own choices about what they read, they have more latitude and are thus implicitly invited to pursue their own interests. This in turn reduces teacher

control and encourages learning to occur outside class. As each student chooses a book within his or her own capability range, weaker students need not feel embarrassed about not keeping up with more advanced ones, as can happen with a teacher-chosen class reader that all students must follow. Students are therefore less likely to get frustrated and de-motivated, so the overall effect on their attitude will be beneficial. In other words, success in individual reading encourages learner autonomy which over time leads to learning success and enhanced motivation.

Indeed, if extensive reading did nothing more than help students read better, then it would be unlikely to have attracted so much attention. What makes it far more compelling is evidence indicating that extensive reading not only develops reading skills, but benefits a wide range of other language skills, increases confidence and motivation, and improves overall attitude toward language learning. Extensive reading in this sense has to be viewed holistically, as a critical part of students' total intellectual development.

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