Getting Started With Graded Readers in the Classroom: Five Pre-Reading and Reading Activities

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Abstract

In this paper, learner autonomy, self-access, and graded readers (GRs) will be discussed as integral aspects of extensive reading (ER) and the virtuous cycle of reading. Five pre-reading and reading activities for English language learners will be outlined that can be adapted and adopted freely into an English language learning program at a Japanese university. The goal is to introduce post-secondary-level Japanese English language learners to GRs with an idea towards fostering ER, learner autonomy, the virtuous cycle of reading, and self-access, both within, and beyond, the scope and requirements of the course. "The Five-Finger Rule" helps students choose a GR at an appropriate level. Calculating reading time helps students with time management and builds confidence, accountability, and motivation. The "Blurbs and Titles" matching activity introduces students to more GRs as does discussion with other students. Finally, allowing time for ER in the classroom enables teachers to monitor the activity. Lastly, this paper will discuss areas for future research.

Keywords: *Extensive reading, Graded readers, Learner autonomy, Self-access, Virtuous cycle of reading*

Introduction

Within the principle of the four strands of a well-balanced language learning program as defined by Nation (1996)–meaning-focused input, meaning-focused output, language-focused learning, and fluency development, Extensive Reading (ER) lies in the reading component of meaning-focused import. At Rikkyo University, ER is introduced as a part of the Reading and Writing (RW) course in the English Language Program (ELP).

ER is in contrast with Intensive Reading (IR) which emphasizes short but challenging reading focusing on structure and vocabulary, often only single paragraphs, or sentences. Researchers have pointed out that Japanese English language learners are likely to be more familiar with IR than ER. For example, Mizuno (2015) emphasized how little English reading students actually do in six years of English language classes in Japanese junior and senior high schools. To help familiarize students with ER and its advantages for English language learning

this paper will introduce five pre-reading and reading activities for Graded Readers (GRs) which, typical of most programs, make up the bulk of the ER material at Rikkyo.

Although ER has many benefits, significant improvement in students' learning, knowledge of the world, etc., are likely to occur only after reading several GRs. It should be noted that students in RW courses are only exposed to ER with the hope of future voluntary reading in English as a habit, similar to Nutall's (2005) concept of the virtuous cycle of reading and opposite to the vicious cycle of reading (See figures 1 & 2).

Figure 1

The Virtuous Cycle of Reading

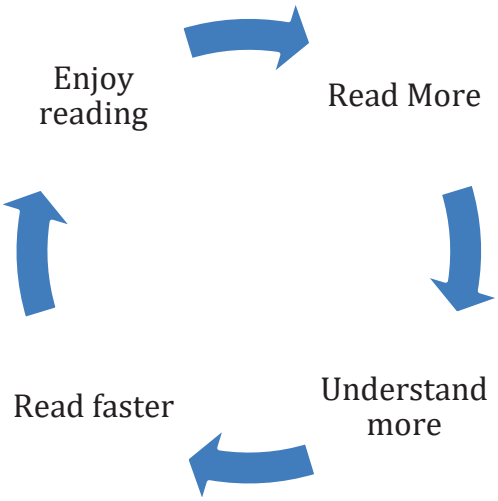
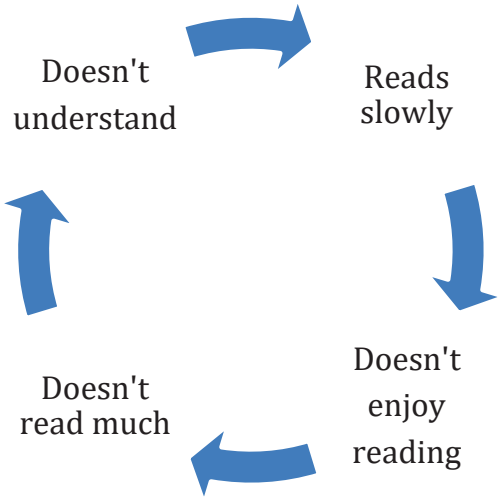


Figure 2

The Vicious Cycle of Reading



Literature Review

What is ER?

There are several definitions of ER. As early as 1917, Palmer used the term to describe reading large amounts of meaning-focused text. In more recent decades, ER has been heavily researched and defined. Its benefits are well-documented, not just for meaning-focused input, but also for the other strands, and more.

Davis (1995) characterizes ER as "a supplementary class library scheme, attached to an English course in which pupils are given time, encouragement and materials to read pleasurably at their own level, without the pressures of testing or marks" (p. 329).

Day and Bamford (1998) have described ten principles of ER:

1. Students read as much as possible
2. A variety of materials on a wide range of topics is available
3. Students select what they want to read
4. The purposes of reading are usually related to pleasure, information, and general understanding
5. Reading is its own reward (no major evaluation)
6. Reading materials are well within the linguistic competence of the students
7. Reading is individual and silent
8. Reading speed is usually faster rather than slower
9. Teachers orient students to the goals of the program
10. The teacher is a role model of a reader for students

(pp. 7–8, see also Day & Bamford, 2002)

Departing to some extent from the focus on the intrinsic value of reading, more recently ER has been described as having four distinct types. According to Extensive Reading Central (n.d.), they are:

Purist ER program

Lots of self-selected reading at home with no / little assessment or follow up. Often is a stand-alone class. This version of ER is best presented by Stephen Krashen and his followers. This type is the one most ER practitioners know from the 10 features of an ER program in Day and Bamford's book whereby the read should

Integrated ER program

This type of ER is one that works in tandem with normal classes. Typically students have a course work and lots of 'study' either as with the same teacher or with others. There tends to be a lot of self-selected reading at home and in class. There are often

follow up exercises / reports which aim to build the 4 skills.

Class reading – study
In this type of ER, students read the same book at or about the class' level and work through it slowly. This is a very high-control form of ER and the book the class reads is likely to be the only one they read in the semester. The book is often treated as a serial story with one chapter read every week or fortnight. It often involves a lot of work on the vocabulary follow up exercises, tests and so forth. Lots of follow up / comprehension work and exercises.

ER as 'literature'
This is similar to Class Reading in that the students read the same book but they discuss it as if it were a work of literature.

Research on ER

There is a large body of empirical research on ER, including studies by Mason, (Mason 2006; Mason & Krashen, 1997 and Williams, 2009). The positive results have been widely documented for several decades. As early as 1981, Elley and Mangubhai organized an eight-month study of primary school students in Fiji and found significant gains in general language proficiency. Janopoulos (1986) also found ER improved students' writing proficiency. Vocabulary gains were reported by Pitts et al. (1989), Lai (1993a, 1993b), and Hafiz & Tudor (1990).

Renandya and Jacobs (2002) summarized the benefits of ER as follows:

1. Enhanced language learning in such areas as spelling, vocabulary, grammar, and text structure.
2. Increased knowledge of the world.
3. Improved reading and writing skills.
4. Greater enjoyment of reading.
5. More positive attitude toward reading.
6. Higher possibility of developing a reading habit (p. 298)

What are GRs?

Concurrent with the rise in interest in and practice of ER there has been an increase in ER material, namely GRs, particularly with the advent of electronic copies of GRs, especially on such platforms as Xreading VL GRs are, according to Extensive Reading Central (n.d.) books written for language learners which have simplified vocabulary and grammar to allow for easier reading. GRs are usually a part of a series of books ranging from very easy to very

difficult.

What are Learner Autonomy and Self Access?

Concerning the activities that will be described in the paper, among Bamford and Day's (2004) principles, three, five, six, and nine come into play the most. Three, five, and six are in line with the concepts of learner autonomy and self-access. Learner autonomy, as defined by Holec (1981) as, "the ability to take charge of one's own learning" (p. 3) through deliberate guidance by instructors. Closely related is the idea of self-access, characterized by Diaz (2012) as "the organization of learning materials and equipment made available and accessible to students without necessarily having a teacher present" (p. 117).

Introducing ER and GRs in the Classroom

Because ER involves reading a lot of text and is likely to be less familiar to students than IR, it is important to introduce the concept and have students choose GRs early in the term. If possible, teachers may wish to guide students' choices of GRs at the library and/or online. Students should be made aware of what ER is and its potential benefits for them, including, and maybe especially, increased vocabulary knowledge. Indeed Nagashima (2017) found students who read English extensively reported "an overall positive … including vocabulary gain, reading fluency and (a) positive attitude towards reading in English" (p. 240). With this in mind, testimonials from students in previous classes can be used to encourage and give advice to students as well. For example: "Start early" or "pick books that interest you." They also can be directed to this testimonial video from the Extensive Reading Foundation (ERF): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=THHJR4s1UB4.

Along with introducing ER and GRs, the underlying principles of the following five activities are self-access and guided learner autonomy. They can be sequenced in any order, and any number can be omitted. Also, they are designed to be freely adapted and adopted to suit and fit the needs, goals, and objectives of the course, as well as the constraints of the learning environment.

Activity One – "The Five-Finger Rule"

Once students have either a paper or electronic copy of a GR, they should bring it to class. It is important that learners choose GRs at a highly comprehensible level. According to Nation and Meara (2002), students should understand 98% of the vocabulary in a graded reader to allow for implicit learning. ELP's in-house reading book: *Reading for the Future: Developing Reading Skills in the College Classroom* (Garside et al., 2019) echoes this as instructions to the students. There are several other ways students can select a GR that is not too difficult, including a reading level test by the publisher Macmillan also given as instruction in the textbook. It is one of many online placement tests. Although listed levels vary from publisher to publisher,

most GRs are arranged by standardized test scores and headwords. Moreover, in recent years there has been an effort to create combined scales of GRs (Holster et al., 2017). Another method to find a suitable GR is Hiebert and Reutzel's (2010) "Five-Finger Rule" in which students are asked to find the number of unknown words on a full page of text, excluding proper nouns. If there are more than they can count on the fingers of one hand, the book is probably too difficult. Four to five unknown words is a "challenging" text. Three to two unknown words are probably just right, and zero to one unknown words might be too easy. It should not be forgotten however that students should also pick a GR that interests them.

Activity Two – Reading Time

The second activity again asks students to read another complete page of text, only this time they are asked to time themselves to find out how long it takes them to read one page uninterrupted. Students and teachers may also wish to again count the number of unknown words to confirm reading ease, but the goal of the activity is the estimate how long it will take students to read their entire GR, by multiplying the reading time of one page by the number of pages in the book.

Students may be surprised that it is likely to be not more than a few hours and even less when they look closer and realize how much of the book is not text. When students take into account white space, pictures, activities after the reading, front matter, back matter, etc., they will realize their estimated reading time is likely to be much less. The aim is to motivate students and give them a sense of time management for ER, which previous research by Nagashima (2017) indicates is an issue for Japanese university English language learners.

Activity Three – "Blurbs and Titles"

Bamford and Day's (2004) "Blurbs and Titles" is a simple matching activity asking students to connect book descriptions (blurbs) on the back of a GR with the title. This can be an in-class activity with the blurbs and titles spread around the room and individual pen and paper assignments, or a digital activity. The aim is to introduce more GRs and to foster more curiosity about what students may wish to read next.

Activity Four – Discussion

Students may not have completed reading their first GR, but they can discuss their reading choices with other students in pairs or small groups, i.e.: Who is the author? What is the genre? What is it about? When is it set (if fiction)? Where is it set (if fiction)? Why did they choose that particular book? How many pages is it? These questions can be provided by the teacher or generated by the students themselves. Like the blurbs and titles activity, they can help students choose their next GR and/or help students understand what they are reading better.

Activity Five – In-Class Reading

If time permits, teachers may want to allow for more reading beyond the two pages mentioned in the previous activities to monitor and give them a "head start." For example, if students are frequently looking up the words, the teacher may want to suggest an easier GR. Teachers may even wish to model the activity by reading themselves.

Conclusion and Areas for Future Research and Discussion

ER is balanced within a course that meets 14 times a term for 100 minutes each time. This tight schedule allows for little in-class instruction of this component. However, the activities outlined in this article are designed to foster better self-access and learner autonomy which are essential to ER. Ideally, this will lead to more ER beyond what the scope of RW allows for.

There are several research questions that might be asked about ER in the ELP. By Extensive Reading Central (n.d.) definitions "Integrated" probably comes the closest to describing ER in RW, but students are only required to read one GR for each of the two terms. Although the intention is merely exposure to ER and to encourage more voluntary reading in English, should students be required to read more? This goes against the purist route of ER, but there is a substantial amount of evidence that suggests a high word count per term results in better English proficiency (Beglar & Hunt, 2014; Beglar et al., 2014; Rutson-Griffiths & Rutson-Griffiths, 2018). Lastly, this paper has only discussed pre-reading activities for the beginning of the term in RW. Another area for future research and development in RW curriculum might be post-reading activities, particularly alternatives to book reports, such as game-inspired character sheets particularly for fiction GRs (Dutch, 2015).

Current RW course has changed from an existing course in April 2020. Research continues to be conducted into ER. Regardless of whatever direction the RW course goes in with ER, the years to come will provide students and teachers with new challenges and opportunities.

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