Building Students Reading Habits

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Abstract

Extensive reading involves learners reading texts for enjoyment at their own level and helps to promote good learning habits and skills. Making it part of the reading skills course at the Faculty for Global Communication at an early stage was important to instill a sense of autonomy. This pilot study reports the preliminary observations of the extensive reading portion of this course along with an analysis of students pre and post responses regarding attitude and plans to continue reading for pleasure beyond the running of the course. Findings resulted as inconclusive but with the possibility of some connection between average length of weekly reading and reading speed. More research is necessary before reporting anything conclusively.

Introduction

As of 2016, Aichi Shukutoku University (ASU) started its inaugural year of the Faculty of Global Communication. This department is based around an overall goal of imprinting students with a deeper understanding of both Japanese culture and cultures of the world and a firm grounding in practical English to nurture students to become "Global Citizens". By providing an "All English" learning environment it was envisioned that students would become accustomed to English at a faster rate thus mastering the skill of using English. The current research examines our implementation of opportunities for students to build a reading habit in a foreign language in this new department.

Literature Review

Successful Skill Mastery

According to several studies as reported in Gladwell (2008), successful people became successful from having worked hard for a long period of time, having been given the opportunity to advance, and having appropriate support at the right time. Additionally, the average amount of practice time to become an expert at any skill, whether it be a playing hockey, practicing law, or playing the piano was reported at approximately 10,000 hours (Gladwell, 2008). As reading in a foreign language would fall under the skill category, to research whether this 10,000 hour pattern would show the same result may prove worthwhile for future program design, curriculum design, and independent foreign language learners.

Extensive Reading

Extensive reading (ER) has been a concept that has undergone several name changes since the 1920s (Bamford & Day, 1998). Overall, the foundation of what is now referred to as extensive reading in the foreign language context has not changed from its three key points: (1) do an extensive amount of reading (2) always read easy leveled texts, and (3) always read enjoyable materials in the target language (Bamford & Day, 1998). Grabe (2009) remarked on two meta-analyses of research in ER which showed that such programs required a minimum of six months before any significant positive reading improvement was reported. This may show that time is a major factor in second language reading development as well.

Extensive Reading as a Graded Part of a Course

One challenge of setting up an ER program as an official part of the curriculum in a school setting has been showing its value to administrators and students (Miles, S., 2013). Since it takes time before any results show, students often want some method of confirmation of their classwork (Stoeckel, T., Reagan, N., & Hann, F., 2012). There have been several ways instructors have graded ER such as the use of in class quizzes (Stoeckel, T., Reagan, N., & Hann, F., 2012), outside of class, online, quiz systems such as M-Reader (Bieri, T., 2015; Robb, T., 2015), and weekly ER records with book reports (Eichhorst, D. & Shearon, B., 2013). These, albeit necessary to maintain the program in such contexts, conflict with the "pure" extensive reading concept where testing of extensive reading should not occur (Day, R., & Bamford, J., 1998). In our current study, we focused on using time as the accountability aspect for grading ER in the course. Our study focused on time as a key factor, along with opportunity (access to appropriate levelled interesting books, and appropriate support (in the classroom, and through the people who were monitoring students while reading) as laid out in Gladwell (2008).

Methodology

Participants

Participants were first year university students (*n* = 53) in Japan majoring in Global Communication who were streamed into four sections of roughly equal sizes. This streaming was based on their total April 2016 reading and listening TOEIC scores which ranged from 195 to 785 out of 990 possible points. Participants' reading scores ranged between 75 and 395 out of 495 possible points. In the reading section 15 participants scored below 150, 35 between 150 and 249, 2 between 250 and 349, and 1 scoring over 349 points. According to the most updated ETS TOEIC Reading Score Descriptors (2007), any reading score below 150 implies the test-taker usually cannot comprehend what they read at a sentence level. Scores between 150 and 249 imply that test-takers usually cannot connect information they read beyond two simple sentences and have trouble with paraphrases and other complex grammar patterns (ETS, 2007). Test-takers scoring between 250 and 349 should be able to connect information they read in the text, but may not be able to differentiate between common words with similar meanings and probably do not know idiomatic usage or more difficult vocabulary (ETS, 2007). Considering that all but three participants scored below 250 points, we assumed that the reading level of the students ranged from below sentence-level to very simple, unconnected, sentence-level comprehension at the start of the term.

Data Collection

The current study's data was collected throughout the second quarter (June, 2016 through August, 2016) during the only reading course of the First year English Program (FEP), the required language and study skill courses to prepare students for all English content courses after their first year, which met for one hour, three times a week for twenty-three classes: Monday, Wednesday and Friday respectively. This seven and a half week period was referred to as a quarter as there were four quarters of courses in the FEP.

Questionnaires

A questionnaire (Appendix A) was distributed to the classes by the instructor during the first day of the course. This questionnaire was an orientation tool, part of the coursework, for the purpose of introducing students to reading genres, and reminding them of past times that they enjoyed reading. The same questionnaire was then distributed at the end of the course, with the removal of questions 1 through 5, as it seemed inapplicable to make students attempt to recall what they marked at the beginning of the term for the genres they enjoyed during their childhood. Some students were absent on the first or last day of the course. These students were removed from the analysis of data for this study.

Extensive Reading Data

As homework, students were required to submit a weekly extensive reading timecard. This timecard recorded the length, level, and amount of reading that particular student accomplished in the presence of someone who monitored their reading (called a reading monitor). With this data, a student's weekly average words per minute could be calculated. This data is referred to as leisure reading WPM throughout this study. Students needed to read for one hour at the appropriate level, outside of class each week, in 30 minute or shorter blocks of time in order to complete the minimum amount of monitored reading time for the course. Students were also extrinsically encouraged to read more than the minimum amount of time, as the class with the highest average amount of monitored reading time would get a 10% boost on the final exam for the course. This reading had to be done in the presence of a reading monitor, which included all three researchers of this study. The goal of this homework was to instill a reading habit into the students' daily routines before the quarter ended, as it was the only reading course they would take over the year.

Setting up the extensive reading monitoring times and monitors involved recruiting and orientating instructors as volunteers who were willing to monitor students to stay on task and ensure the return of the book. Instructors were also asked to read quietly to act as role models. A total of nine teaching staff plus the instructor in charge of the reading class donated their time over the quarter.

Speed Reading Data

As classwork, students practiced speed reading once a week. They recorded their times, and answered five very general multiple choice comprehension questions. Students were encouraged to read fast enough to get 3 or 4 answers correct. If a student got 5 answers correct, it meant they may have been re-reading, or reading slower than necessary for speed reading, therefore were advised to read faster. If they got 2 or less correct, it meant they read too quickly for comprehension, or that the reading level was too high for them and were advised to read slower. The instructor kept a record of this weekly speed reading rate and comprehension score as part of the participation grade of the course.

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Results and Analysis

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We analyzed potential relationships for the following: (1) the amount of time students spent on ER and their reading speeds (2) the amount of ER time spent and their reported intention to continue ER (3) the amount of ER time spent and their reported attitude towards reading for pleasure. Some preliminary observations could be made from these analyses.

ER Time Spent and Reading Speeds

Of the 53 students, 24 of them read exactly the weekly minimum amount for ER homework (one hour per week) in at least 5 of the 7 weeks. 6 students read less than the minimum for 3 or more of the 7 weeks, and 23 students read more than the minimum for 3 or more of the 7 weeks. Thus, to analyze the possible relationship between the amount of reading and the speed of their reading during speed reading, the average of each group's initial speed reading time from Week 2, Week 5, and Week 8 were calculated. The first week was not included due to many students never having done speed reading before. Thus, many students did intensive reading instead of speed reading during their first try. The week 5 time fell exactly in the middle of the 7 remaining weeks, thus this time was calculated as well. Since there were various times where students were absent during other weeks (although they did extensive reading they missed the speed reading) for the purpose of keeping the data with the same number of participants in each group, the beginning, middle, and end times of the quarter are reported in this paper (See *Figure 1*).
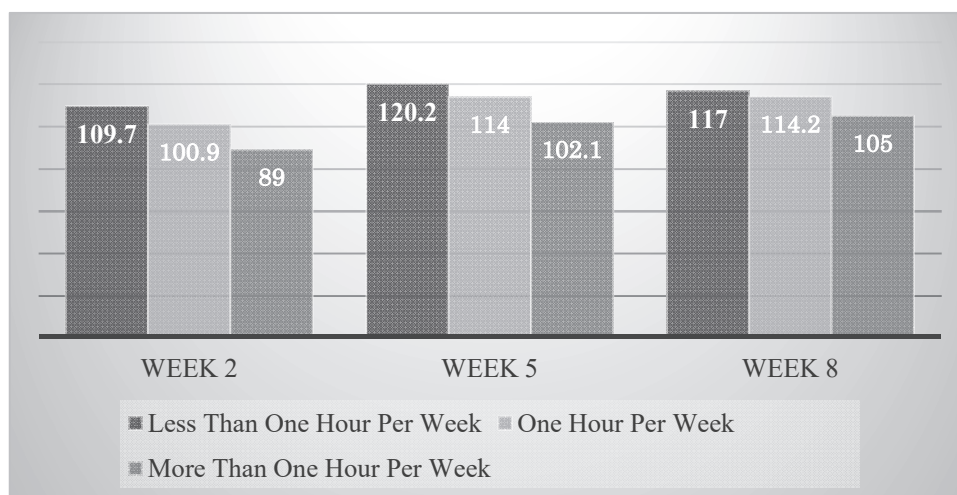
Figure 1. Average words per minute (WPM) grouped by the weekly amount of time spent doing monitored extensive reading.

As can been seen in Figure 1, the group that did the least amount of monitored reading (*n* = 6), in fact doing less than the required amount of reading assigned per week, was the group that had the initial highest average reading speed (109.7 WPM). This group increased an average of 10.5 WPM between week 2 and week 5 (120.2 WPM). Between week 5 and week 8, this group's average reading speed dropped by 3.5 WPM (117 WPM), thus from week 2 to week 8, they had an overall average reading speed increase of 7.5 WPM. Granted this group had a small number (thankfully in terms of a teacher wanting their students to do their homework properly, but regrettably in terms of wanting to produce research with appropriate numbers for statistical significance), noting the amount may assist future research in this area. The middle bar in Figure 1 was the group (*n* = 24) that did the absolute minimum monitored weekly ER required for the course, one hour per week. This group began with the second highest initial reading speed, 100.9 WPM. Between week 2 and week 5 this group's average reading speed increased by 13.1 WPM (114 WPM), almost double the increase of the group that did not read the minimum. Between week 5 and week 8 this one hour a week group increased their reading speed by an average of .2 WPM (114.2 WPM). Overall they increased their average reading speed by 13.3 WPM. The third bar in Figure 1 was the group (n = 23) that read more than the required one hour per week for the course. This group also started with the slowest average reading speed, 89 WPM. Between week 2 and week 5, this group increased their reading speed an average of 13.3 WPM (102 WPM). This is exactly the same average increase as the one hour per week group (*n* = 24). From week 5 to week 8, the third group increased their average reading speeds by 2.1 WPM (105 WPM) for an overall average increase of 16 WPM. Due to the small number in the less than one hour per week group, a finding of statistical significance would be unlikely, but the results may hint that reading extensively for one hour a week may be quite different than reading 30 minutes a week in regards to maintaining and increasing one's reading speed.

ER Time Spent and Reported Intentions to Continue ER

The same division of groups as the previous section were used to observe whether or not there was a difference in students reported intentions for continuing reading for pleasure after the course commenced based on their answer to the questions, "Do you plan to read for pleasure in the future?" and "How often do you think you will read for pleasure in the future?"
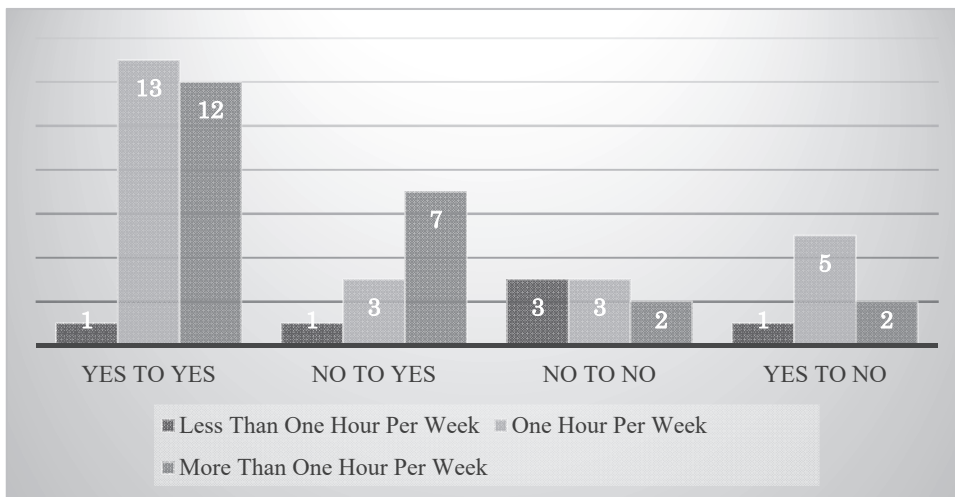
Figure 2. Pre- to Post- Questionnaire Responses to the question, "Do you plan to read for pleasure in the future?", grouped by the average weekly amount of time spent doing monitored ER.

Figure 2 shows that most students reported no change in their initial plans to continue to read in the future for pleasure with 26 planning to do so and 7 planning not to (33 out of 53 students). Eleven students changed their minds to planning to read in the future while 8 reported they no longer planned to. If one compares by group, one may notice that 7 from the group that read more than one hour per week changed their responses to planning to read, on the other hand, those who read an average of one hour per week had 5 change to a negative response. This may imply a potential connection between length and value perceived in making time to read for pleasure, but the numbers in this study are too few to know for certain, especially in regards to the students who read less than one hour on average per week. One challenge with this data is that many students reported a response to the question "Do you plan to read for pleasure in the future?" which did not logically correspond to their response to the question, "how often do you think you will read for pleasure in the future?" Twelve students reported an opposite response in the pre-questionnaire and ten in the post-questionnaire. For example, if they responded they would not read in the future for pleasure, they also responded that they thought they would read 1-2 times per week for pleasure. Considering that the questions were literally next to each other on the survey, the researchers were confounded by this pattern. As such, we are uncertain of the reliability of these two survey questions.

ER Time Spent and Reported Reading Attitudes

The same three groupings by average weekly time spent doing monitored ER were used to ascertain whether or not there was any connection between the time and possible changes in student attitude prior to and after doing monitored ER for seven weeks. The responses in both pre- and post- questionnaires for two questions were used to analyze reported attitudes: (1) Do you think reading is important? (2) Do you think reading is fun? (See Figure 3).
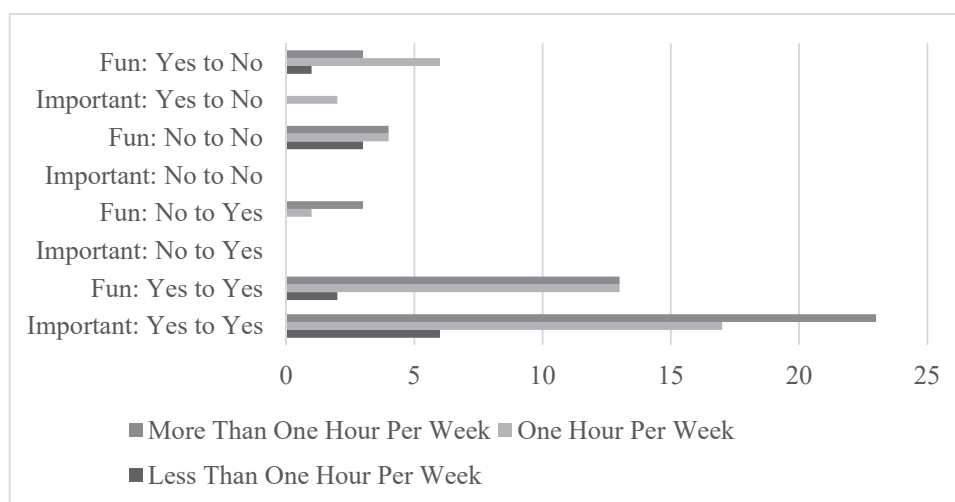
Figure 3. Changes in reported attitudes from the pre-post questionnaire responses for "Do you think reading is important" and "Do you think reading is fun?" separated by amount of average time spent reading.

As shown in Figure 3, the less than one hour per week group (LHW group) which consisted of six students in total all reported an unchanging belief that reading is important. As for reading being fun, initially, all but one student from this group remained with an unchanged view (3 believed it was not fun, 2 believed it was fun). One student changed their mind from believing it to be fun to unenjoyable. With the one hour per week group (OHW group) 17 (n =24) reported an unchanging belief that reading was important, and 2 changed to responding that it was unimportant in the post-questionnaire. For fun, 17 also did not change their responses (13 reported it was fun, 4 reported it was not), 6 changed from responding it was fun to not being so, and one changed from responding it was not fun to it being fun. The more than one hour per week group (MHW group) unanimously maintained the same view that reading was important (n = 23), whilst 13 maintained it was fun. Three from the MHW group changed to answer it was no longer fun, while another changed their answers from unenjoyable to enjoyable. Four of the MHW group continued to answer it was unenjoyable in the pre and post responses. Compiled, 27 (n = 53), about half, reported and unchanging view that they believed reading was fun, while, 11 had a steadfast unenjoyable response regarding reading. We did not find any specific patterns regarding a connection between the amount read and the attitudes students reported.

Strengths and Weaknesses
This study utilized reading monitors to confirm the amount of reading students actually did throughout an eight-week reading course outside of class. In this way, students could be immediately informed if they were off task, could hear recommendations for further reading, observe a role model (teacher) also reading for pleasure, and were able to ask for confirmation if they were unsure of what to do for extensive reading. In this way, the times spent doing monitored extensive reading could be recorded in a transparent and accurate manner. Secondly, as this was a pilot study, many adjustments can be made for future research in analyzing the possible correlation between time spent reading and improvement of reading skill. The amount of time necessary for certain parts of conducting orientation, comprehending how to read for pleasure, and other logistical/material concerns were noticed through the process of this pilot study.

This study had several weaknesses including the small number of participants, the lack of statistical confirmation of reliability and validity on the questionnaires, and confusion by the participants regarding possible meaning of some of the questions asked. The questionnaire was also conducted in English, but looking

back at the level of comprehension of a large number of the participating students' TOEIC scores, it is likely that some of them could not understand the questionnaire. The duration of the study was also short, and currently lacking longitudinal confirmation of whether students actually read or did not read for pleasure as they had reported their future intentions in the post-questionnaire. In addition, the speed reading passages were not easily comprehensible for many of the students. Oftentimes, students read at a speed where they were unable to answer true/false questions about general information from the speed reading passage. Lowering the level of the speed reading passages to match the level of the students would be advisable in a non-pilot study. Another weakness of this study is that quite possibly, students did not find books they enjoyed to read at appropriate levels due the small selection, particularly at lower levels (less than 300 headwords). At this point, no firm condusions can be drawn based on the current level of analysis of the data collected in this study.

The lack of clear relationships between reading speed improvement and either attitudes towards reading or time spent reading may indicate that the seven week ER program was insufficient in length for such gains to be noticed. As a point of comparison, Huffman (2014) found reading rate gains in a 15 week semester course of 20.73WPM for an ER group, but no gain in reading fluency for a comparison group using an intensive reading approach with no ER. Huffman`s (2014) ER group was calculated as having read a mean of 80,201.74 words. At the minimum seven hours of reading for our seven week program, even if the average WPM recorded in week eight by the study group as a whole (110.5 WPM) were consistently maintained across all seven weeks of ER, a student reading the seven hour minimum requirement for this class would read just 46,410 words. At 96.7 WPM (week 2 average), a student reading for seven hours would read 40,614 words. All these calculations assume the ability to maintain the WPM achieved in a short reading speed test with texts corresponding to the lower levels of graded readers when required to read a range of texts including some higher level graded readers for up to 30 minutes. It is therefore likely that the figures mentioned are the upper end of what a student reading for seven hours could possibly have read. The 13.8 WPM average gain of our group compared favourably to the lack of gains in Huffman`s (2014) non-ER group, but the gains of his ER group over 15 weeks indicated that there may well be greater returns from a longer period of ER. Possibly the difference in the number of words read by the less than one hour group and the more than one hour group is insufficient to see significant differences in reading speed gains. Future research that would be able to track the further reading of those students reporting an intention to continue reading and whether building that reading habit outside of an ER program leads to further gains would be instructive. Further research with a control group without an ER intervention but with weekly reading speed tests over the same time frame would also help in establishing the degree to which a seven week ER program itself rather than any washback effect of the weekly speed reading practice could account for the gains seen in reading speeds.

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Appendix A: Questionnaire

Please answer honestly. Your answers do not affect your grade.

1. Mark which you have enjoyed reading at each time of your life.

    Use a J for Japanese and E for English when you mark.

	As a child	Junior High School	High School	Recently
Picture Books				
Manga				
Short Stories				
Magazines				
Non-Fiction				
Novels				
Textbooks				
Newspapers				
Song Lyrics				
Poetry				
Movie/TV scripts				
Online Materials (news, e-manga, etc.)				
Other (please identify it)				

2. Mark which genres you have enjoyed reading at each time of your life.

	As a child	Junior High School	High School	Recently
Action/Adventure				
Fantasy				
Folk Tales (Momotaro, etc.)				
Romance				
Mystery				
Horror/Thriller				
Self-Help				
Business				
Beauty/Fashion				
Travel				
History				
Hobby-related				
Music				
Other (please identify it)				

3. Did you look forward to reading as a child?

    A)   Yes   B) No

4. Did you look forward to reading as a junior high school student?

    A)   Yes   B) No

5. Did you look forward to reading as a high school student?

    A)   Yes   B) No

6. Do you look forward to reading as a university student?

    A)   Yes   B) No

7. Do you read in English for pleasure as a university student?

    A)   Yes   B) No

8. Do you read in languages other than Japanese? If yes, which languages?

    A)   Yes   B) No

Which languages:

9. Do you think reading is important?

    A)   Yes   B) No

10. Do you think reading is fun?

    A)   Yes   B) No

11. How often do you read for pleasure? (intrinsic motivation)

    A)   I don't think I will read for pleasure in the future.

    B)   1-2 times a week

    C)   3-5 times a week

    D)   Almost every day

12. Have you heard of extensive reading (多読)?

    A)   Yes   B) No

13. Have you heard of intensive reading(精読)?

    A)   Yes   B) No

14. Do you plan to read for pleasure in the future?

    A)   Yes   B) No

15. How often do you think you will read for pleasure in the future?

    A)   I don't think I will read for pleasure in the future.

    B)   1-2 times a week

    C)   3-5 times a week

    D)   Almost every day

Note: Questions One through Five were not asked on the post-questionnaire.