Original Article

A Decade of Reading and Learning: A History of the Extensive Reading Program in the Department of English Communication

Richard J. Lemmer

Department of English Communication, Chugoku Junior College, Okayama 701-0197, Japan

This narrative reports on the Extensive Reading portion of the Department of English Communication curriculum. It explains the workings of the program from its inception in 2001 to the present. Included are results of research on ER, activities related to ER and student comments on the program.

This narrative describes the ten-year history of the Extensive Reading (ER) program as a part of the curriculum for all students in the Department of English Communication at Chugoku Junior College. It depicts the origins, structure and development of the program along with introducing results of research conducted on ER's effectiveness in engaging students and improving English skills.

My introduction to Extensive Reading came in 2000, not long after I began teaching at Chugoku Junior College. When attending a weekend training session in Osaka for EFL instructors I participated in a workshop conducted by Dr. Robert Waring of Notre Dame Seishin University. The concept of reading in volume at an appropriate level to improve language skills seemed quite simplistic, yet logical. Having haunted libraries since my first year at elementary school I consider myself to be a lifelong avid reader. As such, I returned home excited about ER as something that could be added to the curriculum of the Department of English Communication.

The first step was to search for books and articles on ER in order to learn more about it, and after reading Extensive Reading in the Second Language Classroom (1), The Power of Reading (2) and The Natural Approach (3), I discussed with department members the possibility of beginning an ER class to complement the existing Intensive Reading classes. At this time I learned that it would be at least two years before any new classes could be introduced into the syllabus. I was disappointed, but not discouraged.

At that time our Oral English communication classes were divided into three levels. I suggested that ER be introduced as an adjunct to one class with the other classes acting as control groups. My plan was to administer pre and post tests to all classes to see if improvements in reading comprehension were greater in the experimental group. I believed that if better gains could be demonstrated by the ER group, we would, in the future, include a class devoted to ER in our curriculum. The response was not what I had anticipated. Others said it would not be fair to the other students to have only one group participated in Extensive Reading. The rejection turned out to be a blessing in disguise. Because of this, all

Corresponding author.
Richard J. Lemmer
Department of English Communication, Chugoku Junior College, 83, Niwase, Kitaku, Okayama 701-0197, Japan
Tel & Fax; +81 86 293 1100

students would be involved in ER and ER has been demonstrated to aid in increasing reading speed and fluency, and comprehension (4) as well as vocabulary acquisition (5, 6, 7). Research has also shown it a factor in improved writing skills (8, 9, 10) and scores on standardized tests (11, 12).

ER still needed to be justified as a component of the Oral English classes. A plan was devised to have students present oral book reports and discuss books they read and strategies employed when reading. It was understood that the reading itself would take place outside the classroom. Once this was agreed upon it was easier than anticipated to receive funding for the purchase of graded readers. The teacher responsible for the existing reading classes, Professor Haschiuchi, helped acquire ¥20,000 from the department budget and the same amount from the school library's budget for our first purchases. The first books bought were all Penguin Graded Readers. The library already had a number of readers dating back over 20 years. The problem with these older books is that most were written for higher level students and not graded according to more recent publisher systems. These older books were most likely used as class readers since there were over 15 copies of most titles. In contrast our ER program allows for individual selection of reading material in order to increase student interest.

With approval and new books to add to the existing ones we then had to determine a system for sorting books into levels. A grouping of eight levels was determined with the lowest being A (300 headwords) and the highest H (1,500 headwords). Not knowing better at the time, I mainly followed the publisher levels and had the "beginner" or A level books set at roughly 300 headwords with each level increasing by degrees following the Penguin Graded Readers scheme. I was fortunate to have two students from our department help in grouping and labeling the books in our library. After this initial labeling the school librarians have taken care of this task after consulting about the level of new books they receive. The Foundations Reading Library books from Thomson-Heinle publishers became available in 2006, and at that time we added AA to our system which now includes books with fewer than 300 headwords, expanding the number of levels to nine.

From our initial order of 20 graded readers and 10 accompanying audio- cassettes we have been able to build the library by 20–30 books each semester. With further assistance from the librarians, from 2009 students and myself have taken part in the twice a year Book Hunt at local bookstores. The numerous books we have been able to add to our collection through this process are welcome additions. Since one important aspect of ER is having the individual choose what to read within a certain level, our library contains a wide variety of books including literary classics, movie and TV adaptations, new fiction of various genres, biographies, and other nonfiction works to help expand students' general knowledge base while they acquire English. At present the library contains approximately 1,400 readers with about 900 of these in the first four levels, as this is where the majority of our students read. In addition to the library's collection, in my office there are over 200 readers students can borrow at any time.

From the beginning an audio component was made available to help students improve reading speed and pronunciation by reading and listening simultaneously after having read the book once. Unfortunately most students did not use the cassette tapes, but a number did watch videos of many of the titles contained in our library. These were checked out from my office and were in English. As media changed many new books included CDs and students used these slightly more than the cassette tapes. The graded readers are relatively small and light and can be conveniently carried and read while commuting to and from school. In comparison, the devices needed for listening at the time were bulky and a bit heavy, thus making it less likely they would be used. Books with cassettes and CDs were also nearly double the price of the book alone. It was a better investment to buy two books rather than only one book and one tape or CD. It wasn't until mp3 players became ubiquitous that it became practical for the students to listen to the books anywhere. The students now have access to the mp3 files for many books as the older material has been converted to the new format and beginning in 2007 all English majors receive an iPod during orientation week.

After acquiring books and organizing them a placement system for students was needed so that they would begin reading at a comfortable level based

mainly on Krashen's concept of comprehensible input +1 (3). Following ideas found in Day & Bamford (1) we printed onto one large sheet of paper one page from one book at each of the five lowest levels. Students read each passage for one minute and then mark the place where they stopped reading. After reading all five passages they then check how many unknown words were found in the portions read. A student is at the proper level if she can read 8–10 lines per minute with only 2–3 unknown words per page. When the individual finds her level, it is recommended that she start at one level lower. This is based on the assumption that it is better to start reading at easier material and move up from there quickly if need be. Student confidence and motivation should increase by experiencing early success.

The reading placement test changed in 2003 with the introduction of the Edinburgh Project on Extensive Reading (EPER) Placement Test (13). Once again Professor Hasshiuchi procured department funding for placement tests A and B along with the EPER Guide To Organising Programmes of Extensive Reading (14). David Hill, an internationally recognized authority on ER, developed these materials. The tests can be used for both placement and progress checks. After using them for two years we reverted back to the original testing method. The main reason for doing do was that most students placed into the first two levels on the EPER test. Another factor in the decision was the test appears to measure grammar and vocabulary more than reading fluency, although knowledge of both are necessary for reading comprehension. The majority of students were also unfamiliar with the British constructs and vocabulary used in the test.

In 2011 students participated in a pilot study of a free online placement test, The Extensive Reading Foundation's Online Self-Placement Test (ERFOSPT) (15). This test appears to be the most comprehensive and accurate placement and level changing tool available. In 2012 this will be used to determine starting levels and when a student is ready to change to the next level reader. It contains a variety of reading passages from published graded readers. Students are automatically timed as they read and when they finish the short passage they answer five affective questions and five comprehension questions. With the algorithms factoring in time and com-

prehension answers, the student is sent to a new passage at the same, higher or lower level until the correct level is ascertained. The entire test takes only between 20–30 minutes. The instructor automatically receives the results by email.

Following completion of the placement test at the start of each semester students are taken to the library to find books that interest them so that they can immediately begin their reading assignment. During the first classes students are provided with a bilingual handout showing the differences between intensive and extensive reading. Included on this handout are strategies that will be helpful in their reading experience. These strategies are explained in class and reviewed throughout the semester to ensure that students internalize them as they read. The focus is to read in volume to increase fluency. The main strategies employed are:

- Do not use a dictionary.
- Get meaning directly from the text without translations.
- Go for the overall meaning of a passage and do not get detoured by unknown language.
- Guess at the meaning or ignore unfamiliar words or difficult ideas.
- Continue to read at an appropriate level.
- Be satisfied with less than total understanding, when appropriate.

A schedule for brief, two to three minute oral reports is given to students in the first class of the semester. Outlines and sample reports are demonstrated in the first lessons. During the early years of the program each student was required to present twice a semester. As class sizes dropped this was increased to three presentations. In 2007–2008 some reports were recorded and the audio files and accompanying transcripts were posted online for other students to hear (16). One rationale for implementing this was that it might serve as a motivational tool for making higher quality presentations, knowing that the reports would be accessible by those in other classes. Another was for students in other classes to hear different opinions about a larger number of books and help guide them in selecting future reading material. More recently videos were made of the oral book reports and they were converted into a format compatible with the student iPods. Each student received her own reports to be able to study them

and hopefully improve weak points for the next presentation.

Pleasure Reading is term sometimes used to designate reading in volume but unfortunately many students are not likely to read for enjoyment alone. They are too busy and have other priorities. Therefore it was necessary to link the reading done outside of class to the individual student's grade. This provides an extrinsic motivation factor, in the hope that once students begin to read more and come to enjoy reading in a second language, intrinsic motivation would replace the idea of reading for a grade. From the outset the Oral English A class' minimum amount of reading required was 300 pages. For each of the three following semesters the minimum was 500 pages. To check that the reading was actually being done a very short book report paper was provided to students. It has been stated that if any report takes more than 15 minutes to complete it is too long as the additional time would be better spent reading. With this in mind, our design required only basic information including the title, author, number of pages and book level. This was followed by seven affective questions using a five-point Likert scale and five yes/no questions. The written section checking comprehension required a 2–3 sentence summary of the book and composing three questions the reader would like to ask any of the characters in the book. In 2009 a number of written report formats were sampled during a semester and one created by Shirley Leane, a part-time lecturer at the time, is now used. It also has mainly affective questions, but the Likert scale is replaced by open questions.

In the second semester of 2010 a major change in the program's core requirements took place as the target goal changed from the number of pages read per semester to a number of words read. This became possible as the major publishers responded to teachers' requests and began to list the total number of words contained in the book on its cover. Akio Furukawa and Maria Sato through their Start with Simple Stories (17) method, introduced in 2001, have been proponents of this measuring system whose goal is set at reading 1,000,000 words in English within a year. The ER Foundation now has a comprehensive online database listing the word count for most graded readers and many children's stories. This is freely accessible and is a great aid to teachers involved in ER (18).

There are a number of reasons for the shift; the main one being that using word count is more equitable. Many books, especially at lower levels, contain numerous illustrations to assist the reader in understanding the plot and new vocabulary that is encountered. By including those pages as ones read it not fair to those reading books with few illustrations. This page system seemed reasonable at first, but with a better alternative available there was no reason to continue it. The challenge laid in how to translate 500 pages, the old semester requirement, into a specific number of words. This was accomplished by checking the previous semester's student logs and selecting certain books read by at least three students, and whose total amounted to 500 pages. The next step was to check the word count for each of those books. The average number of words for the 500 pages equaled roughly 100,000. This became the new requirement for Oral English B, C and D with a 60,000 word minimum for Oral English A.

In addition to the written book report students are required to keep an ongoing log of books read during the semester. This information includes the title, author, level, date started, date finished and number of pages read. Reports are collected once a week and the log enables both student and instructor to be able to see if a proper pace is being kept. It is emphasized in class that reading more often, even only 10 minutes a day is better than reading for an extended period only once a week. The more frequent the encounter with the second language, the more likelihood that meaningful acquisition will occur. This practice also aids in more fluent reading as a sight vocabulary is developed.

Another strategy that is repeatedly stated is that if the student finds the book too difficult or not interesting, she should stop reading, list the number of words read and start reading a different book. This has been a difficult concept for our students to grasp. Perhaps this is cultural and has to do with the idea of "*gama*." If a book is difficult, students often see it as a challenge to be overcome and feel that it would somehow diminish their character to give up without finishing the book, no matter how difficult it may be. With the type of reading we are doing it is counterproductive to slog through a difficult or uninteresting

book just to be able to say, "I've made it. I didn't let it beat me."

As one may expect, how ER is integrated into the Oral English classes has also undergone changes over 10 years. As the program progresses and class sizes become smaller two or three classes per semester are devoted to expanding ER activities. Since the reading is an adjunct to is Oral Communication all these activities consist of discussion or using spoken English for activities. We have used a genre identification activity where there are numerous books spread out and students work in pairs, using a handout sheet to identify the book's genre from reading only its title and cover blurb and using the illustrations on the cover. Pairs then report their findings to the entire class while providing reasons for their decisions. Another activity uses just the title and cover illustrations as pairs of students read a one to two sentence summary of the plot and then guess which book it is about. One activity focuses on students' opinions and perceptions about reading. Discussion in small groups may be about a favorite character in a book, a character the reader dislikes, comparing the book and the movie of the story or numerous other topics. Extensive Reading Activities for Language Teaching (19) is an excellent resource for activities as is Extensive Reading in Japan, a journal published three times a year by the ER Special Interest Group of the Japan Association for Language Teaching. An activity done toward the end of the semester is a discussion among 3–4 students about the five favorite books that each one read that semester. Each student provides reasons why the book was chosen while the others in the group ask questions about the book.

A positive result of smaller class size is the ability to use class readers to help introduce ER to new first-year students. As of Spring 2011 the Oral Communication classes have two sets of readers so that all class members will read the same story in class. The sets are from the two lowest levels, AA and A. For the first reading the instructor reads aloud as students follow in the reader. In the next class students read silently for 10 minutes and then ask each other simple questions about the content. They also practice listening to a recording while reading the second book. This in class reading time provides an opportunity to explicitly demonstrate strategies to be employed in future reading outside the classroom. In addition to the class readers, in 2011 students in the lower level class were afforded 10 minutes at the start of each lesson to read silently from the book they were currently reading outside of class. This proved to be successful as it demonstrated the importance the instructor places on reading by providing time in their busy schedule to read. By matching that 10 minutes with outside reading nearly all students easily met the requirement of 100,000 words.

After hearing a presentation by Jason Cox of Shujitsu University about discussion activities in his ER classes, our students were provided with his handout. It consists of a simple explanation of dramatic structure explaining what to expect in the opening of a work of fiction, how various crises affect the characters while creating tension until a climax is reached and how there is a resolution at the end of a story. Understanding these story constructs will help the student reader to more easily comprehend what is taking place while reading. This handout also includes helpful guides for discussing the story in basic terms so that classmates can better share their reading experiences and build a community of readers who discuss with and recommend books to each other both in and outside of class. In addition there are many gambits provided to help students introduce their thoughts on characters, plot, genre, etc. This is an improvement over preciously used material with the same goals.

From 2006 until the present our program/students has had the opportunity to take part in the Extensive Reading Foundation Language Learner Literature Awards evaluation process (20). In doing so we receive two copies of finalist books in categories such as Young Learners and both Young Learners & Adult Elementary and Intermediate levels. This adds roughly a dozen new titles each year that I circulate among students over a 2–3 month period. All students who have read any of these books then join in the CALL room to go online and give their opinions about the books they read. Later in the year the winners are decided based on the student/teacher feedback from participating schools, and of course we continue to circulate the books for future reading. The act of being part of a process that includes participants from schools across the

country and around the world shows the student that she is also part of a larger community of readers. In another step toward student recognition that individual students can be part of a larger community, three students served as interns at the Fourth Annual ER in Japan Seminar in February 2011.

Once the program took hold a number of research studies were conducted on the effectiveness of ER at Chugoku Junior College. The first, *Extensive Reading: Can Its Impact Be Measured?* examined pre and posttest scores of 24 first-year students using the SRA Starting Level Guide for Mark II Reading Laboratory 2b Test to measure improvement in reading comprehension. All had read at least 500 pages in English and all but two showed significant improvement ＜p＝.0038＞(21). Another study compared our students with those at another junior college who received basically the same treatment in their Oral Communication classes but were not exposed to ER. In this study the EPER Placement and Progress Test A was used for pre and posttests. The pretest showed no significant difference between the two groups. The posttest results showed that all but 8 of the 37 Chugoku JC students had advanced; 14 by one level, 9 by two levels and 6 by three levels. Analysis showed that there was a 99％ probability that this marked increase was due to ER (22).

Since target goal requirements are now measured in words, in the 2010 Fall semester a comparison of reading speed (words per minute) was conducted based on a pre and posttest administered at the start and end of the second semester. This information was analyzed in conjunction with the total number of words read to determine if there was a significant correlation between the amount read and increases in reading speed. Results indicated gain scores up as were the total number of words read in the time allocated with a significant difference between pre and posttests. There was no significant difference between first and second-year students in the pretest. In the posttest both groups improved but the second-year students were responsible for the statistically significant gains. This demonstrates the effectiveness of reading in volume as those students had already been exposed to three semesters of ER treatment. The actual gain for first-year participants was 25.5 wpm and for second-year participants 42.1 wpm (23).

In any discussion of the ER program the coopera-tion of the library staff cannot be overstated as this program has added to their workload and they have responded with enthusiasm to the inclusion of an ER section to the library. When students check out any graded reader there is an additional list for each Oral English class at the librarian's desk and students are required to enter information similar to that in their ongoing personal log. This allows activity to be monitored for all classes and to see that students are reading at a good pace and returning books in a timely manner so they are available for others to read. It also indicates which books are popular. The library staff has been very efficient in collecting data on all graded readers checked out each year and provides a printout of this information which includes the names of the students who have used them. This data aids in selecting the types of readers for the next round of book ordering and which books should have multiple copies based on the number of times they have been checked out.

In closing, the success of a program is not only measured by statistical gains and the number of books read while a student. It is also demonstrated by the fact that graduates continue to borrow books from my office and by student comments on ER. I think it appropriate to end this narrative with a sampling of student voices.

"I have read book in English three times a week. Of course, I want to read more times."

"It changed my reading speed. Now I can read little faster."

"Time I used a dictionary decreased."

"I understand word's meaning and contents and long sentence contents."

"Yes. I learned that I can read in English faster than before, so I would like to continue reading in English more and more."

"I can imagine how the vocabulary means. And I can study English as I enjoy reading."

"It was hard to read books every week. But I think my speed reading skill had increased and I liked to read in English."

"It was hard. But it was worth it to improve my command of English."

"I was bale to learn vocabulary and grammar at the same time with interesting stories from reading homework. It was a little hard for me, but it's a good way to study English."

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