

Method and Practice of Extensive Reading: A Case Study at Hirosaki University

英語多読の方法と実践：弘前大学における試み

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Abstract

This article looks at the method and practice of the extensive reading program at Hirosaki University. Extensive reading methods and practices have been developed in foreign countries since the 1980s. Extensive reading has been said to enhance the learner's reading ability dramatically, especially in reading speed and reading comprehension. As teachers of English as a foreign language, we have explored the best methods of extensive reading suitable for students at Hirosaki University, and have pursued this in the classroom and in self-select reading.

Keywords: extensive reading, graded readers, reading speed, reading fluency, reading portfolio, pleasure reading, learner autonomy

1. Introduction

In 1998, "English Practice" was introduced as a centerpiece of the curriculum reform in the Faculty of Humanities at Hirosaki University. "English Practice A" emphasizes oral communication, whereas "English Practice B" concentrates on reading comprehension. Extensive reading was introduced first in the "English Practice B" Level 1 class, using reading materials like the Graded Readers: mainly the Oxford Bookworm Black Series. Attempting this in the university classroom seemed to be ambitious, as the method of extensive reading was not familiar to English teachers in Japan at that time. In 2001, a SSS (Start with Simple Stories) Extensive Reading Study Group was established in order to improve the learner's English reading ability. The SSS Method is well known to English learners in Japan as "One Million Words Extensive Reading Approach."

At first, three teachers (Susumu Onodera, Norikazu Sato and Nobuo Sugawara) held three classes for a total of about 100 students. We had to grope our way in the early extensive reading classes. Twelve years have passed, and the number of the teachers has dropped to one. We can now offer just one class, though many students are eager to improve their English reading ability.

Tadoku & Tacho Magazine has been issued since 2006, and books on teaching approaches to extensive reading began to appear in 2010: Akio Furukawa, *Eigo Tadoku Hou*; Atsuko Takase, *Eigo Tadoku & Tacho Shidou Manual*. This means that extensive reading has been gradually recognized

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as being an effective way to learn English and that many Japanese English teachers have begun to show an interest in it.

This article will look at the methods and practice of extensive reading teaching and learning at Hirosaki University, and will examine the further challenges for those concerned with improving students' English reading abilities.

2. Purposes and Methods of Extensive Reading: An Overview

2.1 The EPER (Edinburgh Project on Extensive Reading) Method

The forerunner of extensive reading was the EPER directed by David Hill at Edinburgh University. This method was established in 1981. At first Hill faced difficulties in getting his extensive reading ideas accepted. It took 10 years for him to win teachers' cooperation (Hill 1997a).

The purpose of the project is to raise the level of "students' general proficiency in English, and their reading level in particular" (Hill 1997a: 1). Students read mainly graded readers, and move toward books, magazines, and journals written for native speakers of their same age group. Tests are undertaken to determine initial starting levels and to measure progress. The reading course itself consists of two parts: *library reading* in which students borrow books from a library to read on their own and ensure sufficient quantity of reading and *class reading* in which all the students read the same title with the help of the teacher in order to ensure quality of reading (Hill 1992; 1997a).

This method features twin approaches: a combination of library reading and class reading. It means that students have both sufficient reading quantity and quality.

2.2 The Method at the University of Hawaii

Richard R. Day (University of Hawaii) and Julian Bamford (Bunkyo University) looked closely into the EPER method, and devised a better method of their own (Day & Bamford 1998). They boiled their approach down to ten principles called the "Top Ten Principles for Teaching Extensive Reading," which was inspired by Ray Williams' top ten principles for teaching foreign language reading. The principles are as follows (Day 2002: 136–140):

1. *The reading material is easy:*

"In helping beginning readers select texts that are well within their reading comfort zone, more than one or two unknown words per page might make the text too difficult for overall understanding." . . . "to accustom students to real-world reading, real-world texts should be used for extensive reading."

2. *A variety of reading material on a wide range of topics must be available:*

"The success of extensive reading depends largely on enticing students to read. To awaken or encourage a desire to read, the texts made available should ideally be as varied as the learners who read them and the purposes for which they want to read. Books, magazines, newspapers, fiction, non-fiction texts that inform, texts that entertain, general, specialized, light, serious."

3. *Learners choose what they want to read:*

Learners "can choose texts they expect to understand, to enjoy or to learn from." Besides, learners are "free, indeed encouraged, to stop reading anything they find to be too difficult, or that turns out not to be of interest."

4. *Learners read as much as possible:*

“The most critical element in learning to read is the amount of time spent actually reading.” ...“There is no upper limit to the amount of reading that can be done, but a book a week is probably the minimum amount of reading necessary to achieve the benefits of extensive reading and to establish a reading habit.”

5. *The purpose of reading is usually related to pleasure, information and general understanding:*

“In extensive reading, the learner’s goal is sufficient understanding to fulfill a particular reading purpose, for example, the obtaining of information, the enjoyment of a story, or the passing of time.”

6. *Reading is its own reward:*

Extensive reading “is not usually followed by comprehension questions. It is an experience complete in itself.”...“At the same time, teachers may ask students to complete follow-up activities based on their reading.”

7. *Reading speed is usually faster rather than slower:*

“When learners are reading material that is well within their linguistic ability, for personal interest, and for general rather than academic purposes, it is an incentive to reading fluency.”

8. *Reading is individual and silent:*

Silent, individual extensive reading “allows students to discover that reading is a personal interaction with the text, and an experience that they have responsibility for.”

9. *Teachers orient and guide their students:*

“Orientation is the first step. Guidance throughout the extensive reading experience is also needed, in light of the independence and choice extensive reading allows learners. Teachers can keep track of what and how much each student reads, and their students’ reactions to what was read.”

10. *The teacher is a role model of a reader:*

“[E]ffective extensive reading teachers are themselves readers, teaching *by example* the attitudes and behaviors of a reader.”

The top ten principles are learner-oriented, so students are not required to take comprehension questions: teachers orient and students read for pleasure.

2.3 The SSS Method of Extensive Reading in Japan

The method was first introduced by Sakai Kunihide at the University of Electro-Communications in the late 1990s. He practiced a new method of extensive reading for junior- and high-school students. He also established the SSS with three other members to further spread their method amongst English learners. In this method, “learners start with picture books with a few words on a page. Many learners who start with simple stories can read a large number of books without difficulty, and they can reach the goal of reading one million words in six months to two years” (Furukawa 2006: 1). This method is therefore often referred to as the “One Million Words Extensive Reading Approach,” or “Hyakumango Tadoku.” The three golden rules for extensive reading are as follows (Furukawa 2006: 2):

- 1) No dictionary while reading

- 2) Skip over difficult words
- 3) Stop reading when it is boring or too difficult

The point is, students read easy to understand books without a dictionary, don't need to understand the book as a whole, and choose books suited to their own interests. Three features of the SSS method are as follows (Furukawa 2006: 2–4):

1. "Start with simple stories and gradually increase the level, length, and difficulty of the books using various titles from Leveled Readers (LR), Graded Readers (GR), books for children and young adults, picture books and manga. Read books not only at home, but also in the classroom."
2. "As an instructor, teachers try to read as many very easy books as possible." ... "The key to the success of the extensive reading program is to build confidence and not to pressure the students."
3. "Make a plan to implement the ER program at your school. It is especially important to decide how many hours you can allot for ER and from what grade you can start."

The difference between the Hawaii method and that of EPER is the extent to which the teacher plays a role in the reading practice of students: a teacher in the latter gives students comprehension tests to guarantee both reading quantity and quality, while a teacher in the former encourages students to do pleasure readings. The SSS method, on the other hand, focuses on a self-select learning system.

Following those methods, we have explored the method of extensive reading most suitable for the students at Hirosaki University.

3. The Method and Practice at Hirosaki University

3.1 Self-selection: learner autonomy

In the self-selection approach, each student chooses reading material suitable for his/her level, read it within a certain period of time, and return it. The student keeps a record of his/her reading in a reading portfolio or something similar. Students take part in this reading program every year. 94 students have joined between 2005 and 2010.

The general procedure for self-selection reading is simple:

1. Students select reading materials that they think they can read easily.
2. Students write the names of the books they read and add the date on which they start reading them in their Reading Portfolios.
3. Students read reading materials in the library or at home.
4. Students return them within two weeks (ideally a week) and write the number of words they read.

I have worked out a self-selection reading program, beginning in 2005. The materials are mainly Graded Readers (GR) such as the Oxford Bookworm Black Series, Penguin Readers, and Macmillan Readers. I also keep a large number of paperbacks in my office for advanced readers.

Several books at different levels (1~6) are kept in stock, so that a flexible and diversified reading environment is preserved for students.

As for learner autonomy, however, it is hard for students to pursue systematic reading activities because of the total reliance on voluntariness. Some students return Readers within the period and borrow other ones. Some students forget to return them even after a year. As I believe extensive reading should be for pleasure, I avoid a strict enforcement of the rules. All I try to do is to let the students believe English is easy and reading is pleasurable. I always try to advise them about choosing what they read and taking advantage of the materials in my office.

3.2 In-class reading

There are two approaches to extensive reading in the classroom: self-selected reading and reading the same title.

1) Self-selected reading

Students choose what they want to read and read these materials in the classroom (silent reading). The classroom is calm and a beautiful reading scene of the students is there. The teacher simply observes students reading in the classroom. Students read as many readers as possible and write down the names of the books, the number of words they read and their impressions in their portfolios.

2) Reading the same title

Each student reads the same reader in advance at home or in the library. In the classroom, the teacher plays a central role and urges students to perform reading activities¹⁾. The following activities can be used:

1. Students summarize the story
2. Students answer comprehension questions attached to the back of Readers
3. A teacher makes original active questions and students answer them.
4. Interactive communication between a teacher and students

The teacher eventually has to grade and decide whether or not to give credit to students. For this reason, self-select reading may be more appropriate for a homeroom in junior-high school or high school rather than for a college classroom.

In the readings of the same title approach, the decision of what activities to use depends on the teacher. In addition, pleasure reading is important for students. At Hirosaki University, students write down a short summary (3 or 4 lines) and fill in a questionnaire like 'which character do you like best?' in advance at home. In the classroom they consider questions like 'what will the hero be doing 20 years later after the story's end?' and other questions that stimulate creative thinking. These are conducted through interactive communication in order to urge students to join energetically in the class.

4. Results of Extensive Reading

After finishing the reading program in the classroom, students find themselves improving in reading ability, and they become better motivated to read further English reading materials.

Motivated students such as these often join my self-select reading program.

Students, who begin in my reading program, go on reading. They aim to raise their reading levels: from level 3 to level 4 or from level 6 to paperbacks, etc.

As no test for checking students' reading ability is administered to students in either self-select reading or classroom reading, I am not sure how much their reading ability improves. Our purpose is to increase confidence in their English reading ability, to build up their motivation, and to raise their reading fluency.

Krashen (1993) expresses the effects of English reading:

Reading is good for you. The research supports a stronger conclusion, however: Reading is the only way, the only way we become good readers, develop a good writing style, an adequate vocabulary, advanced grammar, and the only way we become good spellers. (23)

Bell (2001) conducted a study of speed and comprehension in extensive reading in the Yemen Arab Republic on young adult students and collected substantial objective data: as for reading speed, students of intensive reading gained only +14.08 wpm (words per minute), while those of extensive reading, in contrast, gained +59.43 wpm; as for reading comprehension, students of intensive reading gained +11.36%, while those of extensive reading, in contrast, gained +33.72% (3–6). The outcomes of extensive reading were more effective in reading speed and reading comprehension than in the intensive approach. Bell's study was for students learning English as a foreign language, like those in Japan. Therefore, the data on extensive reading in his study are relevant for Japanese students as well.

5. Reading Materials

In an extensive reading program, Leveled Readers (LR) and Graded Readers (GR) are good for learners. LR is written for native English speaking children and GR for those learning English as a second language.

Leveled Readers	Graded Readers
Oxford Reading Tree	Oxford Bookworms Black Series
Longman Literacy Land Story Street	Penguin Readers
I Can Read Books	Macmillan Readers
Usborne Young Reading	Cambridge English Readers
Springboard	Scholastic ELT Readers
	Password Readers
	Oxford Dominos
	Foundations Reading Library

LR is best for students at lower levels like those in junior high school, while GR works well for students at a higher level like those in university or college. Hill (1997b) notes that graded readers are "greatly prized by foreign teachers and learners of English" (57). The EPER regards GR as "[b]ooks most suitable for secondary-aged and adult students" (Day & Bamford 1998: Appendix).

There are many GR books in my office for students in the extensive reading program: Oxford Bookworm Black series (level starter ~6); Penguin Readers (level starter ~6); Macmillan Readers (level starter ~6). Each title has more than one book, thus enabling students to read the readers they want. Usually, students start at level 2 and then move up one level each ensuing semester. They reach one million words two and half years later.

In classroom extensive reading, students read a reader of the Oxford Bookworm Black series each week. They therefore read 14 readers over the course of a semester: usually starting at level 3 and finishing at level 4, though sometimes starting at level 3 and finishing at level 5.

6. Management of the materials

There are three types of management at a college or a university:

1) Library

A college or university library often plays a role in managing the readers: a library can stock readers at all times and students can access them at any time and at their convenience. Management in a library, however, has its demerits: a librarian cannot serve as an advisor of extensive reading and students have to manage their reading portfolios on their own.

2) Instructor's office

The instructor's office is a good place to give students advice about extensive reading and to manage their portfolios and readers. But it has the limitation of space which makes it difficult to keep a large amount of readers on the shelves. Moreover, access is restricted: it is inconvenient for students to borrow readers because of the frequent absence of the instructor from their office for business, on weekends or holidays.

3) Self-Access Language Center

A Self-access Language Center is an ideal place for students: it is easy for them to access it at their convenience; it can keep lots of reading materials in stock; an advisor is there all the time and gives students advice about extensive reading.

It is difficult to manage reading materials at a college or a university. For this reason, a language center and a reading specialist are needed, so that students can have access at all times.

7. Reading Portfolio

When students start an extensive reading program, they are required to keep track of how much they are reading. A Reading Portfolio or Reading Record is especially useful for these students. Students write their names at the top, and note down what they read, the starting and finishing dates, the number of words they read and some short comments. The reading portfolio gives students confidence and then makes it easy for them to set numerical targets of reading words such as aiming at one million words or reading one hundred thousand words a month. With this record, the teacher is able to grasp the student's reading activity. Students are free to design their own portfolio, although the following should be included:

1. Titles of the reading materials
2. Book level: for example, Oxford Reading Tree Level 1 can be written as ORT L1.
3. The number of words they read
4. Starting and finishing dates
5. Reading impression: was it funny or helpful? If they have to write down the summary, it may cause obstruction to reading because of the time and effort involved. Lessening the workload is the key for students to keep up their reading activities.

8. Assessment

There are three ways to evaluate improvements in students' reading ability:

- 1) Reading Portfolio or Reading Record to check students' reading history
- 2) Reading activities
- 3) Tests and questionnaires

No assessment is good for pleasure reading. A teacher, however, is required to evaluate students' English reading ability or improvement. If students need to get credit for their extensive reading, the teacher will have to take into consideration their reading activities and/or how many words they read. Comprehension tests should be studiously avoided.

9. Conclusion

I looked into a number of approaches to extensive reading, and found the one most suitable for students at Hirosaki University. In the classroom, I have used a modified method, a mixture of the EPER method and the Hawaii method. Students have shown improved reading speed, better comprehension, and also enhanced writing ability! In this article, extensive reading was shown to be effective in the improvement of reading ability. However, further challenges remain: 1) to increase the number of teachers undertaking the teaching of extensive reading and 2) to establish a Self Access Language Center for Learner Autonomy. If these challenges can be met, student competence in English at Hirosaki University will be significantly improved.

Notes

- 1) As for building classroom activities, I made extensive use of Julian Bamford & Richard Day (2004). I greatly appreciate Prof. Day's advice about these activities during our interview (Day 2010).

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