

# The Development and Implementation Of An Extensive Reading Program

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Reading is one of the four main language skills along with speaking, listening, and writing. Reading for specific details or intensive reading has been the prevailing method for teaching reading in numerous second and foreign language classrooms. However, for too long and in too many classrooms this approach, when used exclusively, has contributed to many students quickly losing focus or giving up in frustration. This is because material is at times uninteresting, and for some the content is inaccessible due to a mismatch between the student and textbook level. Intensive reading undeniably has its merits, but there are those in the field of reading education who feel that extensive reading, which promotes reading for enjoyment and personal interest is of more overall benefit to the student. Drawing inspiration from programs at other institutions, an extensive reading program was developed and implemented at Jin-ai University. This report outlines the background of extensive reading, the development and implementation of the program at Jin-ai, and a look toward improvement and expansion of the program.

*Keywords: extensive reading, reading skills, program development*

## Introduction

The impetus for establishing an extensive reading program came initially from the students' results on the CASEC (Computerized Assessment System for English Communication) test that the university uses for placement purposes and the TOEIC (Test of English for International Communication). Students, across a wide range of scores, consistently scored lower on the reading portions of both tests. In casual conversations following the tests, students would often remark that they had problems during the reading portions. Comments would vary, for example, from not knowing a lot of the words, having difficulties understanding the overall meaning, and not having enough time to finish because they could not read quickly enough.

The textbooks used for first-year and second-year general English include reading sections in each unit, the focus is on reading for detail or intensive reading. Reading

for detail is important, but within the confines of a course textbook students may not be exposed to a wide enough range of vocabulary. Similarly, doing readings from a test preparation book may help for that specific test, but it is unlikely to cover the same amount of vocabulary that would be encountered when reading from a variety of different sources and genres. Also, it is with a good degree of certainty from personal experience that the readings from such study guides are often not very enjoyable to read.

The fundamental belief behind extensive reading is that regardless of whether it is one's first or second language, we learn to read by reading. The more we read, the more proficient readers we become. With this fundamental belief in mind, an extensive reading program was developed and implemented in the 2014-15 academic year. This report outlines some basic principles of extensive reading. These principles helped to guide the creation of this program. The report concludes with a look at some challenges with the

program and the program's ongoing development.

## What is Extensive Reading?

Extensive reading is not just simply reading for the sake of reading. Julian Bamford and Richard Day (Bamford & Day, 2004) outline ten principles for extensive reading (see Appendix A). Among these principles, numbers 1 and 3 were given particular emphasis in the development of the program at Jin-ai. The first principle states first and foremost that the reading material must be easy and accessible to the reader. Being accessible refers to how the material relates to the student and her or his interests. For example, many can attest to the frustration of trying to read and comprehend the usual terms and service agreements that accompany our favorite products and electronic devices. Legal jargon is simply not accessible or interesting to the average layperson. Students need material they can relate to and that they have a general interest in. Equally important, the material must be level appropriate. According to Bamford and Day (2004), "There should be no more than one or two unknown vocabulary items per page for beginners and no more than four or five for intermediate learners" (p. 2). The third principle states that learners choose what they want to read. Students are not typically given a choice of what they read. Students are often instructed to read whatever is in their textbook. Allowing students to choose their own material presents them with the opportunity to explore a genre or topic they really enjoy. There is also the inherent motivation of being able to make one's own choice. Within this principle is the understanding that a student is always free to stop reading anything that he or she finds uninteresting or too difficult. It was the principles from Bamford and Day (2004), especially providing accessible and easy material, and the freedom to choose one's own material that the program got started.

## Program outline

Prior to launching the program, the author attended an international conference on extensive reading and attended several seminars within Japan. The information and

material from the conference and seminars helped guide the development of the initial program. From the start, the primary goal of the extensive reading program was to instill a habit of reading in English for one's enjoyment and general interest.

How much should my students read? This was the question most often asked at many of the extensive reading seminars and presentations. There is no unified answer. Many practitioners advocate calculation by word count. Other practitioners prefer counting by pages or by books. Balance between the ambitiousness to push the students and the reality of having students with wide ranging levels, both academic and motivational, led the author to choose an attainable goal of one book every three weeks. The author went with a book count because this was simply the easiest method to use. Also, graded readers in the university's library are from many different publishers. Some publishers include a word count and other publishers do not. This amount of one book every three weeks is below other recommended goals. However, the author felt it would be better to start off modestly and make increases at a later time. In addition, with three classes participating in the program, the author did not want to be overly ambitious and therefore end up not being able to properly guide and assist the students. Why not limit the program to one class? The author contemplated this and in the end decided to keep with a prevailing policy of offering the same class structure to all sections of the same class, e.g., all English I classes would have the same course outline. So, the author decided to start the program in all first-year English classes.

There are many in the extensive reading community who advocate a complete absence of any assignments, evaluations, and or homework. The prevailing belief is that extensive reading should only be reading extensively. As numerous instructors will attest, not all students follow the honor system of faithfully doing their assignments or completing their homework unchecked. In an effort to keep the students honest, but also make it as easy as possible for the student to show he or she had read their assigned book a simple report sheet was created.

## The First Year

In the first year of the program only first-year students were required to participate in the extensive reading program. However, as mentioned, even before starting the program there was the important question of how much reading was to be expected of the students. A four-year study of Japanese university students by Nishizawa, Yoshioka, & Fukada (2010) concluded that 300,000 words was the approximate threshold for readers to move from readers who must rely primarily on translation to those who can read competently without an overreliance on translation. Another program at Tohoku University (Eichhorst, & Shearon, 2013) suggests that 100,000 words per fifteen-week semester is the minimal amount needed to see significant gains in reading ability. Five books over a fifteen-week semester were not going to meet either goal. Using the word count data from three major graded reader publishers the average word count among graded readers that fall within the starter to level 2 readers is approximately 4,800 words per book. Immediately one sees that this results in an approximate word total of 24,000 words a semester, only a quarter of what some of the current research recommends. So, why set such a low goal? Again, the initial purpose of the program was to instill the importance of reading for enjoyment in a second language. In informal class interviews none of the students indicated that they read for enjoyment in English. The author decided that it was best to begin with an absolutely attainable objective.

Achievability, at least initially, has to be given priority over ambitiousness. Achievability helps to increase student willingness to participate in the new program as well as reduce the potential anxiety that comes with having to do something new in a foreign language. With respect to word count, books at higher levels naturally have higher word counts, but choosing or assigning higher-level books was not a realistic option because of the present reading ability of most of the students. A large proportion of the students were classified as low-level readers based on their exams

scores and in-class evaluations. Initially all students in the program were asked to select a reader from the starter-level for her or his first book. This was done to make sure that a student did not choose a book that was too far above their level. After the first starter-level book, the students were free to choose any level with the explicit instructions that they could switch to an easier or more difficult level at any time. They could also switch to a new book if they did not find the current book interesting for them. If the goal had been more ambitious, the risk of decreased motivation and affect would have been a distinct possibility. The worst-case scenario would have resulted in outright refusal by some students to read the books and complete the reports.

### Initial Student reaction

There were no overt complaints during the first year of the program. In fact, on several course evaluation forms students wrote that they actually enjoyed reading English books. Although, there were a few students who wrote that reading books in English was difficult. As for completing and handing in reports, the completion rate for all five reports per semester was over 93%. Only five students failed to hand in all of their reports among three classes totaling 61 students.

### The First Year: Final Thoughts

Almost all of the students fulfilled the requirements of the program. However, there were a few realizations from the first year. One, the goal of five books a semester was not ambitious enough, the students were capable of reading more. Additionally, the author wanted to give 1:1 feedback for most of the reports. This was just too time consuming and it ended up taking away from other classwork. Concerning the reports, the author began to notice that some reports were too similar and other reports that had rather odd writing styles. These occurrences pointed to the likelihood of copying and the use of machine or translation software. These were two areas of concern that would have to be addressed in the coming year. Thankfully though, there were no other significant issues or complaints about

the program. On the contrary, the feedback from the students was largely positive.

## The Second Year

The sentiment of acceptance in the first year has continued into the second year of the program, which has been expanded to include all of the author's general English classes. One of the classes is a second-year optional English class that the author inherited from the beginning of the second semester (2015-2016 academic year). The students were required by their former instructor to write weekly journal entries. When the author took over, the students had the choice of whether to continue doing the journal entries or to switch to the extensive reading program. The majority of the students chose to switch to the reading program. Presently, there are five classes (91 students) participating in the extensive reading program.

## Making the Program More Extensive

Beginning in the second year, the amount of reports was increased from five to eight per semester. This works out to roughly one report every two weeks. So, using the same formula by taking the average word count among the starter to level 2 books from three major graded reader publishers the current program's goal is approximately 40,000 words per semester. This is still well below other suggested targets. It needs to be reiterated that the students in these general English classes are low-level to middle-level with respect to English proficiency. This assessment is based on the results from both the institution-wide (CASEC) placement test that all first-year and second-year students take as well the results from many of the same students' TOEIC tests. While there are some very encouraging test scores there is still a significant issue concerning reading ability. The TOEIC is split between listening and reading with each part carrying the same maximum point total of 495. Over the past three years this institution has been offering the TOEIC IP (Institutional Placement) test. Over these three years there has been an overall rise in scores. However, one thing has remained constant. Regardless of the score, the

overwhelming majority of students perform better on the listening portion of the TOEIC. When talking with students after taking the TOEIC IP many often comment that they were unable to finish the reading portion of the test. They say things like, "I didn't have enough time" and "There were many words that I didn't understand".

It is these results and comments that prompted the author to look at ways to improve the students' reading ability. This is what originally led the author toward extensive reading. That being said, a desired goal of this program is not higher test scores per se, but more proficient and confident readers. A higher test score is merely a welcomed positive by-product of a successful extensive reading program. It is the author's assertion that improved reading ability will aid in the students doing better in all aspects of language learning, not just semi-annual tests.

## Issues Moving Forward

The main issue that must be dealt with is how to further increase the amount students read. Some may advocate simply assigning more reading. The problem with this approach is that although extensive reading is supposed to be read, read, read, there is no practical way to confirm that the students are in fact reading the amount they have been asked to read. Currently, the students must submit a short report for each book they read. This sounds simple enough, but, as mentioned, there have been issues with this approach. One is copying. Students may simply copy each other's reports. So far this has fortunately not occurred very often. When it has, it has been dealt with accordingly. An issue that has occurred more often is that some students have used translation software to do their reports. This is quite easy to spot when knowing what to look for. Machine translated reports inevitably contain multiple pronoun errors that even low-level students would not make. For example, students must write a simple summary of the book in their reports. In a machine-translated summary it is quite often that all characters are repeatedly referred to in the first person, e.g., "I (not Gulliver) went to the island of Lilliput." This calls into question whether the book was

read or not. When the author noticed the growing use of translation software, he addressed each class. The author provided real examples of how such software is unable to properly translate longer texts, like book summaries. This is especially true of fictional works containing substantial emotive and abstract context.

Lastly, in the first year, in an effort to be as flexible as possible regarding the book reports, the author allowed students to hand in their reports up until the Friday of the week the report was due. While this may have been convenient for some of the students, it was not convenient for the author. It was decided in the second semester of the second year to have all reports handed in at the beginning of class, no exceptions. At the time of writing this report, for the majority of students this new deadline has not been a problem. However, for a few students this policy seems to have led to them being absent on days when their reports are due. So, it seems, for a select group of students, further consideration is required to see that students are not sacrificing class attendance because they have not finished their reports.

## What Is Next?

The primary goal is the same: To instill an environment where reading English language books is viewed as an enjoyable and worthwhile activity. Some students, based on their class evaluations and informal comments, seem to already view the extensive reading program this way. Yet, a similar amount of students, based on the same sources, still view the extensive reading program as homework or just something that needs to be done.

So where does the program go from here? It is the author's belief that the attitude of most students will improve or become more amicable as the task of reading becomes easier. This task will become easier the more the students read. This is a kind of catch-22 situation. Students need to read a lot to improve and have reading become easier and more enjoyable, but in order to do this students have to get through the stages of reading development that are slow-going and not enjoyable. There are some options.

One is to increase the amount of time in class for the students to read. In the first year of the program very little class time was allocated for reading. This has changed in the second year. Presently, although the amount of time varies between fifteen and twenty minutes, there is time allotted for reading in almost every class, excluding test periods and periods dedicated to online study. One problem has been that some students, despite being told numerous times, forget to bring their readers to class. These students are left reading from the reading section of the textbook. While this is beneficial to the extent that the student is reading something, it is not extensive reading. The instructor could bring a selection of graded readers to class, but this places the onus on the instructor when it should be on the student to bring her or his required materials to class. The best solution is to begin each semester by outlining exactly what is expected of the students and putting these expectations in a written bilingual document and then having the students sign the document. Students are more likely to fulfill the program requirements from the beginning when there is no ambiguity concerning what is expected of them. Up until now the students have been given written information to copy off the whiteboard – this information has been in English with a verbal Japanese explanation. Another option is to have lower-level students choose from shorter more accessible readings.

Instructors should always bear in mind that programs such as this one are best conducted as a marathon and not a sprint. So for the next year the author plans to:

- 1) Provide a detailed outline stating clearly what students are responsible for.
- 2) Increase the amount the students need to read by (a) increasing reading time in class and (b) reducing the amount of written reports. Progress will instead be monitored by conducting short verbal interviews with students at random.
- 3) Have students interview each other. This will allow the author to listen in and determine which students may or may not be doing the required amount of reading. Also, this will give students more chances to speak in English,

hopefully about books they have enjoyed.

Extensive reading alone is no guarantee of success, but the author believes that it presents the most promise toward making substantial gains in vocabulary, grammar, and overall reading ability.

## References

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## 要 約

リーディングはスピーキング, リスニング, ライティングと共に4つの主要な言語スキルの一つである。また, 細部にわたる読み, 精読は, 第二言語や外国語指導においてよく行われてきた手法である。しかし, この手法は長年, 多くのクラスで行われているにもかかわらず, 多くの学生はリーディングに集中できなかったり, 途中で投げ出してしまったりしていることが多いと思われる。その原因としては, 読み物が学生にとってつまらない内容であったり, 学生の習熟度と教科書のレベルが合わず, 内容が難しすぎであったりすることが考えられる。読みの指導において, 従来の精読等の指導の利点について異論をはさむべくはないが, 一方で, 楽しく, 個人の関心に基づいた読み物を数多く読むことにより, 結果としてより多くの利益を生徒にもたらすであろう多読を支持する向きがあることも事実である。そこで, 仁愛大学では, 他の研究機関で行われた多読プログラムを研究し, 多読プログラムを開発, 実施した。ここでは, 多読についてと, 本学で行った多読法の開発と実施, および改善と推進に向けた今後の課題について述べる。

## Appendices

### Appendix A. Bamford and Day: The 10 Principles of Extensive Reading

1. The reading material is easy
2. A variety of reading material on a wide range of topics is available
3. Learners choose what they want to read
4. Learners read as much as possible
5. Reading speed is usually faster than slower
6. The purpose of reading is usually related to pleasure, information, and general understanding
7. Reading is individual and silent
8. Reading is its own reward
9. The teacher orients and guides the students
10. The teacher is a role model of a reader

Bamford & Day, 2004