

Using a Systematic Extensive Reading Program

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Extensive reading is used in many reading programs either as a stand-alone course or as a component of a comprehensive reading course. Extensive reading, along with content-area reading, is widely believed to promote the development of top-down reading skills (Silberstein, 1994). How each teacher or institution defines extensive reading can vary widely. One issue pertains to the definition of "extensive" itself. Susser and Robb (1990) include in their survey of the literature on extensive reading definitions of "extensive" that range from an hour per evening to 60 books per year. A second issue under debate is whether materials should be graded/simplified, or not (Susser & Robb, 1990; Dubuy, Tse, & Cook, 1996). Nevertheless, the goal of extensive reading generally involves having students read in quantity for global comprehension and pleasure, while intensive, skill-based reading focuses primarily on decoding the linguistic input from the text. For the purposes of this paper, then, we are defining extensive reading as having the following features: 1) reading materials at or near students' current proficiency level; 2) one graded reader per week; 3) reading for general comprehension and enjoyment.

Second-year English majors at Hokusei Gakuen University (HGU), Sapporo, Japan take a general reading course, English II, as one of their required courses. This course, taught by native English speakers, is taught as a content-area American Studies course and is modeled after the simulated university course described in Jensen (1986). This type of course is designed to simulate the type of course

students might find at a university abroad. That is, they are required to do an extensive amount of reading, participate in discussions, take lecture notes, and think and write critically. The course described by Jensen consists of three components: a core (content-area) component, a rate building (reading speed) component and an extensive reading component. Due to time restrictions, the English II course at HGU consists of the American Studies core component and an extensive reading component.

As a reading course, the primary goal of English II is to foster top-down reading skills. Top-down processing strategies view a text as a source of information, as opposed to a code to be deciphered. The information gleaned from the text is systematically integrated with the reader's previously existing knowledge base, or schemata (Carrell & Eisterhold, 1987). The reader selects information from a text based on the linguistic input of words, sentences and grammar. The reader then uses his or her schemata to make predictions about the information in the text. Those predictions are then confirmed, rejected, or refined as he or she continues reading (Silberstein, 1994; Goodman in Eskey, 1986). Clarke and Silberstein (1987), in fact, describe the proficient reader as "an active, information-processing individual who uses a minimum number of clues to extract the author's message from the page." (p.233)

Most students in Japan have been exposed exclusively to bottom-up reading approaches, which focus primarily on decoding the linguistic cues of grammar and vocabulary rather than on the content of the text or the author's message. It is felt by the researcher that the lack of experience with top-down reading skills severely impedes students' ability to process, analyze and evaluate the content of reading material. For this reason, the English II reading course aims to develop students' top-down processing skills by exposing them to content-oriented, analytic reading strategies through both content-area and extensive reading practice.

As mentioned above, the English II reading course at HGU is intended to simulate an American university course. The course, therefore, includes a content-area focus, in this case American Studies using the text *America In Close-Up* (Lingual House, 1990). The content-area forms the core component of the course in the form of lectures and note-taking, reading in the content-area, class and group discussions, and essay exams. However, since we are primarily trying to raise students' general reading proficiency and top-down reading skills, we also include a supplementary extensive reading component. See Jensen (1986) for an excellent description of this type of university simulation course.

Originally, the extensive reading component of the course was arguably the weakest. The books used had been collected over many years by previous instructors and consisted primarily of juvenile, or adolescent, literature-books written for junior high school-age students. Needless to say, these were of little interest to our university students. The procedure for using these books was haphazard. There were no accompanying comprehension questions, no cataloging system, no control over reading level, and no system for checking out books. Books were often lost and probably even more often unread, for there was no way to check if students were actually reading the books. To create comprehension questions for each of the individual titles would have been an overwhelming task. However, over the past few years, the extensive reading component has become more organized and systematic, and this has had a positive effect on students' reading development.

In 1993, an article appeared in the *JALT Language Teacher* introducing EPER (the Edinburgh Project on Extensive Reading) Programme of Extensive Reading developed by the Institute for Applied Language Studies at the University of Edinburgh (Bamford, and Welch, 1993). The EPER program provides a number of services. These include a uniform system of grading books from

various publishers, a broad selection of books chosen for student interest, comprehension questions, pre-reading notes, teacher's guides, placement tests, packaging, and a *Guide to Organizing Programmes of Extensive Reading* (Hill, 1992).

The EPER program suggests one graded reader per week, and this is what we have more or less followed in the implementation of the extensive reading program. Furthermore, we feel that in order for students to read in quantity for general comprehension, it is necessary for the reading materials to be at an appropriate reading level. Dictionaries should be used minimally, if at all, in extensive reading. Finally, since extensive reading should be enjoyable, the reading materials chosen should be of interest to students. The easiest way to ensure this is to allow students to choose their own books from a broad selection. It was felt that this extensive reading program would work well within our own reading course, particularly since the haphazard way extensive reading had been handled up to that point was not producing the results we had hoped for.

After administering one of EPER's placement tests, a modified cloze test, to determine the reading levels of our students, we designed an extensive reading program suited to our students' reading levels and interests. At the same time, we decided to conduct an informal study of the effectiveness of extensive reading in general and the EPER program specifically.

The initial placement test indicated that 76% of our 136 students was evenly distributed across the general reading proficiency levels D and C, 45 and 58 students respectively. In addition, 24 students scored at the higher B level. Four students scored below the main group in levels E and F, while five others scored above the main group at levels A, X, and U (for unsimplified materials). The scale of reading levels and the results of the placement test are shown below in table 1 (numbers refer to the number of students scoring at each level). Based on these results, we opted to begin the program

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Table 1: Results of Initial Placement Test

Low										High
H	G	F	E	D	C	B	A	X	U	
0	0	1	3	45	58	24	3	1	1	

with two class readers at level D: in our case *Z for Zachariah* (Heinemann Guided Reader, Elementary Level) and *Ulster Story* (Longman Structural Readers, Stage 3). This starting level would accommodate virtually all students, even though it would be rather easy for a large number.

With class readers, all students in the class read the same title at the same time. Each class period is devoted to a very brief discussion of the story and ten general comprehension questions. The questions are designed so that students who have read the story should have little trouble answering them. They are not designed so that students have to study, memorize or analyze the story. They are aimed only at general comprehension and should not give the students the feeling of being tested.

It is to be hoped that, after reading two level D books together as a class, most students should be able to move up to at least level C books. Therefore, the remainder of the program allowed students to choose their own books from a broad selection of level C and B titles, depending on their individual reading levels. They were given one week to complete the book outside of class. At the end of one week, students at level C were given a card with a few general comprehension questions, which they answered and handed in during class. Students reading level B books were given a card with a number of short writing topics, which they also completed and handed in during class. This program continued in a class of 32 students for one semester, or approximately 14 weeks.

The Study

Two classes were chosen for the study, which ran during the 2nd semester, from September to December. Each class met once a week for 90 minutes. Class A used the EPER program for one semester as described above, in addition to the regular core component of readings from the textbook, lectures, and group and class discussions. Class C was chosen as the control group. Class C followed the same curriculum but did not use EPER. Instead, in order to ensure that both classes spent approximately the same amount of time on outside reading, class C was assigned extra reading assignments. These supplementary readings, consisting of unabridged short stories and magazine articles unrelated to the class content, were intentionally not controlled for reading level, and students were tested on detailed comprehension. Thus, the control group's outside reading material does not meet our requirements for extensive reading since it was generally above the students' current reading proficiency levels, they were reading for detailed, rather than general, comprehension, and the readings were significantly shorter than the extensive reading books. Although the supplementary readings were shorter, reading for detailed comprehension required students to spend a significant amount of time on the text.

At the beginning of the semester, both classes were given a pre-test to determine their initial reading proficiency level. At the end of one semester, the test was again administered to both groups. A Chi-square test was then performed to determine whether there was a significant relationship between the difference in reading level changes and completion of the extensive reading program.

Results

At the beginning of the semester, a modified cloze test, distributed by EPER, was administered to both classes. Although the control group had a starting distribution of scores slightly higher than that of the EPER group, both classes had an overall average adjusted score corresponding to reading level C. The distribution of pre-test reading levels is shown in Table 2. On the pre-test, class A had an average adjusted score of 37. Class C had an average adjusted score of 38. Both scores correspond to a general reading proficiency level of C.

At the end of the semester, both classes were given the same modified cloze test as a post-test. The distribution of post-test reading levels is shown in table 3. It can be noted that during the semester both classes A and C improved their average adjusted scores to 45 and 42, respectively. The EPER class, however, moved from an average pre-test score slightly lower than the control group to an average score that corresponds to a higher reading proficiency level.

While the change in the average performance of the two groups may be interesting, the more significant conclusions come from an analysis of the change in reading levels of individual students in the two classes. Table 4 shows that students in the EPER group made

Table 2: Pre-test Results

Class	E	D	C	B	A	X	U	Avg.	Total
A (EPER)	0	17	10	3	1	1	0	(37) C	32
C (control)	0	12	20	4	1	0	0	(38) C	37

Table 3: Post-test Results

Class	E	D	C	B	A	X	U	Avg.	Total
A (EPER)	0	2	16	9	4	0	1	(45) B	32
C (control)	1	4	19	11	2	0	0	(42) C	37

Table 4: Changes in Reading Levels

Level Change	A (EPER)	C (Control)
-1	1	2
No Change	7	18
+1	19	17
+2	5	0
Total	32	37

significantly greater gains in their reading levels. In class A, one student moved down 1 level, while 2 students in class C did so. Class C had 18 students who made no change, while the EPER group had 7. Both groups A and C had approximately the same number of students who moved up one level, 19 and 17 respectively. Only the EPER group had students who moved up 2 levels.

Finally, a Chi-square test was performed on the data in table 4 with the single variable being the extensive reading program. The results of the Chi-square test were ($\chi^2=9.97$, $df=3$, $p=.01878$, $N=69$) ($p<.05$). These results indicate a significant relationship between the change in students' reading levels and whether or not they completed the extensive reading program.

Discussion

The Chi-square test itself does not allow us to postulate a cause and effect relationship between the change in students' reading levels and the completion of the extensive reading program. The Chi-square test simply shows that there is a significant relationship between the occurrence of greater changes in reading levels and the extensive reading program. However, if we can make a strong enough claim that the only significant variable between the two classes was the extensive reading program, it seems reasonable to infer that a systematic extensive reading program of graded, high-interest materials may serve to raise students' general levels of reading proficiency.

This researcher believes that it is possible to make a strong, although not absolute, claim that the extensive reading program was the most influential variable in this study. Since the researcher was in the position to teach both the EPER and the control groups, the content of the core component was held to be consistent. That is, both groups read the same selections from the textbook, learned the same reading and text analysis strategies, completed the same homework assignments, received lectures from the same lecture notes, and took the same exams. The researcher was thus able to ensure that both classes were taught under very similar conditions and to attempt, as much as possible, to limit the controllable variable to the extensive reading component.

On the other hand, there are a number of potential problems with variables that were not precisely controllable under current circumstances. One potential problem concerns the differing nature of the class dynamics and the effect this may have had on student motivation. The EPER group tended to be more relaxed and outgoing, often engaging in humorous exchanges with the instructor and frequently asking questions. The control group, on the other hand, was

more reserved and serious, seldom asking questions or responding to the instructor. However, since the extra reading assignments took place outside of class, it is not felt that class atmosphere had any significant influence on the results. Interestingly, the control group tended, on average, to score slightly higher on core component exams.

The more serious potential problem concerns the supplementary reading assignments given to the control group. The main purpose of these assignments was to ensure that the control group spent approximately the same amount of time in out-of-class reading. It was also important that those assignments not be graded materials since we consider extensive reading to take place when students are reading materials at an appropriate level for them. Although we checked that students in Class C were in fact completing the outside reading, through comprehension and short answer questions, it was not determined whether precisely the same amount of *time* was spent on these readings as was spent on the EPER readings. Another problem is that the outside reading for Class C was probably, in fact, at an appropriate level for some of the advanced students and so would be considered extensive reading for those students.

Despite the potential influence of other variables, it nevertheless seems reasonable to conclude that this study does provide objective support for the hypothesis that a systematic extensive reading program can have a positive effect on raising students' reading proficiency levels. More research of this nature, particularly of longer duration with more precise control over the ungraded supplementary readings, would be useful in further establishing the effectiveness of systematic, graded extensive reading.

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Abstract

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This paper describes the results of a study exploring the relationship between a systematic extensive reading program and changes in students' general levels of reading proficiency. Two classes of a university comprehensive reading course were chosen for the study. The reading course is a content-area American Studies course with the primary aim of increasing students' top-down reading skills. Extensive reading is included in this course as an additional method of increasing reading proficiency and top-down processing skills. One class was taught for one semester using EPER, an extensive reading program, and one class was taught without EPER. The non-EPER class was instead given additional reading assignments of uncontrolled reading level. Pre-tests and post-tests were administered to both groups. Results of a Chi-square test indicate a significant relationship between an increase in student reading proficiency levels and completion of a short extensive reading program. Other possibly influential variables are also considered.