

【研究ノート】

Approach to Extensive Reading and Determination of Student Reading Levels (RL)

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1. BACKGROUND

Extensive Reading is an approach to studying a foreign language that should be used in conjunction with other approaches. It emphasizes fast reading of large amounts of text at an understandable level of difficulty by each student. Through such an activity, students obtain fluency in reading in the other language. While building this fluency, students also reinforce their grammar and vocabulary knowledge without the need to focus on such tasks or to memorize independently from context.

However, many second language students do not have a clear idea of the level at which they should be reading. There are several guidelines provided by education researchers, often emphasizing the desirability of reading without referring to a dictionary when encountering new or unfamiliar words. As the number of such words is likely to be high when reading a typical book written by or for native/near-native speakers, reading 'graded readers' is a popular approach to reducing the likelihood of encountering too many such words. As also mentioned by Mutoh (p. 3) an Extensive Reading "rule of thumb" is that readers should not be unfamiliar with more than 4 or 5 words per page. When they do encounter such words, they should ignore or skip them, rather than resorting to their dictionaries. In the Hokusei Junior College Extensive Reading course, students are advised to check the words only if they appear repeatedly and appear to be crucial to understanding the story being told.

These graded readers are available in a variety of 'levels' where the vocabulary and language structure (i.e. grammar) have been carefully decided and arranged. These 'levels'

Key words : extensive reading, moodle reader, graded readers, reading level

are assigned by the publishers of the books and one further difficulty for students is that one publisher's 'level one' may actually be more or less challenging than the 'levels one' of another publisher. Hokusei Junior College's course utilizes a module designed for the Moodle LMS (learning management system) called 'Moodle Reader' that allows students to take quizzes about the graded readers they have read. This system has a large degree of flexibility and, depending on the settings chosen by the instructor, students may choose from a very large selection of quizzes for books at various levels.

One of the challenges that arises is how students can choose books at a level appropriate for them. Following that, how do they distinguish between the different and differing 'levels' assigned by publishers to books in their series. As mentioned, there is often a large difference between a book assigned 'level one' by one publisher and that offered by another publisher. This research intends to propose an approach using the standardized level definitions developed by the Extensive Reading Foundation (ERF) and included in the Moodle Reader module for classifying different graded readers, and to compare methods of 'assigning' levels to students using a type of placement test and TOEIC reading scores.

2. INTRODUCTION

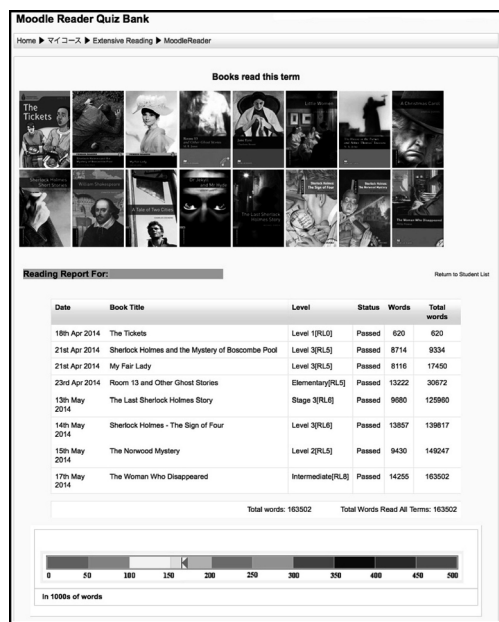
The utility of extensive reading in language teaching has been addressed in innumerable studies and its purported benefits acknowledged by inclusion in Hokusei Junior College's (hereafter Hokusei) curriculum. When it was decided that the author would be in charge of this course for second (final) year students of the two-year junior college, the goal at the outset was to offer as much flexibility to learners as possible, yet still remain within the confines of a valid form of evaluation. The two can seem almost incompatible at times. The flexibility desired entails giving students the freedom to choose books that they wish to read from Hokusei's extensive library collection of graded readers. This means there could be no standard tests for evaluation, as all students would have been exposed to markedly different texts.

Nonetheless, some form of evaluation is required. Having learners write a book report after each book they finish is one approach, but requires considerable time that could otherwise be devoted to reading more books. The system adopted for this course is to take quizzes using the Moodle Reader module, which is a free add-on to the free LMS (learning management system) Moodle.

Each quiz is timed (usually 15 minutes) and questions are chosen randomly from a bank of options. As a result little time is necessary to produce proof that the student has read the book in question with enough understanding to pass the quiz. The time saved can then be applied to further reading.

3. JUSTIFICATIONS FOR APPROACH

Day and Bamford (1998, p.7) present their definition of extensive reading by way of a list of characteristics to which teachers may easily relate. The list may be summarized as: quantity, variety, freedom, interest, rewarding/minimal follow-up, accessible/understandable, silent/individual, faster speed, teacher-guided, and the teacher as role model (Day & Bamford,



1998). Although the concept of minimalizing follow-up is laudable, in practice it is difficult to satisfy institutional requirements without some type of formal evaluation. Using the Moodle reader module enables the instructor to perform evaluation without unduly burdening students with work, such as writing, that may be better assigned and assessed in courses other than extensive reading.

With minimal assessment intervention, it may be possible to approach Day and Bamford's aim of getting "students reading in the second language and liking it... (while also achieving) ...increased general second language competence" (Day & Bamford, 1998, p. 6).

Figure 1: Moodle reader student view. Graphics allow 'collection' of titles read, list gives details and colored scale at bottom helps students track their progress at a glance.

4. CHALLENGES IN SELECTING TEXTS

In extensive reading, students are expected to read lots of text (books) ideally slightly below their actual level of reading ability. One of the main challenges comes in identifying this 'level of reading ability'. Theoretically the students themselves would have the best knowledge of what is easily understandable for them and at which level they can read with confidence and also for meaning.

However it is not always so easy for students to know this, especially if in their second language education experience they have tended to be exposed to more intensive reading. They may require guidance in selecting material of appropriate difficulty. Many instructors are likely to use a 'hit and miss' approach where students try reading books at levels that seem appropriate to them, eventually settling on the best, or what seems to be the best, for them.

Furthermore, even after the best level has been identified, there may be no clear criteria for what that 'best level' is beyond the level assigned to the book by its publisher. If the

students continue to read books from that same publisher at the level they found to be best for them, then there might be no need to consider the matter further. However, if the goal of the Extensive Reading course is to offer the students high degrees of freedom in choosing texts that interest them, then there is a strong likelihood that they will wish to choose titles published by different companies. At this point, the fact that publishers have not adopted a standardized approach to assigning or even naming levels of their books will soon become apparent. What may be labelled as 'level 1' by one publisher may be of equivalent difficulty to what another labels as 'level 5' or even with a non-numerical classification, such as 'beginner', etc. To overcome this, the Moodle reader approach assigns a reading level (RL) to texts which is independent of publishers' names for the levels of their books (Robb).

When using the Moodle reader module, Pennington (2011) used TOEIC scores to assign students to an initial RL. As Hokusei students take TOEIC at least twice during their two-year period of study this is one option. However, the online placement test administered by the Extensive Reading Foundation (ERF Placement Test) appears to offer an option that is both strongly compatible with the Moodle Reader system, and free of charge. The author intends to conduct further study into comparing these and other approaches to determining the RL that is best for students when they begin the Extensive Reading course.

	start date	end date	user	name	school	class	teacher	ER Lv	the time required(minute)	
15/07/06 15:13	15/07/06 15:31	guest	147	Hokusei Gakuen University Junior College	ERJK	Kurt Ackermann	13.4	17.5	詳細	
15/07/06 19:04	15/07/06 19:20	guest	147	Hokusei Gakuen University Junior College	ERIL	Kurt Ackermann	3.2	15.9	詳細	
15/07/09 22:57	15/07/09 23:15	guest	147	Hokusei Gakuen University Junior College	ERJK	Kurt Ackermann	5.7	18.6	詳細	

Figure 2: screenshot of student results from the placement test (these appear to reflect student achievement in Extensive Reading)

5. CONCLUSIONS

The benefits of extensive reading have been recognized by those behind Hokusei's Extensive Reading course and it is hoped that it will not only help contribute to making reading in a second language (English) easier for students, but also to make it enjoyable and to contribute to improving overall second language ability with accompanying better results on standardized tests of English as a second language.

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