

# Let's give Extensive Reading (ER) some credit : A 'novel' way to improve our students English

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## Abstract

This short paper sets out details of a proposal to set up a reading accreditation course with the aim of encouraging students to take part in an extra-curricular English Extensive Reading (ER) program at Fukuyama City University (FCU) as an aid to the development of their practical English skills.

Keywords : course proposal, extensive reading, developing practical skills, incidental learning, course accreditation, monitoring and assessment of reading

## 1 Introduction

Despite numerous initiatives to move high school English education in Japan towards a more practical approach to teaching and learning it remains a fact that many students continue to enter university with minimal English language skills.

This situation is of some concern when we consider the following:

- i) Here at Fukuyama City University (FCU) many of our students during the course of their studies will be expected to work with texts from books, journals and newspapers that are written in English.
- ii) Most if not all students here must study for the TOEIC test, a test which requires high level listening and reading skills if one is to attain a good score.
- iii) Many FCU students on graduation will go on to work in professions where good practical English skills will be not just an asset but a requirement.

At present all second year students at FCU are required to take two short English courses, Communication A,

a general language course and B which focuses on making and giving presentations. While these classes offer valuable language practice opportunities they alone are not enough if we are to make any significant long term impact on their practical English abilities. Indeed it is through teaching the A courses that I have become aware of the substantial number of students who are interested in improving their English abilities further for personal and or professional reasons.

As a consequence of this I feel it is not only important but essential to consider what more we can do to help these students.

## 2 The great reading book resource

Opportunities outside of a classroom for speaking or listening to English to gain practical experience are obviously limited. There is however one activity that is available to all and that is reading books. A proven way of helping to significantly improve one's language skills is through what is commonly referred to as extensive reading (ER) also known as sustained silent reading

(SSR).

### 2.1 What is extensive reading?

Extensive reading (ER) is what we do when reading a novel, for example. In other words, reading lots of interesting comprehensible texts of our own choice. The power of ER and thus its appeal lies in the fact that the reason for reading is for pleasure rather than for study purposes.

### 2.2 How can ER help our students to improve their English?

It is through regular and repeated exposure to (appropriate level) text that the reader is able to progressively develop a better feel for and understanding of the language they are reading. Text flow and language patterns (grammatical structures, collocation, and preposition partners) become more familiar, sight vocabulary and automatic word recognition skills improve, expressional language is picked up, and variety of writing styles are better understood. For this reason language development through activities such as extensive reading is sometimes referred to as incidental learning.

It is this internalization of language through incidental acquisition rather than the overt study of it that makes extensive 'pleasure' reading such an attractive approach and natural tool for improving ones working knowledge of language.

*"If you read a lot, your knowledge of the conventions of writing, vocabulary and grammar are acquired not learned (and as such) it becomes part of you."* Krashen S. (2005)

The development of better reading skills is not the only language area to draw support from ER. Reading books provides lots of opportunities for students to discuss stories with classmates, write and present book reviews and recommendations and even act out character parts.

It has also been suggested that regular pleasure reading can improve students' abilities to deal with more academic texts and help improve test scores.

*"Research also shows that English programs that include some time for self-selected reading produce better results on a wide of variety of tests."* Krashen S. (2012)

*"A student who has done a great deal of easy reading from graded readers and easier authentic texts will find academic texts far more comprehensible than one who has not done this reading."* Mason. B (2005)

What therefore could be better suited to our students here at FCU, who are often reluctant to speak out, struggle with the complexities of TOEIC and are expected to deal with dense academic texts. Here is an opportunity to discover that reading in English can be productive, supportive and pleasurable at the same time. I wonder how many of our students have considered that.

The long list of benefits of regular pleasure reading are of course well documented by many eminent educationalists such as Dr S. Krashen, Dr B. Mason (both quoted above) and Dr R. Waring, to name but a few. A summary of many of the key points of ER are set out in my previous paper 'Developing reading fluency and the many benefits it can bring'. Hampshire S. (2013).

### 2.3 The reading materials

It goes without saying that if we want to encourage our students to read in English then we need to have materials that they can read and want to read. None of the above stated potential of ER will be realized if text levels are too high or the content is uninteresting to the reader. Where's the pleasure in that? Making available lots of suitable reading material is key.

One great source of materials is the graded readers that Dr. B. Mason refers to above. These are books specifically written for language learners and designed to enable, support and promote ER. Language is presented in the context of clear, meaningful and supportive stories, in books designed and written to encourage the reader to keep reading. The grammar and vocabulary content are carefully controlled at each level thus providing large amounts of comprehensible input in a wide variety of interesting genres that tempt the student to read, allow them to get into the story (without having to resort to a dictionary) and thus help the reader to build and develop reading speed and fluency all while engaged in a pleasurable activity.

Since the initial set-up of the ER book section in FCU library in late 2012, I have been slowly adding to the selection of available graded readers. We currently have about 270 available titles. The titles come in 7 graded levels from starter to level 6 and include both fiction and non-fiction.

These great books however have met with a measured degree of interest.

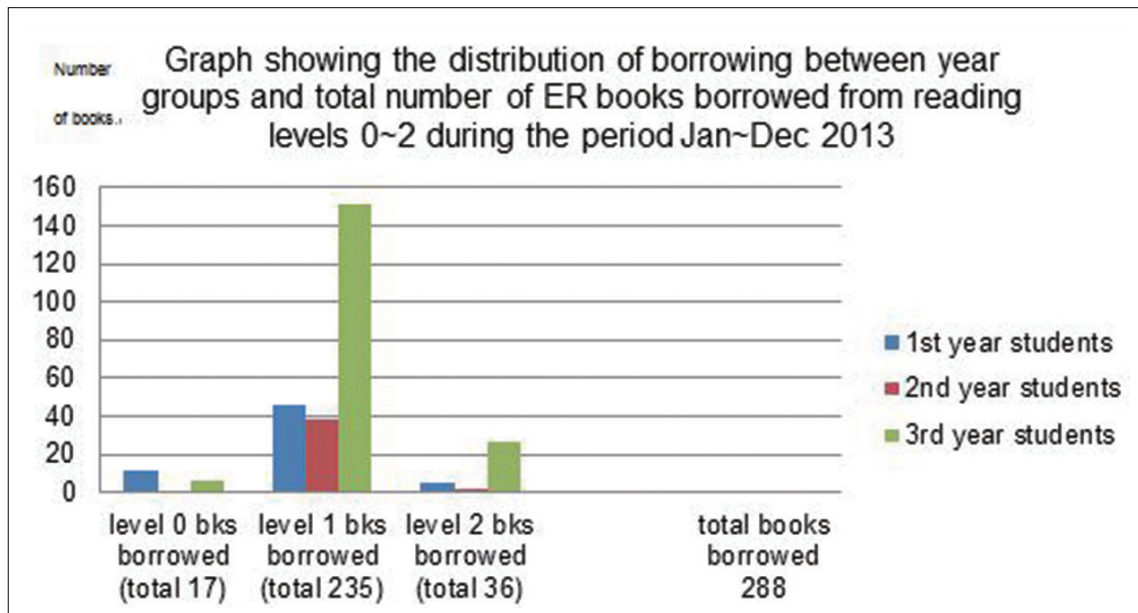
The graph below, (see Figure1) using information collated from the FCU library database shows the distribution of borrowing of graded readers from the ER section of the FCU library from January ~December 2013.

While the ER library contains graded readers from level 0-6, I have only looked at data concerning the borrowing of books between levels 0-2. This is because the vast majority of FCU students true reading levels fall within these parameters and as such level 1 is the start point I recommend to all FCU students.

The relatively high borrow figures of level 1 books by 3<sup>rd</sup> year students (partly due to reading related to the ER programs that form part of the Advanced English Courses 1 and 2) shows clearly the results of having ER as part of an accredited course.

In total 67 different students borrowed ER books in

Figure 1 ER books borrowed



2013. While this is an encouraging sign the data clearly shows this valuable reading resource is still being under used and that there are many more students at FCU that would undoubtedly benefit from what ER has to offer. The question is how can we encourage more students at FCU to pick up a book and get into the reading habit?

### 3 Publicity and promotion

Publicizing and promoting the merits of ER around the campus with presentations and posters is ongoing, as are my efforts to encourage those students I have direct contact with to try reading some of the great books we have on offer.

Experience would suggest however that it isn't just a simple case of telling students about the benefits of something such as ER and expecting them to give it a go. Few people will pick up on something new just because they are told it is good or beneficial, particularly if that something does not seem immediately appealing. I do not want to dwell on the undeniable negative impact years of high school eigo and forced TOEIC study will have had on many students but 'slave to the test' schooling must be held in part accountable for many students' lack of interest in reading. In an attempt to counteract this, what we need is some kind of kick-start or incentive.

### 4 The introduction of an accredited reading course

My proposed incentive is this; using the graded reading books in the library we set up an 'accredited' extensive 'English Free Reading Course' at FCU, open to all students.

### 5 How would the course operate?

There are a variety of possible approaches to course

set up. I would like to examine two possibilities here.

#### 5.1 Version 1

- a) Any students interested in joining the program will be asked to attend an introductory class. This will include an introduction to ER, its aims, its benefits, how to select suitable level books, an outline of the proposed course requirements and an introduction to an online ER book quiz website.
- b) Students who then choose to join the course will be issued with a user name and password. These will enable students to log into the ER website, the use the quiz system, which is explained in more detail below. (6.1)
- c) Each participant will be required to read a predetermined amount of appropriate level text over a set period of time. I would suggest that one program would last two terms, (16 weeks) .The reading targets set (how many books / words to be read) , while offering up a challenge, will be realistic and achievable. Our aim is to encourage and support not deter.
- d) Participants who achieve the set targets will be awarded a study credit, or credits that would count towards their final degree.

In this version of the program, apart from the initial course presentation seminar, students would not be expected to attend weekly classes. The course reading would be undertaken entirely out of class time.

#### The advantages

- a) No extra timetabling would be needed.
- b) The course would not clash with existing courses.
- c) Most students would be free to participate and therefore more students may be interested in joining the program.
- d) The course aim and requirement would be clear and simple: read, read, read.

The disadvantages

- a) Accreditation may be harder to justify and therefore more difficult to secure.
- b) Students would have only their personal drive to help complete the program.
- c) There would be no opportunities for students to meet and share reading interests and book recommendations.

## 5.2 Version 2

In this alternative version, while the majority of reading will still be undertaken in the students own time they would also have to attend a once weekly class. In this class students would bring their reading books and read silently for up to an hour. During this time they may also if ready, take an online quiz. The classes could be held in or near the computer room or the library to facilitate this.

For 30 minutes of each class, pre-selected students would give short book presentations and reading recommendations to their classmates. Other reading support activities may also be periodically included in this time.

Student attendance and any book presentation work could also count towards each student's final assessment mark.

The advantages of this version:

- a) Accreditation may be easier to secure.
- b) Students would have a focal point (class) each week which may help to assist their motivation to read.
- c) Student book presentations, book discussions and recommendations would provide useful additional language practice opportunities.

The disadvantages:

- a) It may prove very difficult to coordinate a time when all wishing to join are free from other course work to attend this class.

- b) Many students may be put off by the idea of joining a reading class due to past experiences.

## 6 How would the program be monitored and student reading assessed?

In both proposed versions of the course the monitoring and assessment of student reading will be done with the use of the online M-reader program.

### 6.1 What is M-reader?

M-reader is a new online reading monitoring system which has been developed with research funds from Kyoto Sangyo University and the Japanese Ministry of Education.

*"M-reader is designed to be an aid to schools wishing to implement an Extensive Reading program. It allows teachers (and students) to verify that they have read and understood their reading."* (M-reader homepage)

What M-reader offers the student is a wide selection of carefully developed timed 'fun to take' quizzes that test general comprehension of the book they have read. What M-reader offers the teacher is a simple and efficient 'easy to use' reader / reading monitoring system.

Fukuyama City University is already registered on the M-reader website. (see Figure 2)

### 6.2 How does M-reader work?

Each student is allocated a user name and password which they use to enter the online site.

Once a student has read a book they log in to M-reader, and are taken directly to their personal homepage. (see Figure 3)

From here they select the book quiz they wish to take and then select Start Quiz. A colored progress bar displays the student's target goal and the current word count.

Figure 2 Mreader home page

View available books About M-Reader

Hosted by the Extensive Reading Foundation

The New Guitar Shifting into Overdrive The American West Powers of the Good Why? Little Women A Christmas Carol Back to the Dreamtime The Red-headed League

# Extensive Reading

## The fun way to learn English!

14 Nov 2013 - The server has been doubled in size. Please let us know if you experience any access problems.

Login:   [New users, click here to register!](#)

If you forgot your password please ask your teacher.

Top reader in the past 30 days **Congratulations!!**

## 7 The quizzes

- Students take quizzes on books they have read. These quizzes are timed (15 minutes) to ensure students have read the book before taking the quiz.
- The questions for each quiz are selected from a quiz bank so that each student receives a different set of questions. This is another safety feature to prevent cheating.
- Very importantly the quizzes are designed to test whether the student has read the book and has an understanding of the story. They are not designed to test comprehension or memory of fine details.
- Students receive a cumulative score of books and/or words read and an image of the book cover for each quiz that they pass. These are recorded on their homepage along with the date the quiz was taken.

## 8 Administering the M-reader program

As the site administrator I have access to all the course registered students reading reports and thus can:

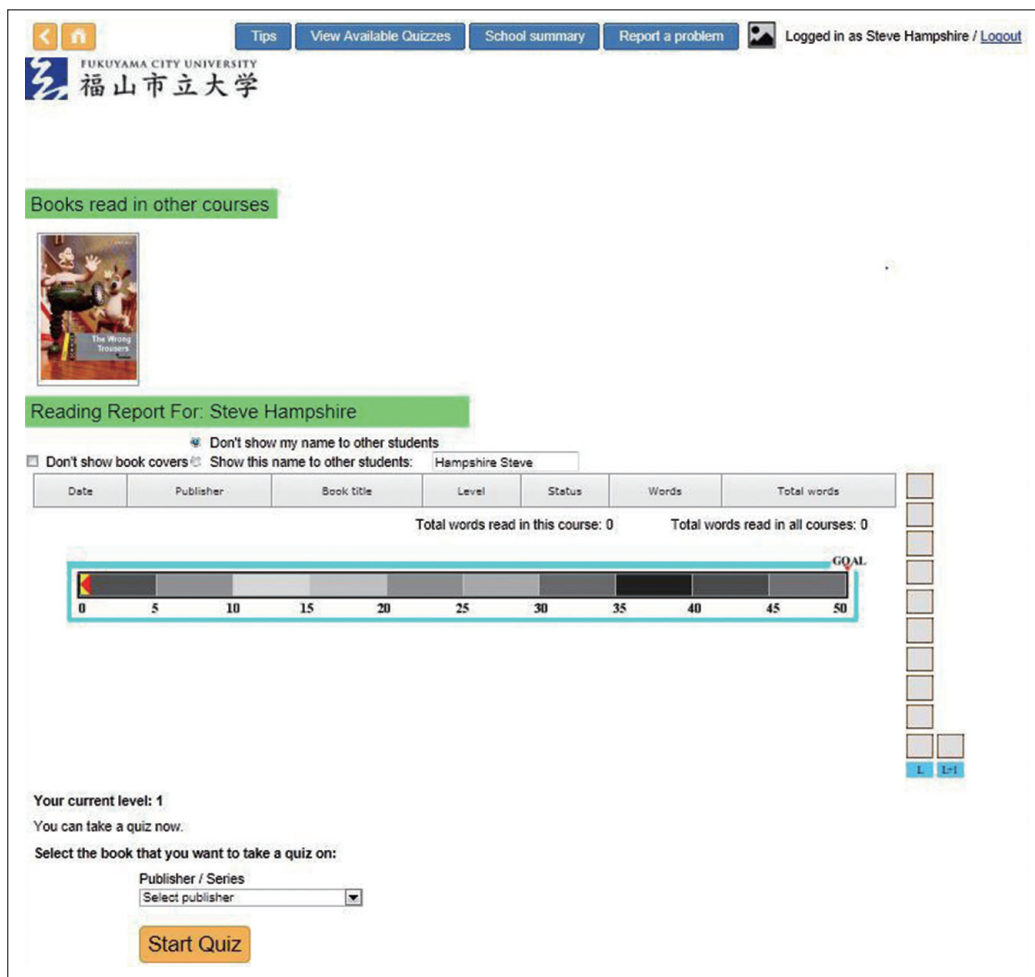
- set and adjust their reading levels
- set and adjust their reading targets
- easily monitor individual students progress
- if necessary award or deduct extra points

The site has in-built security and the use of user names and passwords means their homepage remains private to all except me as administrator.

## 9 Conclusion

Having used M-reader with my Advanced English course students I have found it to be an easy-to-use system that allows me to effectively administer

Figure 3 Students personal home page



and accurately monitor individual student's reading commitment and progress.

Students' initial responses to the online quiz system (taken from a survey issued to English Advanced course students) have been very positive. They find the site easy to access and use. They enjoy taking the quizzes, find them fun and fair and like building up their book cover libraries on their individual home pages.

All the students who completed the Advanced Course

2 this year (2014) have stated that they intend to continue reading and using the quiz system, which is an encouraging sign.

By encouraging more students to become active readers now, we will be providing them with not only much needed English language support while studying at FCU but setting them on the path to developing better and more competent language skills that they can carry with them into the future.

So let's give Extensive Reading in English some credit.

It really is one of the most effective and pleasurable ways of improving one's English language skills.

## **Bibliography**

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**Additional reading**

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Let's give Extensive Reading (ER) some credit :  
A 'novel' way to improve our students English

英語多読 Extensive Reading (ER) プログラム 単位化の実現について (提案)

スティーブ ハンプシャー

要旨

この資料は、福山市立大学 (FCU) における学生の実践的な英語スキルの向上を目的とした英語多読プログラム (ER) への参加を促すため、完成年度以降、単位化を導入することについて詳細を提案するものです。