

Notes on Extensive Reading: Japanese University Classes and Graded Readers

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Abstract

University English classes in Japan often use Intensive Reading (IR) to maximise the students' exposure to new language; however this can have the unintended effect of allowing students to believe that IR *is* reading in English. In order to develop learners' ability to read fluently, without the need to decode texts with the help of a dictionary, an Extensive Reading (ER) program could be created that forms a practice-focussed course component.

This paper introduces and discusses some of the influential research which has been undertaken on ER, reflects on the context of Japanese ESL classes, and ends with a discussion of Graded Readers.

The University Workload

Japanese university ESL students often study English in “4-skills” classes, which might meet once or twice a week. Students are often studying a total of 14 or more classes per week, which can include TOEIC preparation and a variety of non-ESL related classes taught in Japanese; some students may also be studying an L3, typically Chinese or Korean. Thus some 3 hours per week are spent doing work directly related to the requirements of their English study program. In addition to these mandatory classes, university students are encouraged to participate in a variety of extra-curricular activities which can be anything from a music workshop held once a week, to daily sports practice, sometimes held twice in a day. The result of this heavily-scheduled week is that voluntary out-of-class English practice usually has to make way for the homework associated with the scheduled classes, and preparation for regular testing, including end-of-semester examinations. It is not uncommon for professors to hold mini-tests every two weeks, mid-semester tests and, beyond these, require students to submit reports for regular summative assessment. This means that, since ER is a very time consuming activity, it may be difficult to persuade students to keep to

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their reading schedule as their other classes demand attention. The hope would be that they quickly begin to see the value in ER, even though it is probably an unfamiliar kind of “reading”.

Intensive Reading is a valuable activity, but it is not like reading.

When students are reading intensively, they are typically dealing with, or decoding, fairly short texts with a significant proportion of new or rarely-met word-forms. They might be looking at sentences of a few dozen words containing one or two unfamiliar items, or a grammatical construction which they have been taught earlier in the same lesson. Comprehension questions are often used to prompt students to offer definitions, synonyms or re-wording (Waring, 2011). As they engage with the text, students usually read slowly and may re-read clauses, phrases and words several times. The teacher might allow dictionaries to be used or ask students to parse sentences by drawing lines between phrases/ clauses/ words. Although all students are reading the same teacher-selected text, some may find it more difficult than others, but understanding the text is not “easy” for anyone; if all the students are able to understand the language without some effort, the teacher may conclude that the text does not lend itself to study. “The texts are treated as vehicles for the presentation, practice, manipulation and consolidation of language points, rather than the encouragement of reading itself.” (Nuttall, 1982:20; Alderson & Urquhart 1984: 246-247; Bartram & Parry, 1989:7; Hyland 1990:14; Susser & Robb 1990:161-162, all cited in Bell, 2001) Examples of this kind of text can be found in most of the major general ESL and ESP textbook series like *Total English* (Bygrave, J. 2007:71) and *Market Leader* (Cotton, Falvey, & Kent, 2005:94), and may have been created by the authors or reprinted from L1 sources. These may not have any connection to the learner’s personal interests or topics raised in their other English classes. It is also up to the teacher to decide whether to keep a running theme, or to introduce diverse topics throughout the course. Intensive Reading is a kind of language training which happens to use the written word, and not *reading* as we would recognise it.

Japanese university reading classes which use IR may run the risk of creating weak readers.

Japanese university students seem quite comfortable with IR; certainly they have had a great deal of exposure to it. However the ease with which they can comprehend the kind of task being given them does not necessarily correspond to the amount of gains they make, especially in terms of overall reading ability. The heavy reliance on bilingual electronic dictionaries means that students develop the habit of running their eyes along a sentence and instinctively reaching for their dictionary when they encounter an item which they do not immediately understand. The kind of speed which many students develop from repeated practice is simply the ease with which they consult their dictionaries and find a definition which seems to follow somewhat from the previous

word or two, and thus allows them to read on until they find the next item to decode. Often this means that students are sent back to the start of the sentence to try again: a sentence with two new items which have only two dictionary definitions each means that students can end up in a guessing game with eight possible choices. It is not the number of choices of course that is the problem, it is the fact that guessing games with dictionaries are the sign of a disadvantaged learner.

Readers whose reading is far from fluent are caught in the “vicious circle of the weak reader” (Nuttell, 1996:127):

It doesn't matter where you enter the circle, because any of the factors will produce any of the others. Slow readers seldom develop much interest in what they read, let alone pleasure. Since they do not enjoy it, they read as little as possible. Deprived of practice, they continue to find it hard to understand what they read, so their reading rate does not increase. They remain slow readers.

Students quite naturally extend their impressions of one kind of reading to another, and do not discriminate between what happens in their reading class and what happens when they are handed a book. This lack of progress generates a perpetually re-enforced belief that they “simply can't” read in English: at least in terms of the fluent reading of large amounts of text. Observational evidence shows that this leads to the problem of poor student expectations of their own performance, which makes it harder still to separate them from their electronic dictionary.

ER is IR's practice-focussed counterpart.

Extensive Reading (ER), also called Reading for Pleasure, is about building the skills associated with the fluent reading of very large amounts of text; comprehension is a priority, but it comes from the text being easy for the reader, rather than as a result of effort and time spent going over its constituent parts. Where IR is a study-focussed activity, ER is its practice-focussed counterpart. Day and Bamford's *Top Ten Principles for Teaching Extensive Reading* (2002) are listed below as a working definition of ER:

- (1) The reading material is easy.
- (2) A variety of reading material on a wide range of topics must be available.
- (3) Learners choose what they want to read.
- (4) Learners read as much as possible.
- (5) The purpose of reading is usually related to pleasure, information and general

understanding.

- (6) Reading is its own reward.
- (7) Reading speed is usually faster rather than slower.
- (8) Reading is individual and silent.
- (9) Teachers orient and guide their students.
- (10) The teacher is a role model of a reader.

Interest in ER has generated a great deal of anecdotal evidence to suggest that it has many benefits, but research has yet to bear this out.

Bell (1998) describes ER's role in language learning, noting that:

- (1) It can provide "comprehensible input" (Krashen, 1982)
- (2) It can enhance learners' general language competence
- (3) It increases the students' exposure to the language
- (4) It can increase knowledge of vocabulary
- (5) It can lead to improvement in writing
- (6) It can motivate learners to read
- (7) It can consolidate previously learned language
- (8) It helps to build confidence with extended texts
- (9) It encourages the exploitation of textual redundancy
- (10) It facilitates the development of prediction skills

One of the advantages above, the consolidation of learned language, deserves particular attention since the goal of repeated review is often difficult to sustain when there are so many demands on teacher/ student time. Newly-learned language is in danger of being lost surprisingly quickly if it is not reinforced in repeated practice.

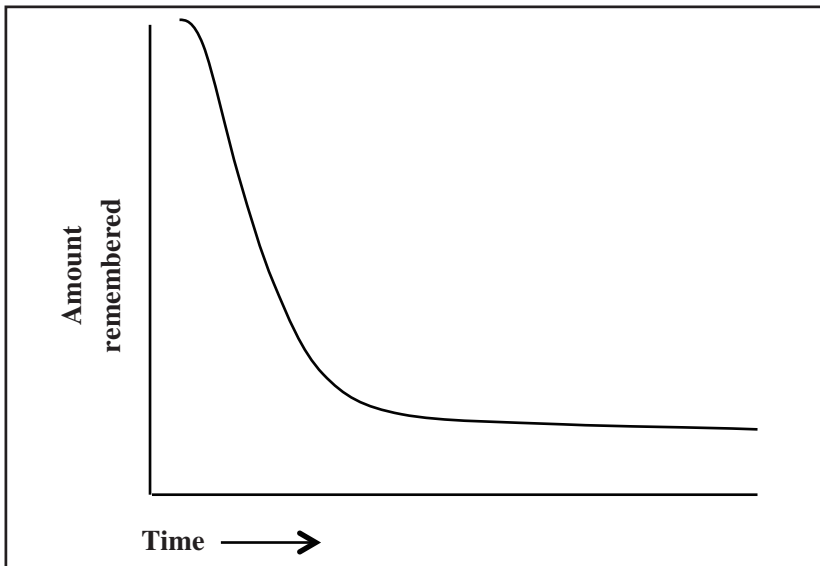


Fig. 1: Typical Pattern of Forgetting

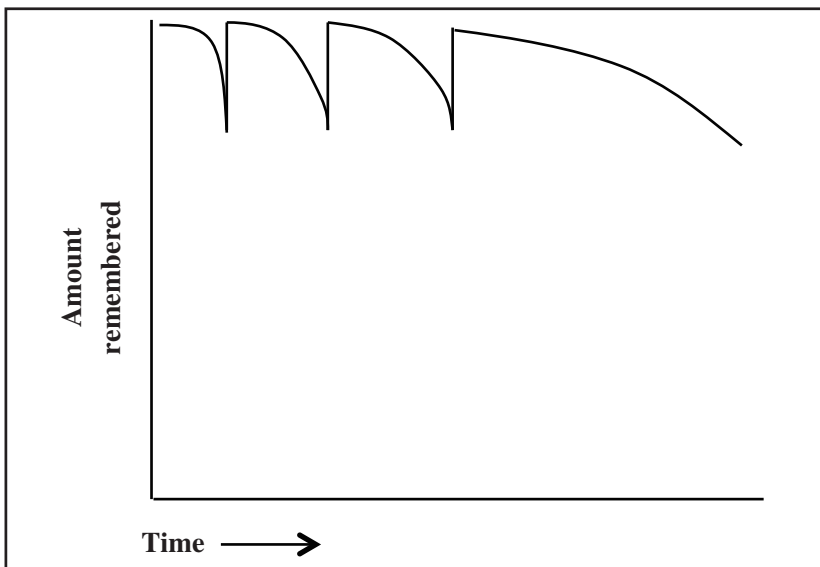


Fig. 2: Pattern of Forgetting with Expanded Rehearsal

“Typically most forgetting occurs soon after the end of the learning session.” (Schmitt 2007; also Figures 1 & 2). If the process of forgetting is not halted quickly, a great deal of effort can be wasted. Fig. 2 shows the results of practice undertaken quickly after the initial learning has taken place. The widening space between peaks indicates that the practice sessions can gradually decrease in frequency as the new language is more robustly assimilated and internalised. What this means

for ER is that it can potentially provide this kind of experience as learners are exposed to new vocabulary, see it recycled fairly often, but eventually less so once the new language has become established.

Waring (2011) has noted: “One of the well-known benefits of reading a lot is the effect it has on vocabulary development.” Many others share this view (see Elley, 1991; Hafiz & Tudor, 1990; Krashen & Cho, 1994 for just a few examples), however the supporting research has proven difficult to replicate (often because of the specific nature of the classes studied), or subject to contamination (Waring, 2001). While it has been reported (Susser & Robb, 1990 and Waring, 2001, for example) that research into ER has some way to go before it can fully elucidate exactly what is being achieved by so much reading, claims for language gains do not stop at vocabulary uptake: reading speed, comprehension, writing ability, spelling, speaking ability and motivation all appear, at least anecdotally, to improve (see Waring, 2001 for a detailed discussion of these claims).

ER involves reading a lot of text, although exactly how much, and how it should be measured is still the subject of research and opinion:

...thirty pages an hour (Hill & Thomas, 1988:50);...an hour per evening (Krashen, 1981:105);...one page per day and three pages per day during summer vacation (for Japanese High School students)(Matsumura, 1987:179);...a rate of at least 200 words per minute and up to 250 words or more (Hill, 1986:16);...a chapter per week (Hansen, 1985:161);...at least two books a week (Carroll, 1972:180);...60 books a year (Bright & McGregor, 1970:69) (Susser & Robb, op. cit.)

Day and Bamford (op. cit.) do not specify how many words must be covered in a given period of time for optimal benefits, rather they suggest that “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”. While it seems reasonable that there will be some lower boundary for input below which reading simply fails to provide sufficient language exposure, upper limits are hard to imagine, and would defeat the idea of students “catching the bug”, and fully achieving the goal of reading at length for pleasure.

Both ER and IR are activities which could be thought of as categorizing a range of reading acts.

IR teachers sometimes make overt reference to “skimming” text in order to locate key information, for example, or they may instruct students to find the main idea of a text in order

to better grasp the gist. The place of these “skills” and “strategies” in the description of what good readers do, and what weak readers ought to be taught, has been questioned (if not outright denied). It has been thought (Hosenfeld, Arnold, Kirchofer, Laciura & Wilson, 1981, cited in Susser & Robb, op. cit.) that students are taught to read “better” in their L1, and often in an L2, by developing strategies and skills such as skimming, scanning and finding the main idea of a text. Barnett (1998:157 in Susser & Robb, op. cit.) has claimed that foreign language students “did not significantly improve their reading comprehension” after having been taught these strategies.

Fig. 1 is one possible way to imagine the relationships between ER, IR and concepts which have been associated with them in the literature (including the terms “Text-Attack” and “Lexical-Attack”, see Nuttall, 1996). The concepts below may be separated by degree, considered polar opposites, or co-opted to either “side” when required. I have included the debated “skills” and “strategies” since anecdotal evidence suggests that the terms do refer to something, and that while IR may utilise them explicitly, we can infer their presence in the fluent ER reader.

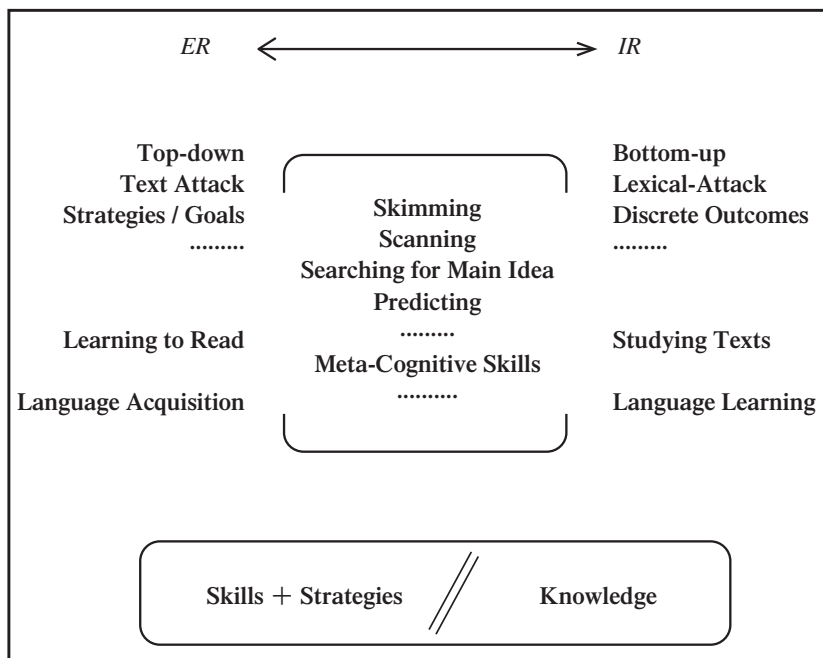


Fig.3:

How difficult should the ER text be?

“[t]o become an effective reader, it is far more useful to read a lot of easy books than a few difficult ones.” Nuttall (1996:130)

ER research in this area, as on the question of “How much?”, has returned a variety of answers. Laufer (1987), details a study which found that a minimum rate of comprehension should be 95%, and this figure sits between Clay (1985), who recommends 90 – 94% and Nuttall (op. cit.), who stipulates a figure of 1% unfamiliar words in an ER text. While the differences between these figures seem small, it is worth bearing in mind that even at 10 words per line, a 95% comprehension rate means that we should expect to find one new word every two lines, on average.

What to read?

Day and Bamford’s *Principles* (op. cit.) emphasise the need for variety in the kind of texts available, and for this, Graded Readers, published in Japan, for the most part by four well-known names in the ESL market, seem to be a very popular choice. The publishers are:

- Cambridge University Press (CUP) [\[www.cambridge.org/jp/elt/?site_locale=ja_JP\]](http://www.cambridge.org/jp/elt/?site_locale=ja_JP)
- Longman Pearson Penguin [\[www.longmanjapan.com/penguin.html\]](http://www.longmanjapan.com/penguin.html)
- Macmillan [\[www.mlh.co.jp\]](http://www.mlh.co.jp)
- Oxford University Press (OUP) [\[www.oupjapan.co.jp\]](http://www.oupjapan.co.jp)

All four have large catalogues of Readers in print, and all (apart from Macmillan) produce books which they claim accommodate the needs of students from at least Elementary level to Advanced, or using the CEF: [\[www.coe.int/t/dg4/portfolio/?m=/main_pages/levels\]](http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/portfolio/?m=/main_pages/levels), A1 to C1 (Macmillan’s range runs from C1 to B2).

One notable feature of these book series is the ratio of fiction to non-fiction: there are many more fiction titles (unfortunately, no data was found to enumerate this observation). A second feature is the number of “classic” compared to modern adaptations. This perceived imbalance would perhaps merit further study.

Finally, when selecting a graded reader, the general consensus is that students choose a book which is one level below their comfortable reading level to ensure that Day and Bamford’s (op. cit.) first *Principle* is upheld: the reading material must be easy. There is no point in aiming for fluency if the learner cannot comfortably enjoy the book without struggling with a high number of unknown words. To assist teachers and students choose appropriate Graded Readers, the publishers offer information on the number of headwords they allocate to a given CEF level (Fig. 4; all data from the relevant websites) [the Extensive Reading foundation (ERF): www.erfoundation.org/wordpress/].

No. Headwords	ERF Graded Reader Scale		CEF / Oxford Bookworms		CEF / Cambridge Readers		CEF / Macmillan Guided Readers		CEF / Penguin Readers	
1-50	Beginner	Alphabet								
51-100		Early								
101-200		Mid								
201-300		High								
301-400	Elementary	Early	A1	250	A1	250	A1	300	A1	300
401-600		Mid	A2	400						
601-800		High								
801-1000	Intermediate	Early	B1	700	A2	800			A2	600
1001-1250		Mid				1300	A2	1100		
1251-1500		High			B1			1400		
1501-1800	Upper Intermediate	Early	B2	1800		1900	B1		B1	1700
1801-2100		Mid							B2	2300
2101-2400		High					B2	2200		
2401-3000	Advanced	Early	C1	2500					C1	3000
3001-3600		Mid								
3601-4500		High			C1	3800				

Fig.4: Publisher's classifications for their Graded Readers, set against the ERF Graded Reader Scale

As can be seen from (Fig. 4), all four publishers have noticeably different CEF-to-wordcount associations, to the extent that Macmillan's A1 level reader is considered to be a full two levels higher by OUP, and for the rest of the headword counts, there are more discrepancies than agreements.

Since ER is designed to be a personal engagement with the text, it seems fitting that the best judge of the appropriateness of the text is the reader. Waring (2011) recommends asking the student to read a few pages selected from throughout the text and have the student then decide whether or not to try the book. Since there is no pressure to finish an ER text, in fact students are encouraged to change their book if they don't like it or find it difficult, there is no harm done by experimentation.

Conclusion

This paper has sought to highlight the potential that ER has as a useful balance to IR, particularly so in the environment of the Japanese university, and to reflect on the use of Graded Readers. It is hoped that future ER research will clarify the issues still outstanding which have been mentioned here.

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