A Practice of English Extensive Reading
― With Special Reference to Motivational Factors ―

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Abstract

The Foreign Language Center (FLC) of Jissen Women's University offers an Integrated Course required for the first-year students. The aim of the course is to enhance motivation for the students to acquire English. On a trial basis, a practice of English extensive reading was adopted in 2006 and has been improved year by year. Reading in language teaching is the most important of the four skills though the current focus is on listening and speaking. Reading is both a thinking process and a productive activity. It is more than just receiving meaning in a literal sense. It involves bringing a greater thinking ability or cognitive effort.

In the first semester of 2009, students whose majors are Japanese literature, English, Food and Health Sciences, and Humanities and Social Sciences, participated in the practice. In this paper we examine extensive reading as a whole and practice a method of extensive reading that is most suitable to the university students. First we give about 240 students the introductory reading strategies of extensive reading. And after that we give them a chance to read extensively through their free choice among about 1400 different books.

 Prior to the beginning of this practice, the students were given a questionnaire about English language learning. The same questionnaire was administered at the end of the semester. The results suggest that extensive reading is an effective way to enhance students' positive attitude toward learning English.

Introduction

 The authors chose this subject of study for the following three reasons. Firstly, reading in language teaching is by far the most important of four skills. Secondly, in Japan, reading classes

traditionally emphasize intensive reading, where the focus is on accuracy, comprehension, and translation. But it is also important to develop fluency in reading, to help students to read extended passages rapidly. We would like to examine an approach that we used with extensive reading in the class and outside the class.

Thirdly, we would like to correct the excessive decline of students' motivation for learning by extensive reading which focuses their learning in a favorable climate.

The students were taught the introductory reading strategies of Phrase reading, Guessing words, and Paragraph reading. Graded texts from Oxford, Penguin, Macmillan, and Scholastic Readers suitable for the students' needs, levels and interests were provided, so as to energize and motivate them to read the books. During 13 weeks, some students read more than thirty books and wrote excellent descriptions of their impressions. It was useful for the students to choose the books they read.

Results of Quantitative Questions

In the first semester of 2009, the authors offered the program again to the students of four classes. The four classes were as follows: two classes of Japanese majors (JP-1, JP-2), one class of Food Science majors (FS-C), and one class of English majors (EN-3).

The students of these four classes were asked to answer two questionnaires, one before and one after the extensive reading program. In order to make the data as precise as possible, the authors analyzed only the data for students who answered both questionnaires. The total number of students analyzed was as follows: JP-1 (32 students), JP-2 (31 students), FS-C (47 students), and EN-3 (29 students). The authors will focus on the results of non-English majors, since they would like to know how much progress the students, who do not seem to be used to reading English, will have made.

Among the questions asked in the questionnaires was a question regarding the students' attitude toward their reading activity ("Do you like reading English?" / "Did you come to like reading English?"), since their interest in reading English is a key to success of this program. The results are shown in Table 1 and the pie graphs below.

Table 1: "Do you like reading English?" / "Did you come to like reading English?" (% rounded)

|		JP–1		JP–2		FS–C	
		ST	%	ST	%	ST	%
Like	Before	2	6%	1	3%	4	9%
	After	3	9%	3	10%	5	11%
	Difference	1	3 pts.	2	7 pts.	1	2 pts.
Somewhat like	Before	11	34%	6	19%	21	45%
	After	19	59%	18	58%	37	79%
	Difference	8	25 pts.	12	39 pts.	16	34 pts.
Somewhat dislike	Before	14	44%	15	48%	18	38%
	After	9	28%	9	29%	5	11%
	Difference	−5	−16 pts.	−6	−19 pts.	−13	−27 pts.
Dislike	Before	5	16%	9	29%	4	9%
	After	1	3%	1	3%	0	0%
	Difference	−4	−13 pts.	−8	−26 pts.	−4	−9 pts.

ST: # of students

【JP-1: Before / After】
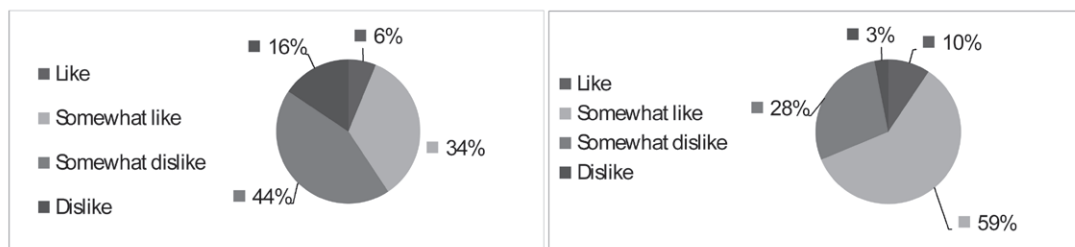
【JP-2: Before / After】
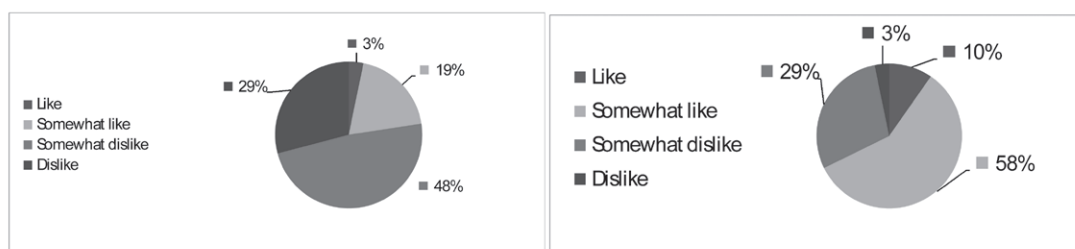
【FS-C: Before / After】
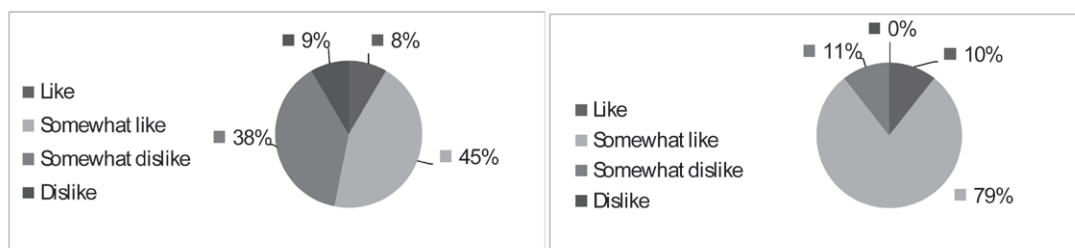
The comparison between before and after the extensive reading program revealed that more students showed a positive attitude toward the reading activity after the program. This trend is as same as the one observed in the extensive reading program offered in 2008 (Jones et al., 2009).

To analyze the results in a more detail, the combined figures for "Like" and "Somewhat like" are shown in Graph 1:

Graph 1 Combined figures for "Like" and "Somewhat like" (% rounded)
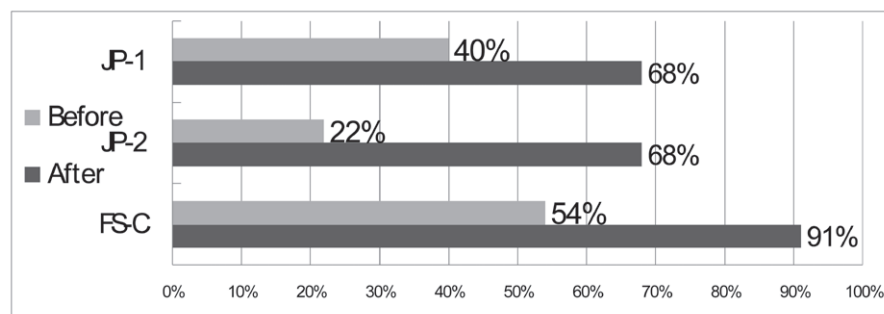
This bar graph indicates that the students of JP-1, JP-2, and FS-C got used to reading English, which is one of the objectives of the extensive reading program. As far as the data is concerned in this question, this extensive reading program has so far been successful.

The authors will discuss two more questions which they found to be of interest from the questionnaire that the students in these three classes answered.

(1) "Are you worried about skipping any words you do not know while you are reading English?" /
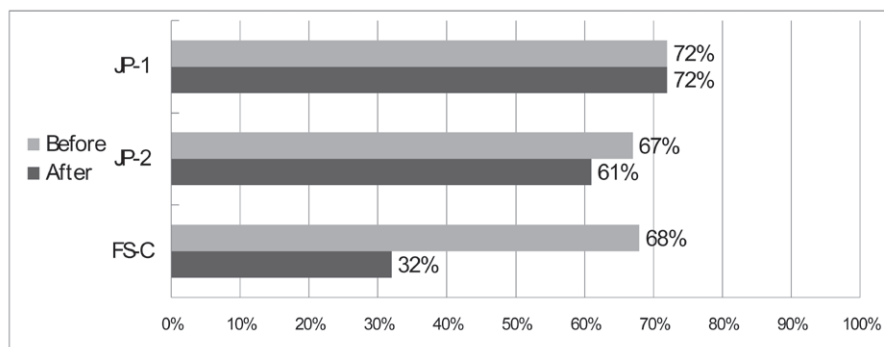"Are you still worried about skipping any words you do not know while you are reading English?"

Table 2: "Are you worried about skipping any words you do not know while you are reading English?" / "Are you still worried about skipping any words you do not know while you are reading English?" (% rounded)

		JP−1		JP−2		FS−C	
		ST	%	ST	%	ST	%
Yes	Before	12	38%	10	32%	8	17%
	After	8	25%	9	29%	2	4%
	Difference	−4	−13 pts.	−1	−3 pts.	−6	−13 pts.
Somewhat yes	Before	11	34%	11	35%	24	51%
	After	15	47%	10	32%	13	28%
	Difference	4	13 pts.	−1	−3 pts.	−11	−23 pts.
Somewhat no	Before	4	13%	8	26%	13	28%
	After	6	19%	12	39%	28	60%
	Difference	2	6 pts.	4	13 pts.	15	32 pts.
No	Before	5	16%	2	6%	2	4%
	After	3	9%	0	0%	4	9%
	Difference	−2	−7 pts.	−2	−6 pts.	2	5 pts.

ST: # of students

As shown in Table 2, the JP-1 students tend to be worried about skipping any words they do not know, even after the extensive reading program. Meanwhile, the JP-2 students seem to be less worried about skipping them, but they are still worried. In contrast to JP-1 and JP-2, the FS-C students show a big difference between before and after the extensive reading program (cf. Graph 2).

Graph 2 Combined figures for <"Yes" and "Somewhat yes"> (% rounded)

	Before	After	Difference
JP-1	72%	72%	0 point
JP-2	67%	61%	-6 points
FS-C	68%	32%	-36 points

(2) "What would you do if you encounter any words you do not know while you are reading English?" / "What did you do when you encountered any words you did not know while you were reading English?"

The data shown in Table 3 indicates two aspects. One is "dictionary-dependent reading activity" (cf. JP-1 and JP-2), and the other is "dictionary-independent reading activity" (cf. FS-C). This means that to some extent there is a relation with the previous question "Are you worried about skipping any words you do not know while you are reading English?" / "Are you still worried about skipping any words you do not know while you are reading English?". To be more concrete, the students who are worried about skipping any words they do not know tend to look up such words with their dictionaries. Those who are not worried about skipping any words they do not know continue reading until the end of a book. FS-C shows almost the same percentage between Graphs 2 and 3.

Table 3: "What would you do if you encounter any words you do not know while you are reading English?" / "What did you do when you encountered any words you did not know while you were reading English?"   (% rounded)

		JP−1		JP−2		FS−C	
		ST	%	ST	%	ST	%
Use a dictionary every time.	Before	14	44%	8	26%	9	19%
	After	10	31%	8	26%	1	2%
	Difference	−4	−13 pts.	0	0 pts.	−8	−17 pts.
Use a dictionary after reading a paragraph.	Before	11	34%	10	32%	23	49%
	After	12	38%	9	29%	14	30%
	Difference	1	4 pts.	−1	−3 pts.	−9	−19 pts.
Continue reading without a dictionary.	Before	3	9%	5	16%	2	4%
	After	6	19%	7	23%	20	43%
	Difference	3	10 pts.	2	7 pts.	18	39 pts.
Guess the meaning from the context.	Before	3	9%	8	26%	11	23%
	After	4	13%	6	19%	12	26%
	Difference	1	4 pts.	−2	−7 pts.	1	3 pts.
Others	Before	1	3%	0	0%	2	4%
	After	0	0%	1	3%	0	0%
	Difference	−1	−3 pts.	1	3 pts.	−2	−4 pts.

ST: # of students

Graph 3   Combined figures for "Use a dictionary every time" and "Use a dictionary after reading a paragraph" (% rounded)
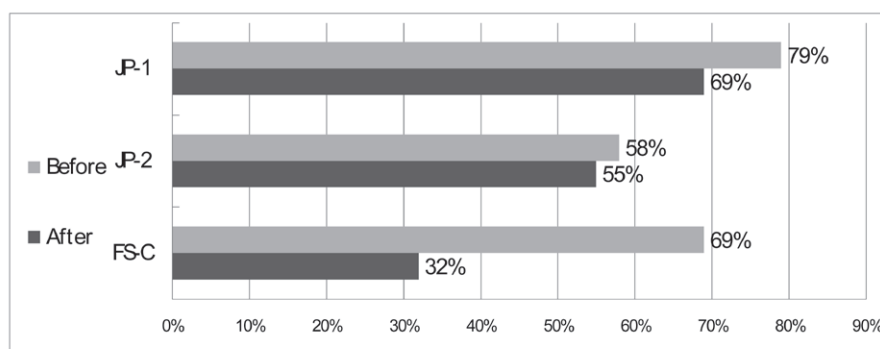
	Before	After	Difference
JP-1	79%	69%	-10 points
JP-2	58%	55%	-3 points
FS-C	69%	32%	-37 points

Meanwhile, there are few students of JP-1, JP-2, and FS-C answering "Guess the meaning from the context". The authors assume that in this extensive reading program the students put their first priority on cover-to-cover reading activity rather than on inferring from the context. Probably, the students attempted to gain a picture of the story instead of just focusing on the details of it. However, it is too early to make a conclusion on this matter. Further analysis and investigation will be needed in this area.

About the project

Reading is one of the best sources of enjoyment. In learning a foreign language, it can also a good way to make the knowledge of previously learned grammar and vocabulary items concrete (Nation, 2009).

This project of voluntary extensive reading was implemented as a supplemental effort to the Integrated English course planned and conducted by a team of teachers of the FLC, Foreign Language Center, in Jissen Women's University. The goal of the project was to help the students to be independent, autonomous learners. It was planned to maximize the students' exposure to written English. The students could check out any book of their choice after class. Freedom of choice is guaranteed, although the teachers give advice if asked. The students would receive no penalty for not reading so that the freedom from fear would enhance motivation (Dörnyei, 2001). The students were encouraged to choose an easy book and to stop reading and choose another if the chosen book was too difficult or not enjoyable. The easiest books in stock were written using no more than 300 words.

Discussion for further research

Although L1 research on extended exposure to print, i.e. extensive reading, has demonstrated a strong positive relationship between amount of reading and reading comprehension (Grabe, 2009a), research on extensive L2 reading is a relatively unexplored area. Elly's studies, cited by Grabe (2009b), are one set of rare and important series of studies. The set was carried out for more than 20 years and showed students who read extensively over a long period of time consistently improved reading comprehension as well as other language skills.

Nation (2009) pointed out that a reading program should be carefully planned and monitored. As it started as supplemental project to the *Integrated English* program, our project of extensive reading lacked the time necessary to secure both of the above conditions. In addition, as the third condition, if you control over the contents of reading (for meaning-focused reading) it would affect the original plan of the project. It was meant that the students completely voluntarily check out books and read them of their own accord.

Monitoring was the one condition that this empirical project managed to maintain to some extent.

The students' reading reports can be a rich source of further qualitative investigation. Some students' reports clearly indicated dramatic positive effects on reading motivation. This will be discussed elsewhere.

Extensive reading is closely interwoven with such factors as reading fluency, motivation, L1 and L2 reading differences. Thus, for a more statistically sound report of this project, some kind of L2 reading assessment should have been introduced. Grabe and Stoller (2002) listed three tools that the researchers of extensive reading commonly used: (a) an instrument for students' abilities before training, (b) procedures for the training itself and (c) procedures to determine what changes in student performance had occurred after the training. A valid test is very difficult to produce, however. Since the reading activity was completely voluntary and no control was given on the books (materials) the students read, it was almost impossible to implement a common meaning-focused test which could have investigated the comprehension levels of the students. A set of must-read books might solve this problem, but too much control (too narrow a choice) would reduce the positive effects upon motivation.

Extensive reading fits into the meaning-focused input and fluency development strands of a course, depending on the level of the books that the learners read (Nation, 2009). According to Nation, when the books contain only a few unknown vocabulary and grammar items, extensive reading is supposed to provide the meaning focused input. On the other hand, if the books are very easy ones with virtually no unknown items, extensive reading provides the condition for fluency development. Lacking a proper measurement both for reading comprehension (for meaningful input) and reading speed (for fluency), we say for sure, at least statistically, that this is the case of the extensive reading program in Jissen.

Guessing from the constant growth in the number of the students who showed positive attitude toward reading, as far as motivation is concerned, extensive reading was an effective measure. As Grabe (2009a) pointed out, a number of studies demonstrated that extensive reading is closely associated with positive attitudes and motivation for reading. The result of this study confirms this association.

Further possible benefits associated with this kind of extensive reading projects are: effects on vocabulary growth (Nation, 2009), the relationship between extensive reading and the development of language skills (L1 & L2) and literacy skills, extensive reading and conceptual-knowledge growth (Grabe, 2009b) and effects on reasoning. For the above types of studies, both quantitative and qualitative methods should be employed in order to obtain clearer overview of effects of extensive reading on language acquisition.

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