An Overview of English Extensive Reading Program

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Abstract

In this paper, we review the changes in attitude toward reading English shown by students as a result of participating in an extensive reading program. The top classes for each department studying Integrated English in the first semester of 2012 were given the challenge of reading extensively in English, using simple readers from leading publishers. Before and after the program, the non-English majors were asked to answer a questionnaire designed to reveal their attitudes toward reading English and to determine what methods they employed when reading in English. Specifically, they were asked in the pre-program questionnaire if they liked reading English, while in the post-program questionnaire they were asked if they had come to like reading English as a result of participating in the extensive reading program. They were also asked if they were worried about skipping unknown words and how often they resorted to using a dictionary when encountering such unknown words. The results showed that students given the choice to freely select books to read came to like reading English, whereas those students who were simply handed books to read did not show any change. At the same time, the students found that they did not need to worry about skipping words and became more independent of their dictionary.

Introduction

Reading has traditionally been the skill most emphasized in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) situation. In Japan, reading classes usually concentrate on

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intensive reading, with the focus on accuracy, comprehension, and translation. But it is also important to develop fluency in reading, to help students to read extensive passages rapidly, in particular with the rapid expansion of the Internet, which has led people to read English and exchange simple written messages in English.

For this reason, we need to motivate students to read extensively. A number of scholars have identified attitude toward the target language as an important component of language learning motivation, and as such exerting a strong influence on learning behavior (Gardner, 1985; Dörnyei, 2001).

In our previous studies (Jones et al., 2009, 2010), we examined the significance and effect of extensive reading on learning English. The results suggested that extensive reading is an effective way to enhance students' positive attitude toward learning English. In the first semester of 2012, the authors offered the program to all students who took the Integrated English Course. The total number of students was 646; their majors were Japanese Literature, English, Food and Health Science, and Humanities and Social Sciences. A placement test was used to divide the students from each department and form one Challenge class (the top class); the other students were placed in regular classes. The students of all the Challenge classes except the English Department were asked to answer two questionnaires, one before and one after the extensive reading program. This paper overviewed the extensive reading project for the Challenge classes and discusses independent readers.

Organization of Extensive Reading Program

In our previous study (Yoshino et al., 2012), we reviewed the history of the extensive reading project of the FLC (Foreign Language Center). The extensive reading project was introduced in 2006. At that time, there were very few books, so only a limited number of students could borrow them. As it became clear that there was sufficient interest among the students, the FLC purchased sets of books from various publishers. The FLC had nearly 2000 books in total (including duplicates) in 2012. This made it possible to expand the program to all the challenge classes.

In order to clarify which readers were most popular, we decided to make a computer readable mark sheet for the students to enter their evaluations of each reader from various points of view, such as interest and ease of understanding.

In order to be able to recommend suitable books to students, we also put seals on

each reader to indicate the Headword level and kept records of the number of words in each reader so that we could evaluate the amount that the students had read at each level. There were various problems with relying on Headword Count levels. One was that different publishers divided their levels according to different numbers of headwords: At the Starter level, the Headword Count levels were almost the same, but at Level 1, ranged between 300 words（Penguin）and 800 words（Macmillan）. Another problem was that even readers in the same series with the same Headword count were very different in length. We commonly described books with the same Headword count as "Thin" or "Thick" Macmillans, or "Thin" or "Thick" Penguins. Finally, we came to depend on The Complete Book Guide for Extensive Reading （Furukawa and Kanda, 2010）, which gave the YL（Yomiyasusa Level or reading ease）of almost all readers that have been published. This system gives a much more finely tuned evaluation of the book level and overcomes the above problems of differing Headword Count levels and book thickness. We added an additional seal to the top corner of the back of the reader to indicate the YL, and now rely on this YL evaluation when recommending books.

Procedure

In our previous study（Yoshino et al., 2012）, we showed 4 steps of the extensive reading program and improved some part of them in the first semester of 2012.

1. **Preliminary guidance**

    Most students have not experienced extensive reading. The students were taught by the introductory strategies with an original handout for guessing words, scanning and skimming. The students were taught to start with a simple level so as not to lose interest. In the first class, they borrowed one easy book in class. These readers were easy enough for the students to read without checking any words in the dictionary.

2. **Graded Readers**

    More and more publishers are entering the extensive reading market recently. We have a stock of nearly 2,000 readers in the FLC office now. Graded texts from Oxford, Penguin, Macmillan, Cambridge, Scholastic Readers and others suitable for the students' needs, levels and interests are available, and they energize and motivate the students to read the books.

3. How to lend the books

There are two main ways of using these readers in this project: lending out to students for one week using an empty classroom as a bookshop or using the books in the library. In the first semester of 2012, the Challenge classes used an empty classroom as a bookshop and Regular classes used the books in the library.

The reasons for dividing in this way were mainly logistic. When lending in class, new books are lent out before the returned readers can be processed. Therefore, the minimum number of readers required for any given level is two or three times the number of students.

Also, the FLC is not equipped with enough manpower to handle the processing. In addition, having the students use the library helps boost interest in the library. A suitable level of books was provided in the bookshop for the challenge classes, started from YL 0.6 and moving up by 0.2 each week.

4. Computer readable card

The students use a copy of the computer readable card for each book they read. They fill in the data on the front and write reports on the back of the copy.

Results of Quantitative Questions

As mentioned earlier, in the first semester of Academic Year 2012, we offered the program to all students who took the Integrated English Course. In this paper, the four Challenge classes were picked up: one class of Japanese majors (JP-C), one class of Food Registered Dietician majors (FD-C), one class of Food Science majors (FS-C), and one class of Humanities and Social Sciences majors (HS-C).

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, we analyzed only the data for students who answered both questionnaires. The authors focused on the results of non-English majors, as we wanted to know how much progress the students, who do not seem to be used to reading English, make. There was also a Challenge class for the English majors, but they study in many other English classes, which makes their situation radically different from that of the other majors, so they were excluded from this survey, although they participated in the Extensive Reading program itself.

We have picked up three questions from the questions asked in the

questionnaires. These questions are exactly as same as the ones selected in the previous papers (Jones et al., 2009, 2010). The results of these questions and several findings are described as follows:

1. 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 bar graphs below.

Note: In the table below, "Bookshop Style" indicates the system used for Saturday classes, where books of a selected level were laid out in an empty

Table 1　Feelings about reading English

(% rounded)		Bookshop Style			Handout Style
		JP-C	FD-C	FS-C	HS-C
		%	%	%	%
Like	Before	3%	0%	10%	10%
	After	25%	8%	8%	10%
	Difference	22 pts.	8 pts.	−2 pts.	0 pts.
Somewhat like	Before	44%	58%	40%	49%
	After	50%	60%	72%	48%
	Difference	6 pts.	2 pts.	32 pts.	−1 pts.
Somewhat dislike	Before	44%	42%	43%	33%
	After	25%	28%	20%	37%
	Difference	−19 pts.	−14 pts.	−23 pts.	4 pts.
Dislike	Before	9%	0%	7%	8%
	After	0%	4%	0%	5%
	Difference	−9 pts.	4 pts.	−7 pts.	−3 pts.

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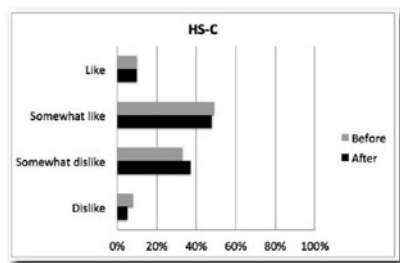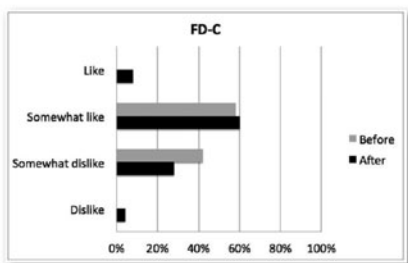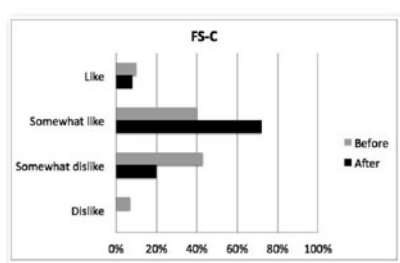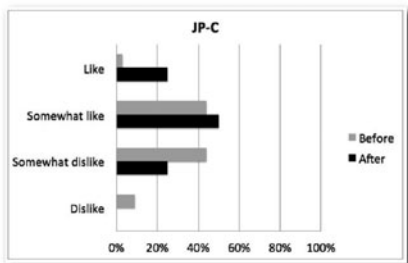
classroom, allowing the students to choose their reader freely. "Handout Style" indicates the system used for Wednesday classes, where there were no empty classrooms available to use as a bookshop. To overcome this, the teacher handed out readers of a selected level to students in class.

Overall, it is observed that those students have a tendency to come to like reading English. We found that that the effect of our extensive reading program appeared proportionately. For instance, the combined figures for "Like" and "Somewhat like" show such effect (JP-C: 47%→75%, FD-C: 58%→68%, FS-C: 59%→80%).

As for HS-C, however, the students had to read the books distributed to them on a Handout-Style basis, so they may not have been able to read their favorite books. This may explain why there is almost no difference between before and after the extensive reading program.

2. Two other questions which we found to be of interest from the questionnaire that the students in these three classes answered are shown in (1) and (2) as follows:

  (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?"

On the whole, it can be observed that the students are less worried about skipping any words they do not know while they are reading English, although the number of FS-C students answering "Somewhat yes" slightly increased after the extensive program. However, this may be explained by the large number of students who changed from "Yes" to "Somewhat yes". It is therefore presumed that the extensive reading program had a positive effect.

  (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 number of students in those four classes answering "Continue reading without a dictionary" is found to increase (JP-C: 3% →21%, FD-C: 23% →48%, FS-C: 13% →20%, HS-C: 13% →32%). This relates to the increase of percentage answering "No" and "Somewhat no" in 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?"

Meanwhile, the number of students of FS-C answering "Guess the meaning from

the context" increased after the extensive reading program, whereas other classes showed virtually no difference between before and after the program. It is assumed that the students of FS-C put their first priority on inferring from the context. On the other hand, the students of the other classes may have put their priority on cover-to-cover reading activity rather than on inferring from the context. Jones et al. (2010) pointed out this trend, and the limited data of 2010 and this year show that there are two types of students answering "Continue reading without a dictionary": one putting the top priority on cover-to-cover reading activity, and the other putting the top priority on inferring from the context. Still, the fact remains that both types of students tried hard to continue and finish reading without using a dictionary.

Table 2　Worry about skipping unknown words

(% rounded)		Bookshop Style			Handout Style
		JP–C	FD–C	FS–C	HS–C
Yes	Before	28%	19%	43%	24%
	After	13%	4%	12%	19%
	Difference	−15 pts.	−15 pts.	−31 pts.	−5 pts.
Somewhat yes	Before	53%	58%	40%	45%
	After	33%	32%	52%	27%
	Difference	−20 pts.	−26 pts.	12 pts.	−18 pts.
Somewhat no	Before	16%	15%	17%	28%
	After	33%	48%	32%	44%
	Difference	17 pts.	33 pts.	15 pts.	16 pts.
No	Before	3%	8%	0%	3%
	After	21%	16%	4%	10%
	Difference	18 pts.	8 pts.	4 pts.	7 pts.
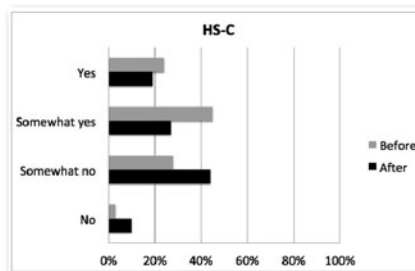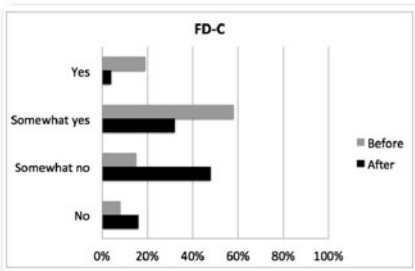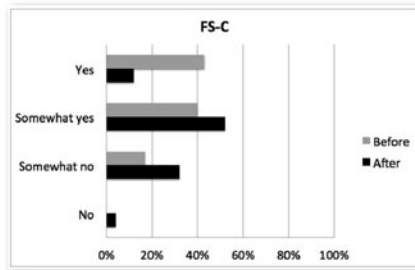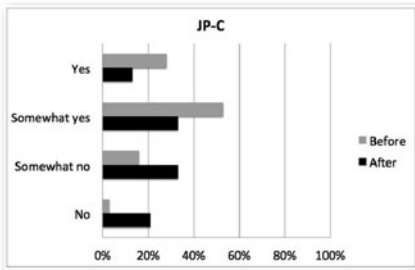
In the past two years（2009 and 2010）, the same questions were asked in the questionnaires, and the same three questions were discussed in our papers. For this time of survey the same questions were asked in the questionnaire and the results of the same three questions as the ones selected in Jones et al.（2009, 2010）were mentioned in this paper. The data of the three years describe that students come to like reading English and that they try hard to read through books without frequently using a dictionary. It may be concluded that our extensive reading program has contributed to motivating the students to learn English, and the results

Table 3　Action when encountering unknown words

(% rounded)		Bookshop Style			Handout Style
		JP-C	FD-C	FS-C	HS-C
Use a dictionary every time.	Before	38%	12%	27%	17%
	After	12%	0%	8%	13%
	Difference	−26 pts.	−12 pts.	−19 pts.	−4 pts.
Use a dictionary after reading a paragraph.	Before	28%	42%	37%	47%
	After	38%	32%	24%	37%
	Difference	10 pts.	−10 pts.	−13 pts.	−10 pts.
Continue reading without a dictionary.	Before	3%	23%	13%	13%
	After	21%	48%	20%	32%
	Difference	18 pts.	25 pts.	7 pts.	19 pts.
Guess the meaning from the context.	Before	28%	23%	20%	23%
	After	29%	20%	48%	18%
	Difference	1 pts.	−3 pts.	28 pts.	−5 pts.
Others	Before	3%	0%	3%	0%
	After	0%	0%	0%	0%
	Difference	−3 pts.	0 pts.	−3 pts.	0 pts.
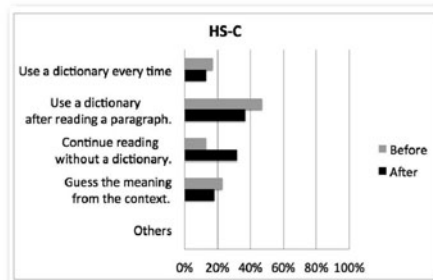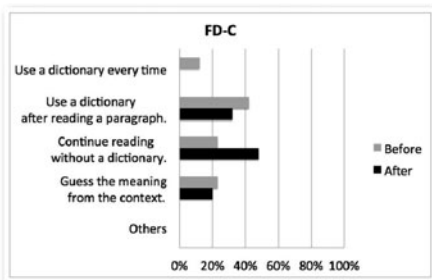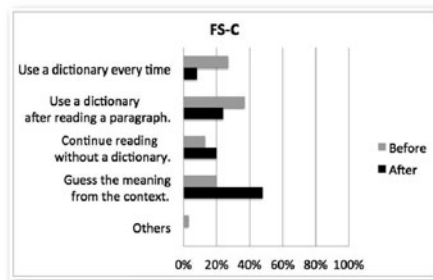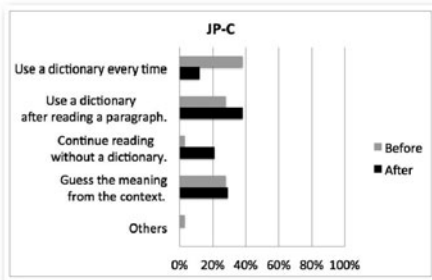
have shown us ways in which the program needs to be further developed.

Discussion

So far, as far as we view from the available data, the Extensive Reading program is being conducted successfully and effectively. The pre- and post-program questionnaires showed overall positive trait. Participating students are becoming fonder of reading. It is, naturally, very difficult to isolate the effect of extensive reading among all the positive exposure that participants had received during the half-year Integrated English course in and out of class. After all the Integrated English is only a small part of the exposure to English. It is difficult to conclude that extensive reading alone gave the positive effect to the participants' attitude toward reading. However, considering that the participants were not English majors and it is supposed that the Integrated English course was the major source of exposure to English, it is highly reasonable to claim that the extensive reading has positive effects on students' reading habits.

The data were positive for the effects of extensive reading upon improvement of reading skill. The participants showed that they became more independent readers through the program.

As a major change of procedure, in the experiment, we introduced a bookshop-style when we let the students borrow the readers. As already explained, we used an empty classroom as a bookshop, where students can take their time to choose their next book. Books are displayed like in a bookshop and the levels of the selections are raised gradually week by week. The effect of this new scheme is worth examining further. It is considered to be very promising in its effects on forming better reading attitudes.

Note:

It should be noted that the new procedure was not possible without the dedication and enthusiastic cooperation of the FLC secretary, Ms. Sumie Yonekura, for whom the authors are in debt. Further technical change will be planned and be executed.

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