

The Effects of Different Types of Extensive Reading Materials on Reading Amount, Attitude, and Motivation

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1. Introduction

Over the past decade, extensive reading (ER) has rapidly been spreading more than ever before among people of all ages in Japan. One of the causes of this favourable trend is the spread of the new style of ER (Sakai 2002) called Start with Simple Stories (SSS) advocated by Kunihide Sakai, a university professor in Tokyo, in the late 1990s. One of its particular characteristics is the reading material that they use.

It is obvious that reading materials for ER play a crucial role in a successful ER program. Although it has been discussed whether to use authentic materials or simplified texts (Day – Bamford 1998), the most widespread materials for learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) are language learner literature called graded readers (GR). A major obstacle, however, is that there are a considerable number of Japanese high school and university students who have difficulty in reading even the easiest level of GR without translating each word into Japanese. For the purpose of improving the situation and encouraging learners to learn to read without translation, the SSS study group and the Japan Extensive Reading Association (JERA) members have been promoting the new effective ER approach, SSS, which has been spreading rapidly among many ER teachers and practitioners throughout Japan. Here is the new approach that has brought ER programs great success in Japan.

1.1. Background of English education in Japan

Contrary to the objectives of high school English education which aims to develop students' practical communication abilities as advocated by Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (2003), the main goal of studying English for many junior and senior high school students is to succeed in entrance examinations to higher institutions. As university entrance examinations require examinees to read difficult but rather short essays

or stories with great accuracy in high school English classes, fluency is weighed less while accuracy is emphasized. For this reason high school students are trained to read English using word-by-word translation called *yakudoku* (Hino 1988) in a rigid grammar-translation-based English education for six years. Students cannot read English without stopping every time they encounter unknown words and consulting a dictionary. In this kind of learning environment, it is inevitable that high school and university students start reading with very easy English in order to unlearn the reading style of habitual translation and thereby acquire reading fluency.

2. Extensive reading materials

Among the top ten principles for a successful ER program that Day and Bamford (2002) offered, the first two tips concerning the reading materials are “the reading material is easy”, and “a variety of reading material on a wide range of topics must be available” (Day – Bamford 2002). The level of material which is considered easy is not stated specifically in their tips, as it seems the difficulty level varies from learner to learner. On the other hand, Sakai (2002), the SSS group and the JERA members encourage any level of beginner reader to start with very simple stories. By simple stories, they mean picture books called Levelled Readers (LR) that are written for L1 children to learn to read their own language. Reading an abundance of simple stories enables a smooth and easy transition to higher levels of books.

2.1. Levelled readers (LR)

2.1.1. Advantages of LR

First, learners are suggested to read at least 100 books from LR in two or three months at the beginning of an ER program in order to unlearn the translation habit and become used to reading without stopping every time they encounter unknown words.

It is true that there has been strong opposition, criticism and resistance from many English teachers in Japan against using children’s picture books including LR for high school or university students. They claim that students would not read them because the stories are too childish, the vocabulary and expressions are difficult and not effective for EFL learners in

learning to read, or the sentences are so simple that they are not appropriate in preparation for entrance examinations. Contrary to these expectations, however, the majority of high school and university students enjoy reading LR, because these picture books lower learners' affective filter and encourage all the learners, even the students with a fear of English, to give reading a try. According to Takase (2004, 2007, 2008), the introduction of LR greatly motivated her high school and university students at any English level, lower levels in particular, to read extensively. In the questionnaires and interviews that the author has conducted during her ER classes in the past decade, students gave the following reasons for their preference of LR:

1. beginner levels of LR are easy to read for students at the lowest English level;
2. bigger font sizes are used compared to those in GR or school textbooks;
3. stories are simple, thus, easy to comprehend;
4. it is not time-consuming to finish a whole book;
5. pictures and illustrations help learners understand the story;
6. pictures and illustrations teach learners different cultures;
7. stories, classic tales, in particular, are familiar to learners as they read them in Japanese when they were little;
8. LR are easy enough for any learners to concentrate in reading.

2.1.2. Popular LR series

The following are several series of fiction and non-fiction LR suggested for learners to read at the beginning of an ER program for warming up, for eliminating habitual translation, for regaining self-confidence, and for experiencing the joy of reading.

- **Oxford Reading Tree Series (ORT) (Oxford University Press, UK)**

The ORT series written for British children contains over 800 books including nine levels of story books, ten levels of easy non-fiction, seven levels of advanced stories, and two levels of biographies. The lowest level of story books contains one word or a sentence in one page in order for beginner readers to grasp the whole story with the aid of pictures. As the same characters appear in every story up to the ninth level, readers become familiar with them and feel a sense of intimacy when they reach the second or the third level. Most learners,

including high school and university students, are motivated to continue reading until the end of the series, approximately 200 books, even though books in levels 8 and 9 hold about the same difficulty level as several GR level 1. Some junior high schools in Japan have started to use ORT story books as school textbooks, which greatly motivate students to read and learn English. As a result, not only students' reading skills but also listening and writing skills have increased immensely (Takami 2007, Furukawa 2008, Yasufuku 2008).

- **Longman Literacy Land Series (LLL) (Pearson Education, UK)**

The LLL series, also written for British elementary school children, contains over 100 story books called LLL Story Street (LLLSS) in twelve levels and about 200 non-fiction books. As with the ORT story books, the same characters appear in each book; however, unlike the ORT series, the characters of the LLLSS grow up facing various problems as the book levels increase. Similar to the way in which students read the whole series of the ORT story books, many students are motivated to read until the 12th level of the series, which has the difficulty level equivalent to most GR level 1 and many of GR level 2 books. Non-fiction books include geography, history and science at different levels.

- **I Can Read Books (ICR) (Harper Collins, USA)**

First published in 1957, the ICR series, created by several great picture book authors and illustrators such as Maurice Sendak and Arnold Lobel, contains over 300 fiction and non-fiction books in five levels. Several stories from this series are introduced in Japanese elementary school textbooks in translation; therefore, this series is very popular among high school and university students for familiarity.

- **Ready-to-Read (RTR) (Simon & Schuster, USA)**

RTR is another series of about 300 fiction and non-fiction books in four levels. Among the many stories, Snoopy, Sponge Bob, the Henry and Mudge series are very popular with Japanese readers.

- **Step into Reading (SIR) (Random House, USA)**

The SIR series holds over 250 picture books in five levels, which contain very popular children's stories from Berenstain Bears, Sesame Street, Disney, Thomas, Winnie-the-Pooh,

etc. in Steps 1, 2, and 3. Non-fiction is found mostly in Steps 4 and 5, and includes science, math, history, culture, and biography, sports heroes, in particular.

2.1.3. Children's picture books and L1 young readers

Reading L1 children's picture books and chapter books is one choice that students have after reading an abundance of easy LR. They can mix these picture books and chapter books with higher levels of LR. Some popular series are the *Curious George* series, the *Mr. Men and Little Miss* series, the *Nate the Great* series, and the *Oxford Wolf Hill* series. As these books are at a beginning level of readability, most students find little or no difficulty after reading 100 easy LR.

The next step students take is either reading GR or young readers for L1 children. There are always several enthusiastic readers who devote most of their spare time to reading books in any level of class in high school or university. These bookworms often choose the following books together with or in place of GR. Popular series include the *Magic Tree House* series by Mary Pope Osborne, the *Marvin Redpost* series by Louis Sacher, *The World Greatest Artists* and *The World Greatest Composers* by Mike Venezia, *The Zack Files* by Dan Greenburg, the *Judy Moody* series by Megan McDonald, the *Magic School Bus* series by J.Cole / B. Degen, the *Amber Brown* series by Paula Danziger, and *Matilda* and other books by Roald Dahl. There is a tendency that once they start reading one book from a series, they almost always continue reading other books from the same series or by the same authors until they finish up reading the whole series.

2.2. Language learner literature (GR)

2.2.1. Popular GR series

After warming up by reading very easy 100 LR books and some easy L1 children's books, the next step most students take is to start reading Language Learner Literature or GR series. Students usually do not stop reading LR or easy children's books completely and jump into GR, but read LR and GR concurrently. They gradually increase the number of GR, but never abandon LR completely. When they do not have enough time to read a long story, or

when they are tired and want to relax, they can always go back to their favourite LR series. The most popular GR series available in Japan are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Major graded readers

Series	Acronym	Level	Headwords	Σ title	Publisher
Cambridge English Readers	CER	0 – 6	250 - 3800	62	Cambridge University Press
Macmillan Readers	MMR	1 – 6	300 - 2200	145	Macmillan Education
Oxford Bookworms Library	OBW	0 – 6	250 - 2500	180	Oxford University Press
Oxford Dominoes	ODM	0 – 3	250 - 1000	43	Oxford University Press
Oxford Bookworms Factfiles	OFF	1 – 5	400 - 1800	40	Oxford University Press
Penguin Young Readers	PYR	1 – 4	300 - 1400	80	Pearson Longman
Penguin Readers	PGR	0 – 6	200 - 3000	395	Pearson Longman
Black Cat Green Apples	BCG	0 – 2	--	41	Cideb Black Cat Publishing.

As students' tastes differ greatly, it is difficult to generalize which of the above GR series are popular. Some students prefer particular authors of the same series like Tim Vicary from the OBW series, other students like to read stories from movies in the PGR series, other students choose retold classics in all GR series and compare them with each other; still others try to read all the books of the same level in the same series. Although there are many good and popular books in CER, the total number in its series is much smaller compared to other GR series. The BCG series are a little too difficult for many Japanese beginner readers. In general, once students become used to reading one series, they tend to continue reading and try to go to the next level in the same series. For this reason, BCG, which lacks the easy starter series, cannot become students' favourite series, in spite of its beautiful illustrations, good stories, and beautiful and charming audio recording.

2.2.2. Innovative GR: Foundation Reading Library (FRL)

A new GR series called the Foundation Reading Library (FRL), written by Rob Waring and Maurice Jamall, was published by Thomson Learning (now Heinle Cengage Learning) in 2006, which, according to Stewart (2008), is an innovation in ER. In general, students have their own taste for storylines, illustrations, genres, series, and publishers as mentioned above. The FRL series, however, seems to have won the hearts and minds of most young Japanese learners. There are several reasons that make this series innovative and so popular among young people.

First, the FRL series consists of seven levels of forty-two books, six books in each level, and have the same characters from the group of teenagers in all the books, just like the

ORT series and the LLLSS (Longman Literacy Land Story Street) series mentioned in the LR section. This makes readers feel familiar with the characters. In addition, most of these teenagers are ordinary kids who hardly ever serve as good role models, and get what they deserve at the end. According to Stewart, the writers added “the moral dimension to the series without preaching or making the characters unrealistic” (Stewart 2008: 19). This kind of storyline seems to make young readers feel even closer to the characters. Moreover, the illustrations attract young people, who were brought up reading comics and watching animated films, because of their vivid colour and description. Interestingly, many students comment on each character’s bad, dirty, or brave deeds and behaviour.

Second, despite the length and attraction of each story, the level of the vocabulary is low and the number of headwords (HW) is only 75 - 150 in the beginner three levels 1 – 3. Compared to the other easiest levels of the GR series, the FRL series holds more running words (RW) or word count with the exception of the CER Starter series (see Table 2). This means that the ratio of the appearance of the same words is higher in the FRL series than in PGR0, OBW0, and MMR1. In addition, 98% of the words in this series are found in the words list for Japanese junior high school students. The choice of vocabulary and the small number of HW have given confidence to beginner readers and low level learners, in spite of the length of each story. Thus, the above two factors, content and the familiarity with the words in the FRL series, strongly motivate Japanese students to read all the books in this series.

Table 2. Comparison of HW and RW between FRL and other GR series

Series & Level	Headwords	Running Words (Word count)
FRL Level 1	75	500 - 620
FRL Level 2	100	640 - 760
FRL Level 3	150	680 - 910
PGR Easystarts (PGR0)	200	880 - 1,100
FRL Level 4	200	1,270 - 1,430
OBW Starters (OBW0)	250	700 - 1,500
FRL Level 5	250	1,120 - 1,750
CER Starter (CER0)	250	1,973 - 2,000
MMR 1	300	500 - 780
FRL Level 6	300	2,300 - 2,640
FRL Level 7	350	2,280 - 2,930

2.2.3. Language Learner Literature Award

There is another way to motivate students to read extensively. The Language Learner Literature (LLL) Award for graded readers in English was established in 2004 by the Extensive Reading Foundation, which “aims to support the development of language learner literature in English and to encourage extensive reading in language education” (<http://erfoundation.org/awards>). Every year newly published books are nominated by publishers in four different difficulty levels, and the three best graded readers from each level are chosen by an international jury. Students as well as teachers are encouraged to read the finalist books and to vote on the Internet for their favourite one in each level. Participating in the voting motivates students to read seriously as they must comment on their choice. Students in general choose to read different books according to their own taste and level; however, reading the same LLL finalist books give them an opportunity to discuss each book and share their ideas about their likes and dislikes, with the hope of choosing the best new GR in the world. Some winner books from 2004 to 2008 are as follows:

- **young learners level**

The kindest family. PM Plus Story Books, Level 20.

Is it a butterfly? Macmillan Children’s Readers, Primary, Level 1.

Thumbelina. Oxford Classic Tales, Beginner 2.

The boy who burped too much. Stone Arch Books. Realistic Fiction

Dorothy. Black Cat. Earlyreads Level 1.

- **adolescents and adults (beginners level)**

Jojo’s story. Cambridge English Readers, Level 2.

Love among the haystacks. Oxford Bookworms Library, Stage 2.

The Amazon rain forest. Penguin Readers, Elementary, Level 2.

Let me out. Cambridge English Readers, Starter Level.

Horror trip on the Pecos river. Teen Readers, Level 2.

- **adolescents and adults (intermediate level)**

A kiss before dying. Macmillan Guided Readers, Intermediate Level.

Rabbit-proof fence. Oxford Bookworms Library, Stage 3.

Dead cold. Cambridge English Readers, Level 2.

Billy Elliot. Penguin Readers, Level 3.

- **adolescents and adults (advanced level)**

Captain Corelli's mandolin. Penguin Readers, Level 6.

Cold mountain. Penguin Readers, Level 5.

The age of innocence. Oxford Bookworms Library, Stage 5.

Body on the rocks. Hueber Lektüren, Level 6.

Further information can be found at <http://erfoundation.org/awards>.

2.3. Manga (Comics)

Japanese comics are very popular among young people and they are widely read all over the world. Comics or animated films can be excellent tools to learn a foreign language as far as motivation is concerned. For Japanese students, however, there are pros and cons to including comics on the bookshelf. As most of the students know the stories of many of the comics, they might just look at the illustrations and read the story without reading English. An even worse case might be expected if the comics are bilingual. In that case, it is very likely that students are reading mostly Japanese. Therefore, school teachers tend to avoid buying them partly from an educational standpoint, and partly from the limited budget, as comics are more expensive than any ER material. If used properly, however, comics work very effectively to motivate reluctant students, male students, in particular. Comic books often serve as a trigger for reluctant learners to read. Among many popular comic books, *Spirited Away* by Miyazaki Hayao, *Dragon Ball* by Toriyama Akira, *Devilman* by Nagai Go are often read.

3. Useful information for ER

3.1. *Eigo Tadoku Kanzen Book Guide* [Complete book guide for extensive reading]

Complete book guide for extensive reading supports ER teachers and practitioners in Japan by providing comprehensive and accurate information on over 10,000 books. This book guide was first published by Cosmopier Publisher in 2005, and contains information on 10,000 titles of ER books including 14 LR series, 11 GR series, recommended books written

for L1 children and young readers, and popular paperbacks. The data were gathered and compiled by Furukawa and his colleagues (2005) in cooperation with SSS and JERA members, including ER practitioners called *Tadokist*, meaning working people and housewives who are involved in ER by themselves. The book is renewed every two years after getting feedback from ER teachers and practitioners and adding new titles. The second version was published in 2007, with comprehensive data of over 12,000 titles in total in 475 pages. The book contains the title, genre, readability called *Yomiyasusa* Level (YL), running words (RW) or word count, level of recommendation, comments, and ISBN for each book. Students as well as teachers often consult this book guide to look for new titles, readability, word count, genre, and other information. Although the introduction of major LR and GR series, suggested children's books, and comments of each book are written in Japanese, the series of books, titles, genres, levels, RW, and recommendation levels are comprehensible to non-Japanese speakers. The distinct feature is *Yomiyasusa* Level (YL), which is the readability level mainly focused on Japanese students. An abundance of information of ER books is provided at <https://www.seg.co.jp/ssr/review.html>.

3.2. *Yomiyasusa* Level (YL) (Readability)

Identifying the readability of ER materials is a critical factor for a successful ER program. According to the *Dictionary of language teaching and applied linguistics*, readability “depends on many factors, including (a) the average length of sentences in a passage (b) the number of new words a passage contains (c) the grammatical complexity of the language used” (Richard – Platt – Platt 1992: 306). However, levelling ER material involves various factors besides the above mentioned three factors. Cultural factors or prior background knowledge can be critical factors that make books readable. This means that readability greatly differs among learners of different cultures and education systems.

The number of headwords that each publisher gives in a text can be a good but rough indication of readability, because each publisher uses their own scale and HW, and there is no compatibility with each other. For example, according to Furukawa and his colleagues (2007), MMR1 (HW: 300) is easier than OBW0 (HW: 250) and PGR (HW: 200), PGR1 (HW: 300) is easier than CER0 (HW: 250), MMR2 (HW: 600) is easier than CER1 (HW: 400) and OBW1 (HW: 400), etc. You cannot fully depend on the headwords that each publisher provides.

In order to fill the gaps of readability differences among GR and also to measure the reading level of ungraded readers, including LR, L1 children's books and authentic books for young readers and popular paperbacks, YL was established by Akio Furukawa from SSS Group in cooperation with JERA members. New books for ER have been reviewed and introduced on the website, many of which are contributed by JERA members and adult ER practitioners called '*Tadokists*'. Their way of levelling books is a subjective assessment of readability for both graded and ungraded readers. Individual readers assess each book by considering factors like illustrations, the size of fonts, different text styles, genres, and the backgrounds of the books, familiarity with the content, and at the same time comparing them with levels of other books. The same book is assessed by several people for accuracy, and therefore, each book has some range from the lowest possible to the highest possible level. All the books are graded into 100 levels from 0.0 to 10.0, 0.0 being the easiest picture books with no words except for its title, and 10.0 being the hardest authentic books that are not appropriate for ER. The following are some examples of YL (Furukawa 2007: 1):

YL 0.0: Readable without the knowledge of English language.

YL 1.0: Readable to learners of English with more than 80 hours of studying.

YL 3.0: Children's books of about 10,000 words length.

YL 7.0: Paperbacks (Stories) for adults.

YL 8.0: More difficult paperbacks.

For further information visit [http://www.seg.co.jp/ssss/word_count/YL-20070621.html].

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, it is obvious that reading material works as a critical factor to motivate learners to read extensively. Reading an abundance of very easy LR at the beginning stage of an ER program enables any level of learners to feel self-confident, to unlearn the habit of translation and become used to reading without a dictionary or translation, which enables a smooth and easy transition to higher levels of books. This subsequently enables students to

choose books based on their individual levels and preferences from various types and genres of books, and to gradually acquire reading speed and fluency. If learners can find reading materials that match their level and interests, they can surely get into books. Consequently, their reading speed is accelerated and their reading fluency will surely be ameliorated. For these purposes different types of ER materials including LR, GR, L1 children's books and young readers, fiction and non-fiction of various types are mandatory for any ER bookshelf or library.

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Resources

- **Childrens picture books and chapter books**

- Hargreaves, Roger. 1984. *Mr Men and Little Miss series*. NY. Price Stern Sloan.
- Hunt, Roderick. 2000. *Oxford Wolf Hill series*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ray, Hans Augusto – Margret Ray. 1973. *Curious George series*. Houghton Mifflin, USA,
- Sharmat, Marjorie Weinman. 1977. *Nate the Great series*. NY. Random House.

- **Books for L1 young readers**

- Cole, Joanna – Bruce Degen. 2004. *The Magic School Bus series*. NY: Scholastic.
- Danziger, Paula. 1997. *The Amber Brown series*. NY: Scholastic.
- Dahl, Roald. 1998. *Matilda*. NY: Puffin Books.
- Greenburg, Dan. 2001. *The Zack Files*. NY: Grosset & Dunlap.
- McDonald, Megan. 2000. *The Judy Moody series*. London: Walker Books.
- Osborne, Mary Pope. 2001. *The Magic Tree House series*. NY: Random House,

Sacher, Louis. 1994, *The Marvin Redpost series*. NY: Random House,
Venezia, Mike. 1989. *The World Greatest Artists*. Chicago: Children's Press
Venezia, Mike. 1989. *The World Greatest Composers*. Chicago: Children's Press

Language Learner Literature Award Winners from 2004 to 2008

- **Young Learners**

[no indication of author]. (Retold by Krista Bell). 2003. *The kindest family*. Boston: Thomson Learning.
Llewellyn, Claire – Ant Parker. (Retold by Carol Read). 2004. *Is it a butterfly?* Oxford: Macmillan Education.
Andersen, Hans. (Retold by Sue Arengo). 2005. *Thumbelina*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Nickel, Scott. 2006. *The boy who burped too much*. MN: Stone Arch Books
Traverso, Paola. 2007. *Dorothy*. Rapallo: Black Cat Publishing.

- **Adolescents and Adults: Beginners Level**

Davenport, Paul. 2007. *Horror trip on the Pecos River*. Copenhagen: Sangill Grafisk Produktion, Aschehoug/Alinea.
Lawrence, David Herbert. (Retold by Jennifer Bassett). 2004. *Love among the haystacks*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Moses, Antoinette 2003. *Jojo's story*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Moses, Antoinette. 2006. *Let me out*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Smith, Bernard. 2005. *The Amazon rain forest*. Essex: Pearson Education.

- **Adolescents and Adults: Intermediate Level**

Egmont, Melvin. (Retold by Karen Holmes). 2007. *Billy Elliot*. Essex: Pearson Education.
Garimara, Doris Pilkington. (Retold by Jennifer Bassett). 2006. *Rabbit-proof fence*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Leather, Sue – Edith Wharton. (Retold by Clare West). 2004. *Dead cold*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Levin, Ira. (Retold by F. H. Cornish). 2003. *A kiss before dying*. Oxford: Macmillan Education.

- **Adolescents and Adults: Advanced Level**

De Bernieres, Louis. (Retold by Mary Tomalin). 2003. *Captain Corelli's mandolin*. Essex: Pearson Education.

Frazier, Charles. (Retold by Mary Tomalin). 2004. *Cold mountain*. Essex: Pearson Longman.

Kirby, Denise. 2007. *Body on the rocks*. Hueber Verlag.

Wharton, Edith. (Retold by Clare West). 2006. *The age of innocence*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.