A Review of Two Years of Extensive Reading

Phillip Radcliffe

Abstract

One way to improve students' English comprehension is to get them to read more "natural" English both in and outside of the classroom. Extensive Reading (ER) is a program that is gaining wider acceptance in Japan and other countries. Students read very easy, enjoyable Graded Readers without the use of a dictionary to build their reading speed and reading fluency. There are now sites like the Moodle Reader site *(moodlereader.org)*, a site created to test students' comprehension of a large number of graded readers, and more universities (as well as some middle and high schools) have begun to introduce ER programs at their institutions in Japan. After an initial trial was run in one class of 15 students in 2010 at Sapporo University, it was decided to expand the program for all first year English majors beginning in 2011 and to secure funding for books to add to the library. Two years of ER results for freshmen will be presented to examine how the program is working so far.

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to compare the results of the English Department's ER program at Sapporo University for two freshman year classes over a two year period (2011-2012) and to review and to draw some conclusions about the ER program and make any changes or additions to the program if deemed necessary.

Teaching Context

This study consists of the results of two years of ER for first year university English majors (male and female). All first year majors are required to take Nyumon Enshu I and Nyumon Enshu II, which are courses designed to prepare students to study at university level. The ER program has been coupled with these courses during the first year of study and accounts for 20 percent of the final grade for those two courses.

Method

Although there is general testing (a placement test and two achievement tests) of all first and second year English majors three times a year, the reading sections of the tests were not designed with ER in mind and are not considered valid for measuring ER results. Furthermore, the students are not required to take the TOIEC exam each year, so, for now, there is no relevant testing being done that can be used to judge the efficacy of ER. Despite this, numerous studies do show ER to be beneficial to students' overall language learning (Day and Bamford, 1998; Elley 1991; Hafiz and Tudor, 1989; Krashen 1993; Mason and Krashen, 1997; Nation, 1997; Robb & Susser 1989; Waring, 2006). Correlating students' GPA with ER results was considered, but GPA scores were also deemed to be an unreliable tool for evaluating ER (*see fig. 1*). Though there have been studies that show a strong or moderate correlation between reading and GPA (Kerstjen and Nery, 2009; Avdi, 2011) this correlation cannot be attributed to ER per se, but rather to "Academic Reading" in general. It is also conceivable that GPA scores alone do not reflect how much individual students will read in an ER program. For example, in this study a few students with a low GPA read more than the average and a few students with a

high GPA read very little. What this paper does show then are the raw data (number of words read) for the 2011 and 2012 ER program and it uses that data for comparison and to make inferences.

Review of Extensive Reading

The aim of ER is to help students become better at the skill of reading rather than reading to study the language itself, which is called Intensive Reading, i.e. grammar/translation. Intensive Reading introduces new language items to the students, while ER helps students practice and get a deeper feeling for them. ER builds vocabulary, improves reading speed and reading fluency, builds confidence, motivation and enjoyment and allows students to read a lot of English at or around their own ability level. Below is a list of what is generally accepted to be true about ER.

About Extensive Reading
- Extensive Reading is a way to teach a foreign language (in general) and a way to teach reading (in particular).
- Between 95% and 98% of words must be familiar and no more than 2 words per every 100 should be unfamiliar (Nation, P. 2001).
- It takes between 10-30 encounters of a word receptively for the form (spelling or sound) of an average word to be connected to its meaning.
- Students need to read many books at, or just below, their level in order to gain control of high frequency words.
- Around 400,000 words need to be read in order to have an effect on language test scores.

The Role of Extensive Reading in Language Learning
- It can provide comprehensible input.
- It can enhance learners' general language competence.

- It increases the students' exposure to the language.
- It can increase knowledge of vocabulary.
- It can lead to improvement in writing.
- It can motivate learners to read.
- It can consolidate previously learned language.
- It helps to build confidence with extended texts.
- It encourages the exploitation of textual redundancy.
- It facilitates the development of prediction skills.

(Bell, T. 1998)

Extensive Reading at Sapporo University

The main objective of the ER program at SU is to reinforce vocabulary and grammar structures through large amounts of reading easy texts over at least a two year period rather than conducting remedial classes in those areas. The benefits of ER are stated above. Reading for fun may be the ideal, but it is not very practical since most Japanese students don't seem to enjoy reading even in their native language. Some of them may learn to enjoy it, but most will not read if given a choice. Many educators are still against testing in ER, but others are more pragmatic. Testing is an efficient way to monitor how much and how often students are reading and it also provides useful feedback to the students.

Nyumon Enshu I and II

This is a course for freshmen. About 10 to 15 minutes are set aside in class for silent reading to encourage students to read and to cut down on making them read too much "homework" outside of class. All students start out at the lowest level at the beginning and progress to the higher levels according to their individual abilities. Students go online to the Moodle Reader site and take a quiz after reading a book. The Moodle Reader quizzes are used to determine if students comprehend the texts they are reading, and they are awarded words for each quiz that they pass. A passing

mark was set at 50 percent for the quizzes. The quizzes are set for 15 minutes and there are extra random questions for each quiz. A time delay for taking quizzes is set for 24 hours so that students don't try to cram in many books at the last minute (they should be learning to pace themselves), and each student's level is set so that they don't try to take a quiz above their level at the end of the semester just to get more words to meet their goal.

The university library contains at least three copies of each book at various levels. Graded Readers that have quizzes for the Moodle Reader site were selected from four publishers: Cambridge, Oxford, Macmillon and Penguin. ER counts for 20 percent of the final grade for Nyumon Enshu I and II. The goal is for students to read between 30,000 to 50,000 words each semester (60,000 to 100,000 words in one year). Grading for ER within the Nyumon Enshu I and II courses is based on a point/percentage system. For example, over 50,000 words = 20 points (20% of the grade for the course), between 45,000 - 50,000 words = 18-19 points (18%-19% of the grade), and so on.

Results

2011 Results

The 2011 results (*see fig 2.*) show that more than half the students (37 out of 62) did not meet the minimum of 30,000 words read in the first semester while 25 students read more than 30,000 words. Of those students, 17 students read between 30,000 and 100,000 words and eight students read 50,000 words or more. For the second semester, only 8 (almost 9) students read 60,000 words or more with the highest score being less than 100,000 words (82,746 words). Although most students did increase the number of words read in the second semester, the increase was very low.

2012 Results

The 2012 results (*see fig. 3*) show an improvement from the previous year. Just over one-third of the 2012 class (19 out of 52) read fewer than 30,000 words in the first semester, while 33 students read more than 30,000 words. Of those, 16 students read between 30,000 and 100,000 and 17 students read more than 100,000 with one student reading 99,124 words and another student reading 345,491 words. In the second semester there were 27 students who read less than the minimum goal of 60,000 words (slightly over half) while 25 students read more than 60,000 words. Of those students, 7 of them read between 60,000 words and 18 students read more than 100,000 words. One student read 369,876 words and one student read 417,028 words. The second semester shows a decrease in the number of words read by about half of the students (27), but it also shows a significant increase of words read by the other 25 students.

Comparison of 2011 and 2012 Results

The difference in words read from 2011 and 2012 for each semester can be seen in *fig. 4* and *fig. 5*. On average, the 2012 class read twice as many words as the 2011 class in both semesters. While the 2012 class results cannot necessarily be termed a great success (only half meeting the minimum goal after one year), it was much better and more consistent than in 2011. The different results between the 2011 students and the 2012 students cannot be explained by their abilities, grades or GPA scores. Therefore, it's likely the difference is in how the ER program was understood and implemented by each instructor and how instructors made changes in the way they think about and manage ER in their classes after the first year.

Reasons for Different Results in 2011 and 2012

Despite holding several meetings about the ER program, it became apparent that instructors were still unsure as to the purpose and application of the ER program.

This also led to confusion among students about why they had to read, how often they should read and how much they should read each semester. Some instructors were giving students time to read in class while others were simply encouraging students to read, but not following up on their progress and not explaining the purpose and importance of ER for their language learning. In the first semester of 2011, students were divided into six groups for Nyumon I, which meant there were six instructors. The students were put into groups of 10 or 11 according to their student ID number, so there were no high level groups or low level groups. All groups were of mixed abilities. Two groups of students performed well, one was average and three groups did not perform well, with most of them reading less than the minimum goal during both semesters.

The second semester in 2011 saw a substantial reduction in words read by most groups. Nyumon Enshu II was divided into three groups; high level, mid level and low level. There were only three instructors and only one of them had taught Nyumon Enshu I. The other two instructors had not participated in any of the discussions about ER and were not even aware of what ER was. These instructors had to be brought up to speed in a short time. Even so, the results of the second semester of 2011 were not much different than the first semester. This seems to indicate that not everyone was in agreement in how to implement ER. Of course, it takes time for instructors to fully appreciate and understand the goals and benefits of the ER program if they are not familiar with it.

Summary

The data collected show that the 2012 Nyumon Enshu I and II classes read about twice as much as the 2011 Nyumon Enshu I-II class. The reasons for this discrepancy seem to point more toward the instructors' understanding and implementation of ER than to students' abilities. The 2011 year was the first time to

introduce ER to all students, but there were many differences among the instructors as to its implementation and there were some misunderstandings on what the purpose of ER was and on how to encourage student participation in the program. While much improvement was shown in 2012, about one-third of the students still did not meet the minimum goal after one year.

Recommendations

The amount of time available for ER in the Nyumon Enshu classes is limited and it may not be adequate for all students. ER probably needs to be integrated into other parts of the curriculum as well. One idea is to include ER in some of the conversation classes using simple written book reports of books they have read for short oral presentations and to have students sometimes read aloud in pairs or in small groups. By tying ER to other courses, students may be motivated to read more and to read more often.

Conclusion

The data collected show that while the 2012 class performed better overall and read twice as many words than the 2011 class did, there is still a fall off in reading in the second semester. All instructors' groups showed improvement from the previous year which demonstrates greater confidence and understanding on the instructors' part. Silent reading time was implemented by all instructors and this seems to have had a positive effect on student performance in relation to the number of quizzes taken and passed. Introducing ER into other courses may provide a way to encourage students to read more and recycle some of the vocabulary and grammar in different ways.

A successful ER program doesn't just happen - it evolves over time. It requires

instructors to agree upon a set of principles and rules and have a common understanding of its purpose. It also requires good communication among the instructors, timely feedback, teamwork and lots of trial and error. Most importantly, it requires a belief that ER works and is a useful and important component of any serious language program.

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Extensive Reading Online Resources

Extensive Reading Central <http://jera-tadoku.jp>

Japan Extensive Reading Association <http://jera-tadoku.jp/index.html>

JALT ER Sig <http://www.ersig.org/drupal-ersig/links>

Rob Warings Extensive Reading Pages <http://www.robwaring.org/er>

The Extensive Reading Foundation <http://erfoundation.org/erf>

The Moodle Reader <http://www.moodlereader.org>

Appendix

GPA

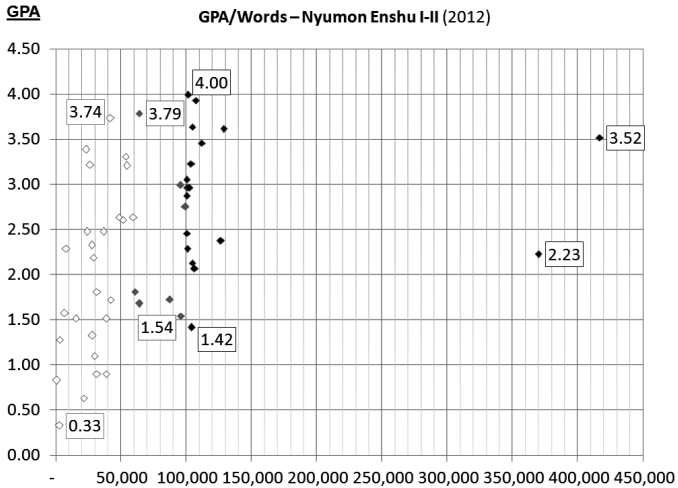GPA/Words – Nyumon Enshu I-II (2012)

Fig 1: GPA/Words comparison (2012).
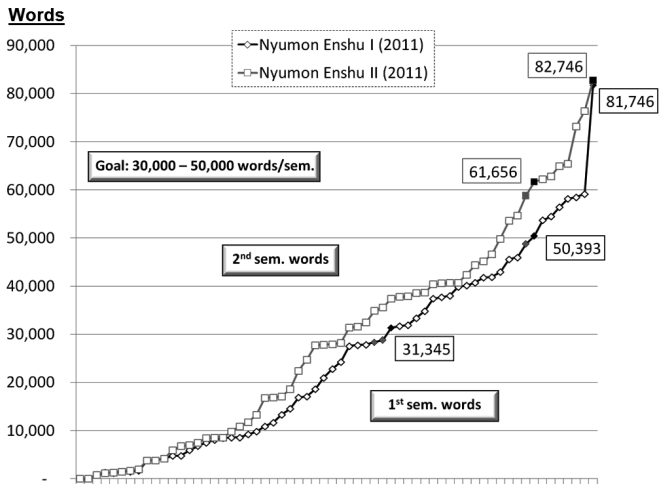
Words

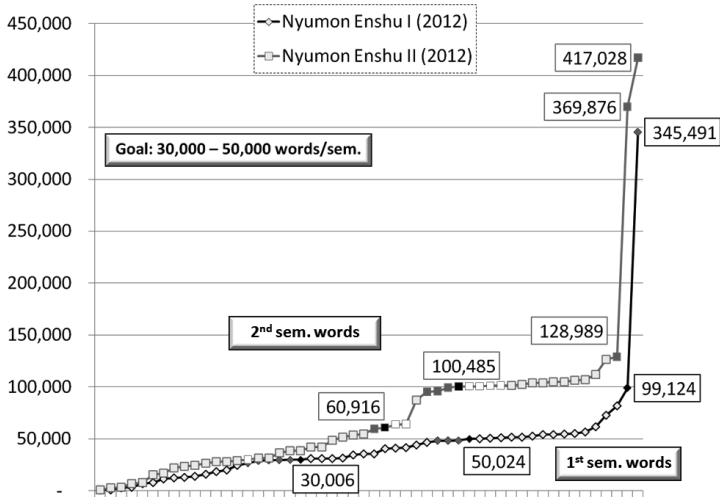**Fig 2: Comparison of 2011 first and second semester results.**

Words

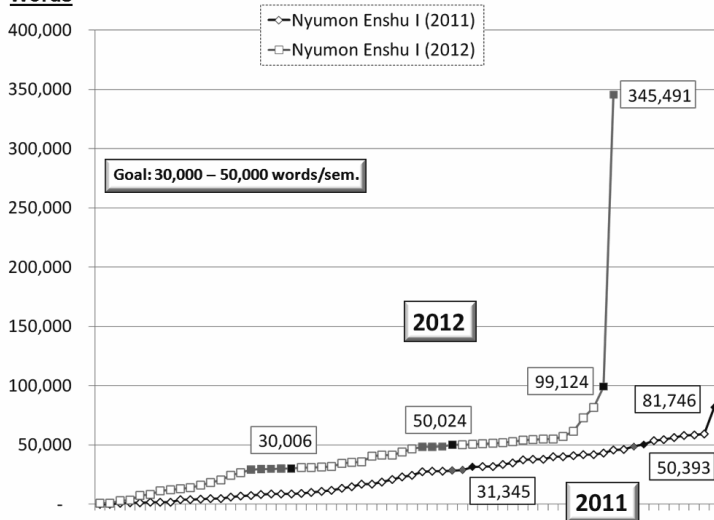**Fig 3: Comparison of 2012 first and second semester results.**

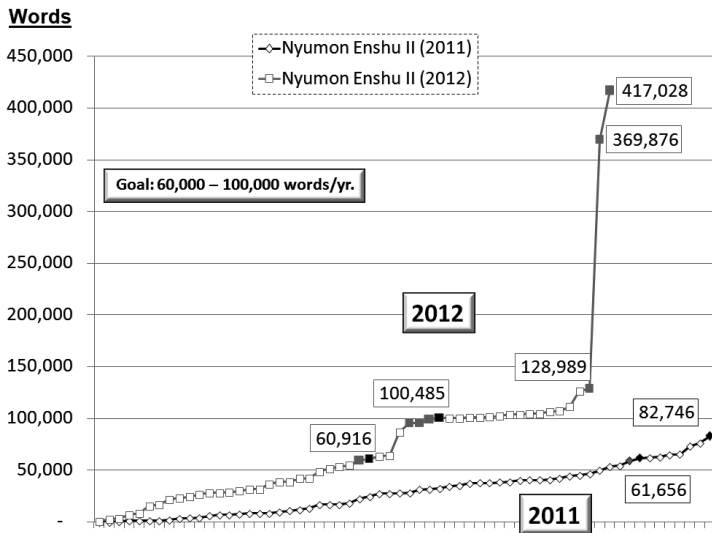**Fig 4: Comparison of 2011 and 2012 first semester results.**

多読の二年間のレビュー（フィリップ・ラドクリフ）

Words

Fig 5: Comparison of 2011 and 2012 second semester results.