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**Research Note**

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## **Developing a Survey to Better Understand Reluctant Extensive Readers in Japan**

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### **Abstract**

In order for learners to show proficiency improvements on standardized tests or other tangible benefits, university-level English extensive reading programs encourage, cajole, or demand that students read massive amounts of text. Successful completion of word count requirements can represent a significant investment of time on the part of learners, often in the range of 40–60 hours, most of that out of class. Even though reading can greatly help learners gain proficiency and demonstrate it on important standardized tests, a significant number of students either resist reading or refuse to read. This paper describes the beginning phase of a study to better understand the reasons for this lack of compliance on the part of these reluctant readers. In this phase, a literature review is combined with program experience in the design of a survey. The constructs are arranged in three areas that can affect compliance with extensive reading program requirements: attitudes, motivations, and contextual factors.

### **Key words**

Extensive reading, Program design, Motivation, Reluctant readers

#### **1. Introduction**

This paper describes how a review of relevant literature on language learning and reading motivation was combined with experience gleaned over the first two and half years of an extensive reading program to create a questionnaire that can investigate several suspicions that have arisen for the lack of extensive reading (ER) compliance by a significant number of students. The focus of the study is students at a mid-level private metropolitan university in Japan who are enrolled in an international liberal arts program. The main research questions for the overall study, which will include both quantitative data from

student performance and surveys, and qualitative data from interviews with resistant students are the following:

1. What are the reasons why readers do not comply with reading targets?
2. Which reasons, if any, have a greater impact on non-compliance?

Reading, like all language skills, develops through use. Research in first language (L1) reading tells us that good readers have large vocabularies (Ouellette, 2006) with good word representations for meaning, spelling, and sound, which they are able to use efficiently. This combination of knowledge and bot-

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tom-up skills allow readers to quickly decode and get the sound and meaning for what they are reading (Storch & Whitehurst, 2002). These proficient readers also bring to reading a significant amount of general knowledge and genre knowledge, helping considerably in recognizing and making associations with facts and concepts, and greatly improving comprehension (Willingham & Lovette, 2014). One of the main characteristics of good readers, however, is that they read a lot. Reading well and reading a lot have been found time and again to be highly correlated (Miller & Moss, 2013) and causally related (Sparks, Patton & Murdoch, 2014). Typically, these children read a lot because they enjoy leisure reading on their own, out of class (Miller & Moss, 2013), but no matter what the reason, learners who read more generally show better proficiency, as measured by standardized test scores, vocabulary learning, or reading speed increases (Reutzel, Fawson & Smith, 2008).

For L2 readers, similar characteristics of bottom-up skills (phonological strategies, decoding, and lexical and syntactic strategies) and world and genre knowledge also significantly account for good readers (Birch, 2015). Although L2 readers, similar to L1 readers, also read more in the L2 (Bernhardt, 2009). Yet for L2 reading, the challenge of reading is greater, particularly for less academically proficient L1 readers (Koda, 2007). L2 reading is marked by unfamiliarity with language in the target texts, and the uncertainty of whether skills and strategies learned in the L1 can transfer into the L2 (Koda, 2007). This is particularly true in the case of Japanese and other languages that share little with English (Birch, 2015). There is also evidence that L1 readers with less academic proficiency are unable to transfer reading skills and strategies as efficiently when reading in the L2 (Brevik, Olsen & Hellekyaer, 2016). Being a proficient reader in English in Japan not only makes vast amounts of web-based and other reading content

accessible, it also greatly helps students demonstrate their language proficiency. Standardized tests such as the TOEFL, TOEIC, and Eiken-STEP, as well as various entrance exams at the secondary and tertiary level function as gate-keepers for schools, programs, and even employment. Good L2 reading skills are crucial for academic success in Japan, and for some types of employment. Many university language programs in Japan are trying various approaches to somehow increase the amount of reading instruction and reading practice students do, both inside and outside or regular lessons. Among the intervention being tried are e-learning programs and extensive reading (ER) programs.

## 2. ER and programs in Japan

The appeal of extensive reading is considerable. It is an activity that promises a multitude of benefits in general language proficiency as well as reading proficiency through the mostly painless, if not enjoyable, experience of reading easy English books (Waring, 2009; Day & Bamford, 2002, among others). It also allows learners to exercise a good degree of autonomous control, which should be motivating for learners (Ushioda, 2011; Zimmerman & Schunk, 2011). While there is an initial set up cost, additive ER—where students are asked to read outside of regular classes (Robb & Kanno, 2013)—seems an attractive way to increase engagement with reading in English, and for this reason, the past few years have witnessed an increase in deployment in programs, publication of graded readers, and research interest (Nakanishi, 2015).

One of the prerequisites for ER to be effective, however, is sustained engagement. Readers need to read a lot to see tangible effects. To give some examples, research has shown they need to read over 200,000 words to see increases in reading speed (Beglar & Hunt, 2014), and over 300,000 words to begin seeing improvement on the TOEIC test

(Nishizawa, Yoshioka, & Fukada, 2010; Nishizawa, & Yoshioka, 2016). Therefore, if we have these improvements as an important goal, students will need to read somewhere in the range of 40–60 hours, a considerable amount of time, particularly for programs that last only a year or less (see Carney, 2016 for a discussion). This massive amount of reading can result from enjoyment on the part of students who enthusiastically embrace the books and reading, or from compliance on the part of students who decide to make the effort to complete institution-set ER target assignments in the belief that doing so will confer benefits. From a program perspective, the goal is to do whatever is necessary to get students reading. As Willingham (2017) states: “it’s reading, not positive attitudes toward reading that will make for better lexical representations and broader background knowledge” (pg. 148).

On the surface, it would seem reasonable to expect that students who elect to enter an international liberal arts university program that features an English language focus and communication focus and whose entry level proficiency with the language is not particularly impressive, would show keen interest in doing ER. After all, it promises a novel (Mikami, 2016) and ostensibly enjoyable way to boost proficiency, particularly in a skill that is key to doing well on standardized tests. Despite the existence of program features to encourage sufficient engagement (targets, grades, in-class activities involving graded readers, etc.), many students choose not to comply sufficiently, and some choose not to comply at all. For the first term of the first year of the program that is the subject of the current study, 29% students chose not to read at all when the ER program was optional, and as much as 57% of the students read too little to see any benefits (Van Amelsvoort, 2016). The subsequent year, when the ER program was compulsory and represented 10% of the total grade for the course, engagement improved, yet only about 70% of students

claimed to have successfully completed the 100,000 word count target for the term. I say “claimed” because there was some evidence and much suspicion that through falsifying reading accomplishments and the book reports that were meant to ensure accountability, an even greater number of students possibly did not actually achieve the target. In addition, less than 3% of students read enthusiastically, going well beyond targets in both of the terms examined.

### 3. Reader engagement research

There are many possible reasons why university students may be reluctant to engage more fully, or even be averse to the experience of L2 reading. Some amount of resistance to any language learning opportunity can be viewed as a natural part of a challenging adjustment process (Shaules, 2016). But given the fact that students are in a program that embraces language learning as a critical objective, and given that reading is a key skill to show proficiency on various standardized tests, it seems strange that students would not respond with more enthusiastic compliance with ER assignments.

Research to date has tended to focus more on proactive readers, readers who read considerably more than their peers. Wigfield and Guthrie (1997) who were influenced by Self-determination Theory by Deci & Ryan, (2000) and Expectancy-value Theories based on Atkinson and Birch (1974), such as attribution theory and self-efficacy theory, created a questionnaire that looked at a number of constructs to explore motivation for reading in the L1. These included reading efficacy, challenge, curiosity, and involvement, as well as attitudes toward reading importance, competition, recognition, the impact of grades, compliance with required tasks, and social reasons for reading. Mori (2002, 2004) used questionnaires with similar constructs to look at ER reading motivation in Japan. She found that intrinsic factors (desire to read or become a better reader, etc.)

could best explain the reading patterns of her students who read enthusiastically beyond the required amounts, while extrinsic motivation (externally-imposed requirements or punishments) did not seem to be significantly correlated (see Mori, 2015 for a summary) Takase (2002) had similar findings. Mori also found that learner childhood experiences with reading, as well as personality features (specifically an openness to experiences) were correlated with more accomplished readers (2015), echoing findings with L1 reading (Baker, Scher, & Mackler, 1997). Mori's adaptations of Wigfield and Guthrie's (1997) questionnaire to the Japanese context uncovered significant similarities with L1 and L2 reading attitudes, though not all researchers have found this (Takase, 2007), suggesting that there are strong similarities, but possibly also important differences between attitudes to L1 and L2 reading motivation.

Along with Self-determination Theory and Expectancy-value Theories, in recent years, the Future Self Theory of Markus and Nurius (1986) and developed and adapted for language learning by Dornyei (2009) has been shown to have considerable explanatory power regarding the behaviors of language learners, and eager readers (Judge, 2011). According to this view, learners are motivated to realize an image they have of themselves in the future, while also complying with the demands of their current contextual circumstances. In a qualitative study of outlier students who read beyond expectations, Judge (2011) found that a mixture of theories and attitudes explained the behaviors of students who strongly embraced the ER assignment, reading far more than was required. These generally included, though, positive attitudes toward literacy and reading formed in childhood and an appreciation for the opportunity to read autonomously (Self-determination theory). He also found a clear incorporation of English competency, particularly reading competency, into his subjects' ideal L2 selves (Future Self Theory). Students had a clear fu-

ture goal and saw L2 reading proficiency as crucial to achieving this.

Research into students who fail to comply sufficiently or who resist completely is not as common. Saito and Smith (2017) looked at the challenge of engaging engineering students in regular English language lessons and found that a general lack of commitment, a lack of preparedness, a lack of focus, as well as distractedness and even anti-social orientation featured among the given reasons for non-compliance with the program. While there may be some similarities with (at least some of) the students who are the focus of the current research, there are reasons to avoid applying the results of that study to liberal arts students and their extensive reading. Mikami (2016) looked at attitudes toward extensive reading by university students in Japan in business administration and pharmaceutical programs. His survey collected numerous reasons for wanting to read and wanting not to read. The former he grouped into six subsets: desire to improve English abilities, interest, desire to create life opportunities, desire to use English, desire to increase English input, and desire to foster international understanding. And the latter he grouped into eight subsets: difficulty, lack of ability, no interest, low priority, preference for native language, lack of confidence, lack of opportunity, and no need. Mikami claims that the reasons for not reading outweigh and outnumber the reasons for wanting to read, and he interpreted these results to mean that students need to have more structure, required texts and targets, better rationale, and facilitated success experiences for reading to make extensive reading more palatable. He largely faults the English education system that students have come out of, and calls for a greater role for the teacher in steering students to more enjoyable and successful experiences with reading in English. Many of the reasons students give for not reading should be alleviated or eliminated by having a well-designed ex-

tensive reading program in place (see VanAmelsvoort, 2016, 2017, for a discussion on adjusting an ER program to address such problems).

There are thus many possible explanations for why readers comply or fail to comply with extensive reading assignments. Students may hold very different beliefs about reading, learning from reading easy books, and attitudes toward reading formed from past experiences. On top of those, contextual factors such as part-time jobs, clubs, friends, family, and past schools can also affect how much engagement learners decide to give or can give. Motivation also can differ from person to person, whether students are framing the task in terms of goal achievement or allocation of time and resources, or expectancy of success. Motivation has been found to be dynamic and adaptive over time, depending on experiences with reading and changing circumstances in the lives of learners (Nishino, 2005, 2007). These changes are not always easy to observe, however, and seem to resist simple interventions over one term (Apple, 2005). Other external forces may also be at work to reduce or diminish the motivational basis of behavioral intentions on the part of students (see Dörnyei, 2001, for a discussion of these demotivating features). Needless to say, learners arrive in a program with very different experiences and attitudes. And the contexts they had in the past, as well as their current context, are likewise apt to feature considerable variation.

#### 4. Identifying prominent reasons for resistance and creating constructs

Although most of the literature that informed the current study examined enthusiastic readers, there are enough likely factors that could contribute significantly to the resistance of students in complying with extensive reading assignments. By combining some of these with others gleaned from experience with our program over the past two and half years,

possible constructs for an exploratory questionnaire begin to emerge. The various reasons for non-compliance can be organized into three larger groups following a three-part structure proposed by Willingham (2017): (a) attitudes toward learning and reading (formed from past learning experiences), (b) motivation, (c) and circumstances. Following the basic structure of Wigfield and Guthrie (1997) and drawing on some of their constructs and questions, items can be tailored for the Japanese EFL context of mid-level university and mid-level high schools that the student respondents experienced as a context for learning. These will be explained in the next sections.

##### 4.1. Attitudes

Attitudes toward reading are cognitive or emotional beliefs coupled with evaluations that have formed from experiences, especially related to success or lack of success, or rationalizations of past behaviors or preferences. They may be the result of logical analysis of past events, or they may also be more emotional and tied up with deeply held values. They are powerful bits of the past that still exert influence over the present. Particularly, emotional attitudes are hard to change just with logical appeals (Willingham, 2017).

For this survey, four constructs are intended to examine student attitudes in regards to: 1) learning history, 2) ER and language learning, 3) language learning skill priorities. The first one should look at general language learning history, specifically aiming to see if a lack of past success has led to doubts about language learning efficacy in general and reading in particular. The second construct should focus on beliefs regarding ER and its role in language learning. Based on students' prior experience in a system that tends to favor language learning materials whose difficulty level is far ahead of learners' actual proficiency level, learners may have come to

hold the belief that reading easy books cannot help with (especially) exam preparation. They may believe that only challenging, vocabulary-heavy close reading can drive language proficiency gains. Indeed these two may be combined into a belief that only cognitive pain leads to academic gain, even while learners hate the thought of cognitive pain. The third attitude construct should look at whether learners may hold strong preferences for other skills, especially spoken production and interaction. They may have already-developed skill proficiency in listening and speaking, leading to a desire to focus on learning through those skills. Experience in our program has shown that many learners who have spent time in English-speaking environments and have gained speaking and spoken interaction and listening skills seem to show a certain complacency toward reading in general, and academic reading in particular, possibly arising from having achieved a level of proficiency in the skills they value most. Related to the third attitude construct, the fourth should aim to see if learners have a strong preference for social and interactive learning and thus put less emphasis on the “boring” individual parts of language learning such as vocabulary list learning, close reading, or extensive reading.

## 4.2 Motivation

The key challenge to applying motivation theories to additive extensive reading is that this type of reading is a matter of choice that, depending on attitudes, may not be considered to impact general language learning outcomes. Students have already chosen to enroll in a program that purports to develop them into global citizens reasonably proficient in English. We can assume that their basic motivation for learning the language is sufficient. Students may or may not believe, however, that ER will affect their ability to achieve general proficiency. Therefore, widely used theories of motivation, including Gardner and

Lambert (1972) may be of limited use. The dominant question that need to be dealt with is how valuable students see the outcome of this specific, laborious activity, and do they believe effort will reasonably lead to success (Willingham, 2017)? As we’ve already seen, tangible benefits take a long time to appear with ER. That means the feedback loop is very long, and this requires considerable faith in efficacy, and in the value of the benefits of reading. As for intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, with little prior experience of ER and finding themselves faced with large, specific word count reading targets, learners are apt to look more at extrinsic features for motivation, at least at first (Gagne & Deci, 2005).

At least three constructs should be used to explore the motivation of learners. The first one should look at whether a vague or absent L2 Future Self image (especially Future reading Self image) could explain resistance. Although the L2 Future Self Theory has been found to have great explanatory power for L2 learning, there is possibly a problem in applying it widely in Japan, particularly with learners in a mid-level university liberal arts program. Learners in such programs are aware that they are not academically successful and may feel shut out of desirable future jobs where English skills are expected. In their current program, they are not being prepared for a specific job, and are often reluctant to aim at one. To further complicate this, Japanese companies tend not hire people for specific jobs, so even if a young person is successful in getting in a company where English is often used, there is no guarantee that he or she will be assigned to such a post. For these reasons, learners in Japan find it difficult to imagine how English, and especially English reading, fits into their future.

Another motivation construct should look at whether credit or course grade weight is insufficient to drive students to make an effort. This is partly to see the effect of extrinsic motivation features of the

program, and partly to see whether Expectancy-value theories of motivation can explain some of the resistance. In particular, some question items should try to ascertain whether the 10% of the grade allotted to ER is sufficient to motivate compliance.

A third and final motivational factor to explore is whether cost-benefit analyses by students lead them to believe that the 30 to 60 hours needed to read sufficiently to see proficiency improvements are simply not worth the effort, and that such time applied elsewhere would be more effective. Expectancy-value theory explains how an outcome that may not be valuable enough or certain enough for some learners, leading them to reject expending sufficient effort for ER, or more often, to simply exhibit minimal, unenthusiastic compliance.

#### 4.3. Circumstantial factors

Circumstantial factors are features in the present or past environment of the learners that make it easier or harder to act on the motivation they are feeling. These factors often determine the actual behavior that the learner engages in. Some of these factors have not always been sufficiently taken into account. Where possible, the constructs listed here will try to explore these factors, although some of them will no doubt be better addressed by qualitative analysis at a later stage in the research.

The current study will examine four constructs to investigate the impact of circumstantial factors. The first circumstantial factor will look at whether an insufficient literacy focus in students' learning history has led them to have an underdeveloped vocabulary and lack of experience of enjoyment with reading. Childhood reading experiences have been found by Wigfield and Guthrie (1997), Judge, (2011), and Mori (2004) to be correlated with reading habits, and so they should be investigated. However, insufficient opportunities to develop rich lexical representations (sound, spelling, and meaning) that are essential to

good reading skill development could also be the result of the type of teaching learners experienced. For example, while ostensibly following the same national course of study, huge variations in the quality of English language instruction exist in Japan because of textbook level, and teacher and program preferences. Reading aloud, for example, is a favorite activity for some teachers, while for others it is employed far less frequently.

Another circumstantial factor related to school experience is whether students have been exposed to or fallen under the care of a good role model, teacher, or mentor who has made the case for reading or ER. With many possibilities for language learning, ER may not have been promoted by a person they trust, and indeed other methods may have been promoted. In the Japanese educational setting where learners often exhibit what Yashima (2014) calls "autonomous dependency," or a willingness to adjust behavior by following the advice of respected and trusted experts, usually teachers at junior or senior high school. The potential for influencing attitudes and behaviors of students by such figures should not be underestimated, and encountering—and then coming to trust—a teacher who believes in and promotes ER can make a tremendous difference to students for the duration of their academic careers.

Another circumstantial feature, and this one most definitely aimed at examining an important construct in the present, should look at the quality of graded readers available to students. Anecdotal evidence strongly suggests that students are less than captivated by the content and writing quality of many of the books made available to them. Reading materials, it seems, are often not interesting enough to maintain interest and sustained effort. The poor quality of some reading materials may lead many students to assume that ER is more akin to exercise than enjoyment.

A final construct in this section should look at

schedules and time management skills. Full schedules and different priorities, along with poor time management skills, result in difficulty meeting the requirements of school course work, clubs, part-time jobs, SNS, entertainment, hobbies, friends, family, and extensive reading. Time is indeed in short supply for most learners, yet many of them do not or cannot make effective use of available time for reading. Likewise, students may be unable to find a suitable place to read and concentrate in an unhindered manner—there may be siblings, the TV may always be on, the train is too crowded or too many transfers break any hope for an immersive flow experience. Requiring 20 minutes per day of reading may seem like a small imposition, but securing that time in the right environment may be a real challenge.

#### 4.4. Other possible factors

The above represent the constructs needed for a questionnaire to begin looking for which reasons best explain why students resist ER. That list is not complete, however. It must be stated that there are two very likely culprits for the non-compliance of students with extensive reading assignment targets that do not lend themselves to investigation by survey questions. The first of these is background knowledge. It has been well established that learners with more information and facts (world knowledge) stored in their minds, are generally better learners (Willingham & Lovette, 2014; Lemov, Driggs & Woolway, 2016). Checking for this with a questionnaire construct seemed inappropriate and pointless. Yet this important potential factor deserves to be investigated. Students in the Japanese education system are streamed. The tests that act as gatekeepers help to define the levels of institutions. The more attractive (higher) the level, the more competitive it is to achieve. Knowing which high school and university a student has on their record, gives us a rough idea of their academic level—only a rough, general

idea. If we accept the findings of Brevik, Olsen and Hellekyaer (2016), the implication is that students at lower academic levels will struggle more with L2 reading. Some way of assessing whether it is a lack of background knowledge that is causing learners in the current program to struggle more with ER, and thus resist more, needs to be found.

A second possible factor that seems impossible to turn into a questionnaire construct is physiological deficiencies in the subjects' working memories. Working memory capacity has been shown to be correlated with language processing facility, including reading, and learners who have better working memories seem to be better language learners (Kormos & Safar, 2008; Wen, 2015). It would thus be reasonable to assume that students with less robust working memory capacities would find ER less enjoyable. Tests for working memory capacity are available (see Wen, 2015 for an overview) but they would require a battery of separate tests.

#### 5. Conclusion

This paper describes the initial part of a study into the rationales behind readers who refuse to comply with the extensive reading assignments in a program, the design of a questionnaire to look for features that can be used to identify key reasons for this behavior to see if any patterns emerge (Appendix 1). The results of this survey will then be used in the second phase of the study, interviews with resistant readers, and possibly tests on working memory capacity. The purpose of the study is to better understand the reasons and conditions that make resistance more likely, and eventually to develop better a better ER program, including better controlling the reading experience of students at various stages, and possibly ways to intervene with students who resist.

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## Appendix 1: Constructs and Questions

All questions presented on a 5-point Likert scale.

### *Attitudes: Learning history success (as reader)*

- I've always found English to be easier than other subjects.
- I was better at English than most other students in junior and senior high school.
- I studied English more than other subjects in junior and senior high school.
- I have a pretty good vocabulary for English reading.
- I usually had scores of 4 or 5 for English coursed in junior and senior high school.

### *Attitudes: Beliefs about language learning (through easy books)*

- Reading is a key to language learning success.
- The only way to improve my reading ability is to read a lot.
- Reading a lot of easy English books will improve my English proficiency.
- Extensive reading is one of my favorite things to do in English.

### *Attitudes: Preference for other (established) skills (especially speaking)*

- My listening/speaking are much stronger than my reading/writing.
- I think I'm pretty good at communicating through speaking.
- I get sleepy soon when I read in English.
- If I could choose which skill I'd like to be really good at in English, it would be speaking.

### *Motivation: L2 future self*

- I have a clear goal for my future.
- I want to work using English in the future.
- I think it is possible for me to get a job using English in the future.
- I need to get high scores on TOEIC/TOEFL to achieve my dream.
- I will likely use my English reading skills a lot in the future.

### *Motivation: Credit or grade weight*

- I might not enjoy it so much, but I would read a lot if I had to for credit or scores.
- It's easy to NOT do ER at FILA and still get good scores in courses.

### *Motivation: Not worth the considerable time investment*

- Because it takes a lot of time, ER should be worth a larger part of the score of English courses.
- I didn't read much because I thought it would take too much time to read 100,000 words in English.
- I didn't expect much benefit from reading many easy English books.

### *Circumstantial: Early reading experiences in L1 or L2*

- My parents read a lot to me in Japanese when I was young.
- My earliest memories about reading in Japanese are positive.
- I liked reading and read a lot in Japanese in elementary school.
- I liked reading and read a lot in Japanese in junior high school.
- I liked reading and read a lot in Japanese in high school.

*Circumstantial: No mentor*

- In junior high school I had a teacher I respected who encouraged us to read a lot.
- In high school I had a teacher I respected who encouraged us to read a lot.
- I didn't really believe the FILA teachers who said that extensive reading would help improve our English.

*Circumstantial: Graded readers are not enjoyable enough*

- The stories in most graded readers are not really interesting.
- The stories in most graded readers are not so easy to understand.
- The XReading system is not easy to use.
- It was hard to find books on the XReading system.

*Circumstantial: Time constraints through p/t job, program tasks, family, SNA, poor time management*

- I couldn't do much extensive reading because of my part-time job.
- I couldn't do much extensive reading because I was with my friends.
- I couldn't do much extensive reading because of my family.
- I don't know why, but I never seemed be able to find time to do ER.
- I spend more than 4 hours per day on SNS.

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