
Original Article

Extensive Reading Onboarding: Challenges and Responses in an Optional Program

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Abstract

Extensive reading (ER) is a potentially effective activity widely used at universities in their EFL programs. This study reviews the establishment of an ER program with 123 students in a new department of a private university in Japan. The ER program design and student engagement record are described, and suggestions for improvement are made based on an examination of the relevant literature. Ways of better engaging learners are discussed including a list of five recommendations: 1) better educating and orienting students; 2) making the program obligatory and assigning a grade for reading; 3) having students set individual reading goals; 4) connecting ER to classroom activities; and 5) making progress visible and public through tracking, sharing and providing feedback on progress.

Key words

Extensive reading, Program design, Motivation, Onboarding

1. Introduction

Extensive reading (ER), an activity where students choose simplified texts (graded readers) and read a lot at their own pace (Day & Bamford, 2002), can be implemented either in class (where students spend class time simply reading silently), or as an “additive” activity in a language program (where students borrow and read books outside of regular class time) (Robb & Kano, 2013). ER can lead to improvement in reading fluency, vocabulary, spelling, reading speed, speaking, listening, writing skills, and stronger language learning motivation (Krashen, 2009). ER also builds reading automatic-

ity, which is associated with improved noticing of language or genre features in the texts. As mental capacity is freed through automaticity of processing, it can be used for greater noticing or allocated to increased or alternative strategy use (Grabe, 2009; Grabe & Stoller, 2011). ER is widely considered to be an important, if not crucial, element of a language learning program (Waring, 2009).

Additive ER has various challenges, however, which include acquiring and managing large numbers of books (Day & Bamford, 2002), tracking and monitoring student borrowing and reading, and orienting and motivating students to begin and con-

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tinue reading (Robb & Kano, 2013). A high number of words need to be read for ER to be clearly and demonstrably effective. On the basis of their research, Nishizawa, Yoshioka, & Fukada (2010) claim that a threshold level of about 300,000 words per student needs to be reached if students are to see any significant increases in scores on standardized tests (TOEIC). In examining gains in reading fluency, Beglar and Hunt (2014) state that reading more than 200,000 words is necessary to see significant improvement. These numbers represent a considerable investment of time on the part of students. As an indication, 300,000 words can translate into about 70–100 pages per week (Mason, 2006), or at least 20 minutes per day of reading for five days a week for two school terms, if we assume a reading speed averaging 100–120 words per minute (Beglar & Hunt, 2014). Tracking or monitoring students can require a large amount of time and expertise (Tanaka, 2015). In addition to the challenge of managing books and reading, there may be possible mindset challenges with students who have never experienced ER and have trouble understanding what is to be done and how/why it can help (Nishizawa, Yoshioka, & Fukada, 2010). Students may hold particular biases, or mindsets, that make them suspicious of the benefits of reading books they see as significantly easier than texts they have studied intensively. Considering the proficiency levels of the young adults in most university ER programs, appropriate books may be viewed as too easy or too childish (Hu & Nation, 2000). These attitudes may interfere with their willingness to begin extensive reading, or to start by reading books at a level that will maximize participation benefits (Mercer, 2015). ER can significantly boost English proficiency improvements if students read sufficiently large quantities of appropriate-level texts. Results of studies of successful ER programs (Nishizawa, Yoshioka, & Fukada, 2010; Robb & Kano, 2013) show

that success is directly dependent upon whether the program can get students to read in large enough quantities, and do so with appropriate-level texts.

Extensive reading programs generally have a secondary goal of developing agency, self-regulation, and autonomous learning, which is seen as important for any learning endeavor (Zimmerman & Schunk, 2011), but particularly for language learning (Mercer, 2011a). ER is attractive because it provides an excellent platform for developing self-regulation and autonomy. Self-regulated learning places the learner at the center of the learning experience and involves encouraging that learner to take more active control of his or her learning. This generally involves phases of forethought (including goal-setting and planning), performance (maintaining active engagement and adjusting effort), and reflection (assessing learning and planning future adjustments) (Zimmerman & Schunk, 2011). ER programs can be ideal for fostering self-regulation and autonomy because students themselves are choosing the books they read and monitoring their own progress. This helps foster intrinsic motivation and a positive identity as an English reader (Lake, 2014).

Challenges arise, however, with tracking and monitoring ER (Campbell & Weatherford, 2013). Students can be given record sheets on which they record what titles and how many words they have read. But not all books have clearly labeled word counts. Quizzes and book reports are the most common forms of monitoring or checking student reading (Day & Bamford, 2002). However, making these a requirement can turn an intrinsic-motivation-developing extensive reading experience into a more intensive reading experience as readers search for answers or details to complete tests or reports, all the while engaged in these tasks very much for reasons that are extrinsically motivated (Lake & Holster, 2014). Too much focus on quizzes and reports can lead to anxiety, demotivation, and avoid-

ance strategies, thereby working against the goal of nurturing autonomous lifelong readers who read for enjoyment (Stefanou, Perencevich, DiCinto, & Turner, 2004; Assor & Kaplan, 2001).

Motivation is always an important consideration with ER programs. Students must be convinced to ‘buy into’ the program and make the necessary commitments of time and attention. Successful onboarding, i.e., getting students to begin and reach a level of active participation, is the result of both the learners’ sense of agency—“a combination of the learner’s will, intent, and capacity to act in order to achieve specific goals and outcomes” (Mercer, 2015)—and the context and design of the educational intervention. This requires aligning student and program goals, of course, but also being and staying aware of student motivation (and performance) as the program progresses. It further entails not only tracking students, but having some way to hold them accountable for reading that does not place undue strain on the administration, teachers, or the students themselves, so that their delicate intrinsic motivation and emerging sense of agency of readers as readers is not dampened. This accountability is a very important issue when ER is undertaken as an additive activity, and most ER programs feature a class, library, or personal reading record sheet to track progress, sometimes with a book report requirement.

Some ER programs manage monitoring and recording by using minimally-intrusive online technology such as the MReader software program of quizzes and short reports (Robb & Kano, 2013, Campbell & Weatherford 2013), or the Mobile Audience Response System (MOARS) of short self-report survey questions, which include responses to the book and reading time (Lake & Holster, 2014) to confirm reading and track student progress. Setting and monitoring specific reading word targets (individual or class targets) has also been employed

successfully in Japan to determine progress, offer advice, and motivate students (Takase, 2010). But programs must decide how much proof they will require of students actually having read the books.

2. Deploying ER at university: promise and pitfalls

This section describes a new ER program that was deployed with 123 students in an international liberal arts program at a private university in Japan. The decision was made to make use of additive ER without monitoring student reading—no quizzes or reports would be required. Both paper-based and electronic graded readers would be made available to facilitate ease of access. Borrowing books would be made as simple as possible (a sign-out sheet for paper books and automatic procedures for electronic readers) and students would be given the option of recording their reading on Reading Record Sheets.

2.1. ER program: design and implementation

The original design of the English language program called for four 90-minute classes per week, plus an additional self-study session each week that would be used to for self-directed, autonomous learning, the specific content of which would be discussed and decided with a counselor. Students would be encouraged (but not required) to make ER a regular part of their out-of-class self-directed learning. That is, ER would be presented as a possible option for out of class study. The decision was also made not to actively track student reading or check that it was being done—no quizzes or reports, and no mandatory record-keeping by students would be required—in order to foster intrinsic motivation and a love of reading in a foreign language. No reading goals would be set for individual students or for the program, and neither ER participation nor reading progress would be set as assessment criteria.

2.2. ER materials

The initial plan called for making both hard-copy graded readers and online graded readers available to students in order to provide them with as much choice of platform as possible. Because it was felt that some students may be uncomfortable with reading on tablets or smartphones, 360 hard-copy paper readers were made available. Having paper-based readers would allow the program to avoid forcing all students to learn and adapt to an unfamiliar platform of online reading, which might have posed an unwelcome challenge for some while trying to focus their efforts on beginning ER. For ease of access—an important design feature to improve engagement (McMurry, Tanner, & Anderson, 2010)—the paper-based graded readers were placed in the Learning Center, a central space in the department that students pass through or congregate in. The electronic readers were to be made available through the “XReading” system (xreading.com), an online subscription service that allows students to access and read graded readers on smartphones, tablets, and PCs. Books can be accessed at any time, and require no trips to the Learning Center or library, and there are no borrowing procedures to undergo. The system can also track and monitor student reading through (optional) quizzes, short responses to completed books, and measurements of reading speed. Due to an administrative glitch, the electronic reading system was not available in April, so the ER program was launched with only the paper-based graded readers. The electronic reading system became available in mid May. This was not seen as a significant setback at the time, however, because it allowed teachers to focus on getting the ER program started with only the paper-based books. It was felt that it would be easier to get the students used to ER with a single platform, and that the electronic option could be added later once the students were familiar with ER.

2.3. Orientation at the beginning of the academic year

Each of the students in the 10 English classes was given an orientation to ER in April, 2015 at the beginning of the semester, at which time the system and benefits of ER were carefully explained by the regular English teachers who took students to the Learning Center and explained the levels of books, lending procedures, and the general system. Specific expectations for ER (for example, number of books, target word counts, or recommended amount of reading time) were not given to students. They were simply told that ER involved reading a lot, and could result in many language-learning benefits, particularly improved reading ability and vocabulary. However, teachers did mention to students, that reading roughly one book per week was a reasonable ER target. A Reading Record Sheet was given to each student, and they were told that this sheet could be filled in as they completed books, and kept in their portfolio. It was suggested that students could show it to their counselor during the mandatory counseling sessions that they would take throughout the term. This, however, was not described as mandatory. Some of the teachers encouraged students to borrow a book when they visited the Learning Center as part of the ER orientation.

2.4. Early engagement results with hard-copy readers

A survey was made of the borrowing records three weeks after ER was introduced to students. It showed that a total of 99 books had been taken out, of which 54 had been returned (and presumably read). These results were not very encouraging, as we had recommended that students read at a rate of about one book per week. After three full weeks, and at a time when motivation should have been extremely high, students were clearly not leaping at the opportunity to read extensively.

2.5. The addition of electronic graded readers

On May 12, the XReading system of online graded readers was introduced to students. Positive results had been obtained with this system at another university in Tokyo (Cote & Milliner, 2014), and hopes were high that with the ability to access and read the books practically anywhere and any-time, engagement would increase. In class, each student was given a detailed visual guide with instructions for how to access the website and borrow books. Teachers had been instructed on how to use the system and had been given the opportunity to try it out. Each teacher carefully explained the online ER access and borrowing system, once again encouraging them to read.

2.6. Results at mid-term

At the end of May, two weeks after the online system was made available to students, it was being severely under-utilized. Only 8 students (6.5%) had accessed the system and borrowed a book, and only 4 of those books had been completed. Students were clearly ignoring the online reading option. The paper readers were being used more, but the results were not anywhere near close enough to what they would need to be for students to benefit from the activity (Nishizawa, Yoshioka, & Fukada, 2010; Beglar & Hunt, 2014), with the exception of perhaps 6–7 students. Only 124 books had been borrowed and returned. Furthermore, only 41 students seemed to be participating in ER with graded readers to any extent. Some other students did say they were reading novels or other materials outside of the graded readers, but given the proficiency of the student population, the graded readers were more appropriate for almost all students, and they were going largely unused.

2.7. Additional interventions

It was clear by the beginning of June that ER was

not going well. Of greatest concern was the almost universal lack of interest/participation in online ER. At this point, the teachers planned a new intervention. Students would be given an activity that required them to visit XReading and read a book. The book would form the basis of a discussion in the next class. The goal was to get the students just to try logging on to the system and experience choosing and then reading a book on their devices. This intervention resulted in a large number of students visiting the XReading site for the first time and becoming familiar with the system. By the middle of June, 93 students had accessed the XReading site at least once—but still 30 students had never logged on. Some of those students were reading paper readers and so may simply have had a preference for paper-based readers, but some of the students were not reading extensively at all. And of the students who had accessed XReading, at least 13 (10.5% of all students) finished less than 30% of the one book they borrowed. It became clear that getting students into the system and reading regularly would be an ongoing challenge, particularly given the current structure of the program. Two teachers reacted to this by requiring students to keep and share their count of the books and number of words they had read. In two (of the ten) classes, class word count targets were set, with the promise of some celebration if the targets were met.

2.8. ER engagement by the end of first term

Results for ER proved difficult to tabulate. Having two systems of graded readers, plus allowing students to read outside materials, made counting problematic. The results here were tabulated from the XReading system records, the paper book borrowing records, and a questionnaire administered at the end of term. In total, students attempted 525 graded readers. Of these, they completed a total of

Numbers of books	Numbers of students	Percentage of students
0 books	36	29.3%
1-3 books	49	39.8%
4-6 books	22	17.9%
7-9 books	9	7.3%
10-12 books	1	0.8%
More than 12 books	7	5.7%

Figure 1. Numbers of books completed per student (n=123)

407. Most of these were lower-level books with low word counts. However, there was no mechanism in place to monitor student word counts, except the XReading system, which was used for only some of the books read. With the exception of three classes, the students were not instructed in how to count and record words. Also, with no requirements for grades or credits, they did not record results with great accuracy. Therefore, in the term-end questionnaire (n=110), only 66 students were able to provide a word count figure (28 provided numbers of books, and 16 gave no answer). Figure 1 shows the breakdown of the number of graded readers read by students after 14 weeks. It gives a rough idea of how many books students read per person. The results show that a very large number of students (29.3%) neither attempted nor finished a single book. Almost 40% of students read so little that no effect could be expected. In terms of success, however, we can infer that almost 15% of students are possibly on course to meet reading targets that will result in tangible gains in reading comprehension or reading speed (Nishizawa, Yoshioka, & Fukada, 2010; Beglar & Hunt, 2014).

In order to meet reading goals, students should be reading at a pace of at least one book per week, according to the Extensive Reading Foundation's

Guide to Extensive Reading (Waring, 2011) and various studies (Nishizawa, Yoshioka & Fukada, 2010; Beglar & Hunt, 2014; Mason, 2006). For a program with 123 students, that should have amounted to more than 1800 books having been read by the end of the first term. Less than 5% of the students were reading graded readers at that pace. The ER program cannot thus be called a success. One of the reasons for not requiring students to read and for not monitoring them more closely was to develop their intrinsic motivation for reading in a foreign language. This goal does not seem to have been met. After more than a month of summer break immediately following the first term, only 15 students (12%) had accessed the online reading system, and only 2 of them were reading at the one-book-per-week pace. The program seemingly had failed to cultivate the necessary intrinsic motivation in students to read.

3. Discussion

Successfully onboarding students into an optional educational activity, particularly one that features a new pedagogical intervention (extensive reading) and new technology (online graded readers) involves numerous challenges. This discussion section will attempt to identify possible areas for improvement, following Taboada and McElvany (2009) who base their guidelines on Dornyei's (2001) motivational framework for teaching practice and Guthrie's L1 reading motivation-building approach (Guthrie, McRae & Lutz Klauda, 2007), which identifies five motivation processes central to reading engagement: interest, autonomy support, self-efficacy, social collaboration, and mastery goals. This discussion will also include some elements of Dornyei's (2009) L2 Self Theory, Self Determination theory (SDT) (Ryan & Deci, 2000), along with Dweck's (2006) ideas on mindsets, and Porter's (2006) stages of onboarding for interactive web design. Accepted

theory and best practices will be contrasted with the approach adopted by our program, on the basis of which recommendations are made.

3.1. Creating the basic motivational conditions

Creating supportive relationships between the instructor and the learners and a cohesive learning group is most important at the beginning stages of a program (Taboada & McElvany, 2009). Learners approach new activities with a mixture of interest and hesitation. They are probably not initially aware of the potential benefits of any activity, but they are aware of their own shortcomings and frustrations; hence, they are ready to listen to the suggestions of people they trust if they feel that they are being respected and understood as learners by community members who care about them (Porter, 2006). At this stage, the teacher must design a program for interest and to support autonomy. This means making the program and contents (of books) look as interesting as possible, as well as making sure that choice is built into the system. The English program at this university was successful in creating learning communities in the English classes, but less so in promoting choice and autonomy.

Providing students with the option of not participating in the ER program seems to have been a misinterpretation of the SDT concept of autonomy through choice. As Gagne and Deci (2005) explain, there is a continuum of motivations from extrinsic to intrinsic, and an important detail is whether the required task is something that can help an individual with his or her own personal goals. That is, some extrinsic pressure (grades or scores) can provide an initial reason to begin an activity whose purpose ultimately matches the learners' own goals—in this case improved English proficiency—and gives students a short-term extrinsic reason that actually aligns with their long-term L2 self image. Pigott

(2011) found that students in Japan tend to be more motivated by their ought-to self (short-term extrinsically motivated) than their L2 future self, meaning that they look to program and teacher-imposed goals for behavior directions. Emberton (2013, p. 1) states “the most important thing you can do is start” because once a person has begun and is engaged, motivation will change.

For an ER program, this means putting more emphasis on the short-term benefits of ER, and making those clearer and perhaps more real by showing case studies and linking results on standardized tests to reading volume. Both Mason (2006) and Nishizawa, Yoshioka, and Fukada (2010) provide good evidence. In addition, an ER program should hold students accountable by tying reading to grades, forcing them to start and experience ER and to think about its effectiveness. Within an ER program, there exists enough options for exercising autonomy—choosing books, choosing platforms, and choosing levels—and not reading should not be one of them. For the program in question, the structure for out-of-class assessment was already in place, it just needed to be applied to ER.

3.2. Generating initial motivation

According to Taboada and McElvany (2009), this stage should be focused on setting, explaining, and modeling mastery goals for reading in order to make those goals as clear as possible to learners. This is in keeping with the principles of formative assessment (William, 2011), namely that learners need to have as clear an idea as possible about learning intentions and the criteria for success. Clearly, one problem with the program was a complete lack of specific reading goals for participants. Students were not aware of exactly how ER would benefit them, or how much they would need to read to get that benefit. Although students had ER explained to them during the orientation, specific goals were not made salient enough to students. The community created

in English classes and the trust that students built up in their instructors were not sufficiently leveraged for ER.

Dweck (2006) has shown conclusively that fostering a growth mindset through orientation sessions, program design, and feedback on effort can lead to significantly more engagement and success. This requires not only clear initial goals, but ongoing attention as students grapple with the challenges that emerge at different levels. Teachers can help students set individual reading goals based on their needs and proficiency. Having clear and simple goals, which students can easily visualize themselves achieving, can greatly affect the chances of their realization (Fogg and Hreha, 2010) and help reduce procrastination (Blouin-Hudon & Pychyl, 2015). This is particularly the case when students can see the value in achieving goals that they believe to be challenging but attainable (Dweck, 2006). Setting short-term class goals for reading can also raise awareness for tracking word counts and help maintain group involvement in the target task, something that also greatly facilitates success (Fogg and Hreha, 2010). This all suggests that an ER program should provide more and clearer rationale for the reasons for doing ER and the mechanism by which it benefits students. Moreover, it should repeat and reinforce that message regularly until it is part of the fabric of the language and reading program. In tandem with this, an ER program should set clear, attainable reading targets for each student, progress toward which can be shared and celebrated when achieved.

3.3. Maintaining and protecting motivation

According to Taboada and McElvany (2009), teachers should build on any emerging sense of self-efficacy that learners have as they finish books or advance in level. Teachers should also make use of social collaboration and autonomy support in the

classroom. Assuming that clear goals are in place, sharing, encouraging, and celebrating success are things that can be done in the classroom to support ER. This helps to foster a motivating sense of belonging to a group with a purpose, a phenomenon known as “relatedness” in SDT. Social interaction with a purpose can also be used to control or improve individual behavior, a practical example of which is restorative practice, a group discussion/sharing activity with an emphasis on building and maintaining relationships, repairing behavioral problems, and working collaboratively on a way forward (Thorsborne & Blood, 2013). It is now being used as an alternative to punishment for students who are either misbehaving or not complying with program requests, and could easily be put to work to encourage and support all students to stick with an ER program. Social collaboration can also foster literary task relevance, as students share reading experience and advice. This leads to opportunities for scaffolding, encouragement for moving up in level, and creates new options for self-directed reading.

Fostering relevance of content or skills is also connected to sustaining or growing motivation (Taboada, Barber, & Buehl, 2013). Talking about books and sharing learning experiences and advances allows learners to notice and display evidence of achievement and learning, something considered crucial to formative assessment (William, 2011) and SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2000). This provides theoretical support for the intervention by the program teachers who tried to get their students to use the online readers by requiring reading for a classroom activity. Requiring the reading of a graded reader for a subsequent discussion in class resulted in the single biggest push to access readers.

In line with this, The Extensive Reading Foundation’s Guide to Extensive Reading (Waring, 2011) suggests starting ER as a whole-class activity before focusing on autonomous ER. Such guided, incre-

mental task progression has been found in many settings to be very useful in building motivation and ensuring success with ER (King, 2011). This suggests that readers and reading experience should be exploited in regular classrooms using guided tasks and/or discussions that facilitate sharing in order to support ER. The close community of English classes can be used to create social support and pressure for all students to sustain their ER effort.

3.4. Encouraging positive retrospective self-evaluation

According to Taboada and McElvany (2009), self-efficacy develops from four sources: 1) previous experience, 2) observing others, 3) verbal judgments/feedback from peers or teachers, and 4) somatic/emotional states. In order to build a stronger sense of self-efficacy (and thus develop a sense of agency), it is important to create a system where students can see their own and others' progress. Without such a system, observations, comparisons, and feedback are impossible, and important affective reactions to reading (Immordino-Yang & Damasio, 2007) will be muted. This seems to be exactly what happened with the program in question. Most students were not reading (sufficiently), and neither the teachers nor their peers knew. Many of the students who were reading did not know if they were doing so in sufficient amounts or at the appropriate levels. They were isolated, cut off from feedback or social support and stimulation, and unable to assess their own performance with confidence.

Part of the problem certainly derived from having two systems of readers and insufficient goals. But without a way to accurately and uniformly record progress, monitoring, sharing, and comparing are just not possible. One way to do this is the online systems mentioned earlier, the MReader system (Robb & Kano, 2013; Campbell & Weatherford, 2013), or the MOARS system (Lake & Holster,

2014). However, both of these systems are more concerned with checking that students have actually read the books, and are more suitable for administrative control of programs. They do not have an immediate ecological connection to the learning context, and they are limited to ER. Although these systems can be used to hold students accountable, a better system would be for students to plan their reading, make a public commitment to doing so, and then reflect and report on their progress and accomplishments in class. For this reason, a weekly student progress sheet with a calendar section to list reading time (and any other study time), a place to list weekly goals, a place to write reflections, and a place to keep track of weekly and total ER word counts may be more suitable. Such a sheet can be filled in outside of class and can form the basis for a discussion in class on progress. Simply the act of writing down (articulating) intentions has been associated with increased persistence of target behaviors (Orbell & Sheeran, 1992), and publicly explaining these intentions in class can also help to reinforce the likelihood of successfully carrying them through (Berger, Rugen, & Woodfin, 2014). If students are required to also fill in part-time job times and club activity times, teachers and other students can see and give advice on study strategies by understanding when, how, and what students are reading and studying, allowing all participants to give "specific and contingent" feedback to facilitate goal-setting and attainment within a social setting (Taboada & McElvany, 2009). Used together with a reading record sheet, teachers, other students, and the student herself can clearly see progress toward goals. Moreover, teachers can easily track progress or identify possible reasons for lack of progress.

4. Conclusion

This paper has shown how the program in question failed to engage the majority of students in ex-

tensive reading to a degree where language proficiency gains could be expected. Recommendations for adjusting the program to make it more effective are summarized as follows:

- 1) Better educate students on the benefits of ER during orientation and repeat the rationale for ER regularly. Explain in detail the mechanism of ER and how much reading will lead to what kinds of gains in proficiency.
- 2) Hold students accountable for ER by assigning grades to performance. Make ER mandatory and expected.
- 3) Set individual reading goals for students based on needs and proficiency levels.
- 4) Regularly exploit ER for in-class discussions on reading content, progress or experience.
- 5) Make progress visible through the use of Weekly Progress Sheets and Reading Record Sheets to facilitate tracking, sharing, and feedback.

Engaging students is not easy. Students are surrounded by various people and activities competing for their attention—friends, jobs, clubs, games, etc. Without a comprehensive program of required participation, supported by social and psychological leveraging, it is hard to get students to engage in new behaviors, even ones that help them toward their ultimate learning goals.

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