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Research Note

Extensive Reading Onboarding:

Program Design for Increasing Engagement

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Abstract

This study reviews the redesign of an extensive reading (ER) program at a private university in Japan. The original ER program design for 2015 proved less than optimally engaging and so suggested improvements based on an examination of relevant literature were carried out. These included: 1) better educating and orienting students; 2) making the program obligatory and assigning a grade for reading; 3) setting reading goals; 4) connecting ER to classroom activities; and 5) making progress visible and public through tracking, sharing and providing feedback on progress. This study compares the reading amount in the first term of the 2015 year and the first term of the 2016 year, immediately after the changes, were put in place. The 2016 program appears to have been far more successful at engaging students.

Key words

Extensive reading, Program design, Motivation, Onboarding

1. Introduction

Extensive reading (ER) can lead to improvement in reading fluency, vocabulary, spelling, reading speed, speaking, listening, writing skills, and to stronger language learning motivation (Krashen, 2009; Waring, 2009). In the Japanese context, it has been linked to increased confidence and decreased anxiety with reading (Yoshida, 2016) and increased scores on standardized tests such as the TOEIC (Nishizawa, Yoshioka, & Fukada, 2010; Nishizawa and Yoshioka, 2016). Because of its proven effectiveness and because of the limited amount of contact class time available in most programs, ER, and in particular *additive ER*—where students borrow and read books outside of regular class time (Robb & Kano, 2013)—has attracted a lot of interest. However, since it seems that considerable, if not massive quantities need to be read (see, for example, Nishizawa, Yoshioka, & Fukada, 2010, Beglar and Hunt, 2014; or Nishizawa and Yoshioka, 2016) encouraging and sustaining sufficient student engagement with ER is a substantial challenge.

This paper will compare the ER programs of two first-year cohorts at the same private Japanese university in the first term of their first year at the insti-

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tution (April–July, 2015 and April–July, 2016) to see how various program elements can be manipulated to encourage greater engagement with ER. First, a brief description will be given of the first year of the program (the 2015 program) and the recommended changes that were made after post-program assessment and how they were implemented for the second year of the program (the 2016 program). A more detailed description of the 2015 program and the assessment that led to these recommendations can be found in Van Amelsvoort (2016). The results for the revised second cohort will then be described and the two cohorts will be compared in terms of learner engagement.

2. The 2015 program cohort

The design of the initial program year with the first cohort strove to encourage intrinsic motivation and a love for reading in the L2, and to foster autonomy by offering considerable choice and making access as easy as possible (McMurry, Tanner, & Anderson, 2010). In regular English classes, students were given an orientation to the benefits of ER and the systems for accessing books. Paper readers were kept in the Learning Center, a central space in the department where students frequently congregated, and electronic readers were made available through student subscriptions to XReading (xreading.com) where they could access hundreds of books using their own computers or devices at any time. Students were given printed rationale for doing ER and instructions for how to do it, and this was supported by teacher explanations. Students were encouraged to participate by their teachers and help was given in some classes in checking out a first book. In addition to reducing the barriers to their participation by making access to the books as easy as possible, students were not required to take quizzes, or write book reports. Even recording the word counts for books that they read was made optional.

Table 1 Numbers of books completed per student in the first term of 2015 (n=123)

Number of books	Number 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%

Early on in the program it became clear that a problem was occurring with student engagement. And by the end of the first term, a very large number of students (29.3%) had either not attempted or not completed a single book, as can be seen in Table 1. Approximately 60% of students had shown some engagement with ER, yet they had read so little that no effect could be expected. Just less than 15% of students were possibly on course to meeting reading targets that would likely result in tangible gains in reading comprehension or reading speed (Nishizawa, Yoshioka, & Fukada, 2010; Beglar & Hunt, 2014).

2.1. Retooling the program

Faced with this lack of engagement, the ER program was reconsidered and the following changes were recommended, based on a review of relevant literature:

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.

These recommendations were seen as corrective interventions. Not all of them were implemented to the letter, however, and some additional measures were also taken. The next sections will describe how each recommendation was implemented, followed by an explanation of some of the theory that informed these decisions. From these practices and theories, we can see there are many ways for sufficient engagement behaviors and autonomous practices to become established. Learners can act in accordance with their L2 future selves (Dornyei, 2009); they can become empowered by experiences of success or being part of an exciting project (Deci and Ryan, 2000); they can trust and follow the experts guiding them or the system they are part of (Yashima, 2014); or they can decide that the potential benefits of participation are worth investing effort in (Hulleman et al., 2008). It is important to understand that the exact motivation varies from learner to learner but is always complex and dynamic and changes according to internal and external factors (Larsen-Freemen, 2006; Mercer, 2011a). One of the reasons for motivational differences is the experiences each student has had with learning English in the past, and the experiences they have within the ER program (Mercer, 2011a; Miyahara, 2015). An effective program should strive for sufficient engagement while trying to ensure positive and successful experiences by students.

2.2. Provide better rationale and ER education

During the 2016 year, the course orientation was expanded to two weeks and more time was allotted for ER orientation and onboarding. Onboarding, also known as organizational socialization, is the process by which new group members (users, learners, employees, etc.) acquire the necessary knowledge, skills, or behaviors to function at a minimal level with new tools or in a new environment. The 2016 orientation and onboarding aimed to better explain the reasons for doing ER and the requirements and expectations for success, and make students functional as readers/users with our system. Teachers carefully helped students to choose books, and then actually gave them portions of class time to read silently—20 minutes of each class in the first week, and then 15 minutes of each class in the second week. By the time the orientation period ended, all students had checked out books and even completed a few. Students were also shown the Reading record sheet and instructed on where to find word counts in graded readers, and how to fill in the form to track their reading progress.

There are many reasons for providing a more substantial orientation and better onboarding for expected behaviors of student participants. First of all, few students have experienced ER at all, and among those who have, great differences in their understanding of ER exist, something Mikami (2016) found as well. In addition, one of the reasons for placing ER so centrally in the program is that it is a way to promote learner autonomy, and that begins with awareness-raising (thereafter followed by practice and appropriation) (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Likewise, careful onboarding has been found to significantly increase continuation with services to which users are new (Porter, 2006) as it reduces the need for these new users to struggle to learn unfamiliar procedures at the same time as they are de-

ciding whether it is worth their while to invest effort into a learning system with which they are unaccustomed. Also, during these early sessions, it is important to raise interest, and stress the achievability of requirements and the importance of expected outcomes (Hulleman et al., 2008) in accordance with value-expectancy theory, which stresses that learners make decisions to engage in or adjust behaviors based on their estimation of the chance of success and the importance of the potential outcome to themselves. At the beginning of the program, students have reasonable questions about the amount of benefit they will get for the amount of effort they will need to expend. This apprehension is natural, and must be addressed. Students bring with them various expectations and constraints, and helping them to have a realistic understanding of how much effort they will need to give to a program and what they can expect from their effort is essential. In addition to this, it is beneficial to position the program as an important part of the educational system of the institution, valued by the school, the teachers, and the students who have already taken part in it. Institutional legitimacy helps learners accept ER as part of the educational package of an institution. It is crucial that students see that especially their teachers believe in its power to improve proficiency. This greatly helps to validate programs, but also in a Japanese context, learners tend to demonstrate greater autonomous dependency (Yashima, 2014). That is, they tend to be willing to follow to a greater degree the directives of trusted experts, especially the ones who are closest to them—namely, their instructors. Therefore, it is important to present ER as an institutionalized program with the full support of the teachers and the administration behind it. Aligning the goals of the ER program with the goals of the learners themselves will help students to build a clearer vision of themselves as L2 users and learners (Dornyei, 2009), at a time when they are unlikely to have more than a fuzzy idea of their future L2 selves.

2.3. Accountability and mandatory ER

In 2015, students received scores for the Writing, Presentation, and Counselling parts of the English course. In 2016, ER was made a separate category and assessed as a requirement along with counselling. As such, it represented 15% of a student's final grade, a considerable amount. A rubric was created and given to teachers and students at the beginning of term. Students would receive the full 15 points if they read at least 100,000 words. They would receive 10 points if they read between 70,000 words and 99,999 words, and 7 points if they read 20,000 to 69,999 words. If they read less than 20,000 words, they would not receive any points. This point scheme reflected the importance of reading large quantities of text, something necessary to see demonstrable improvement. The point allocation was designed to nudge students to read more, a choice architecture feature (Thaler and Sunstein, 2009). Students were required to record all of the books they read, including word counts and a checkbox comment on their enjoyment of the book and its level of difficulty. Total word counts were also required, so that at any time in the course, the learner would know how much she has read to date and how she is doing in relation to the term goal. These sheets were kept in the student's portfolio.

The decision for making ER mandatory was informed by self-determination theory and the idea that since reading improvement and language proficiency improvement were important goals for both the students and the program, exerting some extrinsic motivation, at least in the initial stages, would be useful in getting students actually reading, and moving along the continuum of motivation to a point where intrinsic motivation can become more pre-

dominant (Gagne and Deci, 2005). It is believed that initial extrinsic motivation can evolve into intrinsic motivation as long as the goals of the intervention align with the goals for the students. That is, if students believe they are being pressured to do something that is for their own good, they are more likely to accept it and even eventually appropriate the required behavior. Pigott (2011) also found the extrinsic motivation of program requirements to be very important for students in Japan, who often look to teacher or program-imposed goals for behavior directions.

2.4. Setting reading goals

The original recommendation was for individual reading goals to be set. This proved difficult in practice because we did not have a good idea of the general proficiency of students, their learning experiences to date, nor their attitudes to L2 reading upon their entry into our program. Instead, the decision was made to create minimal requirements (100,000 words) and then see if students decided to invest more in ER over the term. Concrete requirements, in the form of word counts, page counts, or book counts, can help set interim goals for students, helping to build what are called "tiny habits" (Fogg & Hreha, 2010) as they progress toward volume levels that lead to skill improvements. In our program, we required 100,000 words for first term, 100,000 words as a special summer assignment, and 100,000 words for second term.

This was done to ensure that students would have clear and achievable goals (King, 2011) and could reach a total word count where they would be more likely to experience tangible gains in reading speed and proficiency test improvement (Nishizawa, Yoshioka, & Fukada, 2010; Beglar & Hunt, 2014). One of the problems of many ER programs is their short length, which may often not allow for a sufficient amount of reading to see tangible improvements in reading speed, level increases, or improvements on standardized tests (Carney, 2016). Even this may be insufficient in the case of some students, according to Nishizawa and Yoshioka (2016). As it turns out, 90 out of 119 students in 2016 cleared the 100,000 word count target in the first term.

2.5. Integration of ER-related activities into regular classes

Since it was found in 2015 that conducting discussions based on graded readers resulted in both more reading and richer discussions, the recommendation of adding more (especially speaking) activities based on graded readers to regular classes was made. In 2016, teachers followed this recommendation and regularly had students talk about their progress with ER and exchange information on books they had read. At the end of term, all students were responsible for doing a portfolio presentation where they talked about their progress with learning over the term, making use of evidence from their portfolios (Berger et al., 2014). Students could point to the number of books or words they had read, reading speed increases (if they are using the XReading system which tracks reading speed), or their progress in moving up in levels to show proficiency.

This decision was informed by self-determination theory, which posits that people want to feel a part of something (Deci and Ryan, 2000), and socio-cultural theories of language learning that stress the importance of learning happening through a process of socialization that necessarily requires social interaction and involves identity formation or reformation (Little, 2001; Ushioda 2011a; Lave and Wenger, 1991). At the same time, requiring regular interaction was thought to be advantageous for encouraging habitual behaviors by making it easier for learners to learn more about books available and gain ideas for working reading into busy schedules,

something McGonigal calls exercising the “I will” power (2013). Being regularly reminded of the importance of ER through such activities, learners can be encouraged to turn reading into a habit and overcome anxiety-based procrastination. Autonomy can emerge from these habits when they are formed in a social setting into which they are socialized and whose reality they accept and trust.

2.6. Enhancing the visibility of progress through the use of Reading Record sheets to facilitate tracking, sharing, and feedback

In 2016, the decision was made not to use the Weekly Progress Sheets as they required extra time to distribute, fill in, and monitor. In addition, key information would already be contained in the Reading Record sheet, making it superfluous, and so only that sheet was used. The Reading Record sheet has multiple functions. It is a record of the individual books the student has read and their impressions of the content and difficulty level of those books. This helps students to remember more details about their reading, something that helps when communicative activities based on ER are employed in classes. The Reading Record sheet also becomes a progress sheet for student reading, so that the student herself can see how she is doing, and when progress is discussed in class, compare herself to other students. Finally, teachers and administrators can monitor student progress with ER (including word counts and level changes), providing advice or assistance when necessary, in a timely fashion.

When records are kept and made visible to the learner, the teacher, and even peers, this can become a system of formative feedback for learners, facilitating both learning and autonomous development (Wiliam, 2011). Tracking carefully with the aim of reaching 100,000 words gives learners the ability to set interim goals and to always know how they are doing in relation to those goals. The learner can see the goal, see the progress, compare that with others, and make adjustments to performance. In so doing, any amount of reading can provide the learner with formative feedback on their performance and build learning management or behavioral management skills so important for autonomous learner development. Indeed, the act of tracking performance has been associated with better behavioral performance in many endeavors, including for example diets, where such tracking is known as keeping a food diary, a popular and successful technique (Burke et al., 2011). At the end of the term, students were responsible for giving portfolio presentations, mentioned earlier, which amounted to a very public declaration of language accomplishments and improvements (Berger et al., 2014).

3. The 2016 program cohort and ER results

The 2016 program cohort experienced the same number of contact hours, but a slightly different curriculum and different expectations for ER. Greater use was made of the portfolio system, and in addition to ER, the results of twice-weekly quick writing assignments and weekly vocabulary quizzes were tracked. Institutional expectations for participation

Table 2 Numbers of books completed per student in the first term of 2016 (n=119)

Number of books	Number of students	Percentage of students
0 books	0	0%
1-3 books	5	4.2%
4-6 books	14	11.7%
7-9 books	21	17.6%
10-12 books	35	29.4%
More than 12 books	46	38.6%

through such tracking, grading weights, greater allocation of orientation time, and the integration of ER-related activities into regular classroom contact time all delivered a message that ER was valued, expected, and important (Dweck, 2006).

The results showed that the corrective interventions made a fairly drastic change in student engagement with ER. If we compare the results of books read (in Table 1 and 2), obvious improvements can be seen. The number of students who had either not attempted or not completed a single book fell to 0%. Approximately 15% of students showed only some engagement with ER, albeit to an insufficient degree. And fully 85% of students were possibly on course to meet reading targets that would likely result in tangible gains in reading comprehension or reading speed (Nishizawa, Yoshioka, & Fukada, 2010; Beglar & Hunt, 2014).

4. Conclusion: Choice architecture

In the fast-paced world of internet start-up companies, the question often asked by potential investors is whether the new service is a vitamin or a painkiller (Eyal, 2014). That is, is the service selling slow, long-term improvements or quick relief for an acute need? Investors tend to favor painkillers, but educators need to both nurture positive, intrinsic behaviors and leverage extrinsic motivations to ensure sufficient engagement. For ER, we know that massive quantities of text need to be read to see reading speed improvements or improvements on standardized proficiency tests. This takes sustained effort over months, if not years. This sustained engagement can result from established habits of behaviors formed in the context of a social setting into which learners become socialized and whose reality they come to accept and trust (Yashima, 2014); and whose tasks they believe they can accomplish (Mercer, 2015) and benefit from (Hulleman et al., 2008). Providing a system that makes it easier for students to understand what ER is and how it can benefit them, where they are onboarded sufficiently so that program behaviors are familiar enough, and where the institution's system and teachers' intentions are clear and accepted and align with those of the learner are all crucial. Another important feature to consider using is choice architecture design (Thaler and Sunstein, 2009) to make it easier for students to take notice of, understand, accept, and make choices to participate in an ER program.

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