

Effects of Extensive Reading on EFL Learner Reading Attitudes

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Abstract

Extensive reading (ER) is an approach to reading instruction that involves reading a large amount of varied texts at a reasonably fluent speed. While ER has steadily gained popularity as an effective strategy for motivating second language learners of various proficiency levels (Takase, 2007), much more research is needed on L2 reading motivation (Grabe, 2009). This three-year study explores the effects of extensive reading (ER) activities on aspects of the reading attitudes of EFL learners at a Japanese university. ER-based activities were integrated into one semester of a communicative English course. Pre- and post-ER questionnaires elicited learners' evaluations of the activities and data on reading attitudes. Analysis of the data indicated that ER had positive effects on the affective and cognitive aspects of participants' L2 reading attitudes. The findings suggest that implementing ER activities in EFL courses can improve learner motivation and L2 reading attitudes.

Keywords

Extensive reading (ER), reading attitude, English as a foreign language (EFL)

1 Introduction

It is claimed that successful extensive reading (ER) programs may promote positive L2 reading attitudes, helping motivate learners to continue reading (Day & Bamford, 1998; Yamashita, 2013). Since Day and Bamford (1998) identified the strong influence of reading attitudes on learners' motivation to read in an L2, several studies have examined the effects of ER on reading attitudes in designated reading classes (e.g. Takase, 2007, 2012; Matsui & Noro, 2010; Stoeckel, Reagan, & Hann, 2012; Yamashita, 2013). However, as Grabe (2009) points out, much more research is needed on L2 reading motivation. This study addresses the research gap of contexts where ER has been integrated into a communicative English course. Spanning three years, this study explores the effects of ER-based activities on aspects of the reading attitudes of three cohorts of EFL learners at a Japanese university.

2 Research on ER and Japanese EFL learner reading attitudes

The effects of ER on the L2 reading attitudes of Japanese EFL learners has been explored in several studies. In their study of EFL extensive reading conducted with 96 Japanese high school students Tanaka and Stapleton (2007) found that not only did the treatment group outperform control students on reading comprehension and reading-rate increases, students also expressed positive attitudes to the training procedures and outcomes. Takase (2012) found that almost all participants, including reluctant repeater students, improved their reading attitudes and motivation to read English books following a three-month ER program implemented at a Japanese university. Matsui and Noro (2010) conducted a study of the effects of one school year of 10-minute sustained silent reading (SSR), a reading activity where learners regularly read silently in class for a designated time period, on junior high school EFL learners' reading fluency and motivation. They found that while the ER activities enhanced learners' intrinsic motivation to read in English, some learners had anxiety and negative attitudes to English reading due to their basic skills or because of the teacher's guidance. Stoeckel et al. (2012) researched the effects of doing post-reading quizzes in an ER program on the reading attitudes of Japanese EFL learners by comparing participants who did the quizzes with those who did not. They found that taking the quizzes had no significant negative effect on learners' L2 reading attitudes. Yamashita (2013) examined the effects of ER on various components of L2 reading attitude with 61 undergraduate students in EFL classes at a university in Japan. The results showed measurable impacts of ER on three variables. Yamashita (2013) found that ER increased learners' feelings of comfort and

reduced anxiety towards EFL reading, and had a positive effect on the intellectual value that learners' attached to reading. These studies have identified the complex nature of the effects of ER, indicating that more research in this area is needed. In addition, these studies took place in designated reading classes with few post-reading activities apart from book reports (Yamashita, 2013) and short quizzes (Stoeckel et al., 2012). The present study differs in that it was conducted on ER activities integrated into a communicative English course, and which in addition to reading extensively, included various post-reading tasks utilising various language skills. The research question this study attempts to answer is: What effects do extensive reading activities have on EFL learners' L2 reading attitudes?

3 Method

3.1 Participants

The participants in this study were 344 first-year students at a private Japanese university. The students were three cohorts of International Studies majors enrolled in a mandatory, communicative English course. Almost all of the participants were L1 Japanese speakers, aged between 18-20 years old. The English proficiency levels of the participants varied widely as indicated by their TOEIC results, with participants' scores during the year of the study ranging from 180 to 750.

3.2 The course

The communicative English course in this study had a coordinated syllabus taught by three teachers. The course was semi-intensive, with four 45-minute lessons and one 90-minute lesson per week. The course length was 15 weeks (or one semester). Students were streamed into six classes containing approximately 20 students of similar proficiency based on the results of a placement test at the beginning of the semester.

3.3 The ER activities

This study examines the effects of ER activities implemented during the fifteen weeks of the communicative English course. In addition to reading as many graded readers as possible, students did various activities related to their reading, including speaking and listening tasks, written and oral book reports, and poster presentations on their favorite books. Both class readers, often used in conjunction with the audio of the books and film versions of the story, as well as self-selected books were used.

The self-selected graded readers were mostly from the university library, although instructors occasionally lent some of their own graded readers to learners as well. The graded readers were mostly from the Oxford Dominoes, Oxford Bookworms, Cambridge English Readers, and Penguin Readers series. All learners started reading at a very easy level (for example, Starter or Level 1 using the publishers' levels) and had to read a certain number of books at each level before choosing books from a more difficult level. The importance of reading books that were both easy to understand and enjoyable was emphasised to learners throughout the ER program.

The ER program lasted the entire semester beginning with an orientation phase, a period of daily ER activities with a class reader, and then 11 weeks of ER conducted mostly out of class with some in-class activities (see Figure 1).

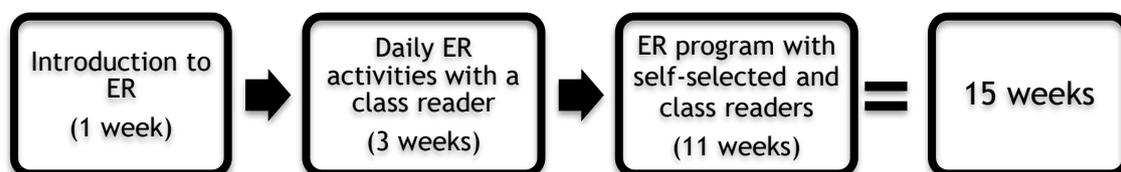


Figure 1: The ER program structure

In addition to reading graded readers, students completed post-reading activities, such as talking about their books and writing book reports. Assessment for the ER activities was mostly based on the amount of words read. For example, in 2015 a sliding scale was used, from the maximum 100% grade for reading 100,000 words or more down to 60% for reading the minimum amount of 70,000 words. This reading amount grade

was worth 15% of the overall course grade, with an additional 5% for book reports submitted. A poster presentation on a favorite book was worth 6% of the overall course grade. As a result, this meant that in 2015 ER-based activities directly accounted for a minimum 26% of the first semester communicative English course grade, with additional components such as a vocabulary log and in-class participation being indirectly related to the ER activities.

3.4 Data collection and analysis

Pre- and post-ER questionnaires were used to collect learner evaluations of the activities and data on reading attitudes for each year of the study. Item types included closed and open questions, multiple choice, and Likert scales. In order to detect changes in aspects of learners' L2 reading attitudes, pre- and post-ER questionnaire data were collected using Likert scales (1=*Strongly disagree* to 5=*Strongly agree*). The post-ER questionnaire also asked learners to rate each of the main activities. These items were divided into two categories: one requiring participants to rate how interesting each activity was and the other requiring participants to indicate how good the activity was for improving their English ability. For items in the first category, participants rated each activity on a scale from 1 (*boring*) to 5 (*very interesting*). For items in the second category, participants were asked to rate each activity from 1 (*poor*) to 5 (*excellent*). The pre- and post-ER questionnaires were administered in the first and final classes of each ER program. Responses from participants who did not complete both pre- and post- questionnaires were eliminated from the data set. An independent samples *t*-test was used to analyse data related to reading attitudes for each year of the study.

4 Results

4.1 Evaluation of the overall ER activities

Almost all learners indicated that they enjoyed the ER activities and considered that their English improved as a result. The vast majority of students also stated that they would continue reading English books independently in the future. A slightly disappointing result in 2013 was that 18% of learners indicated that they would not continue reading English books on their own in the future. The most common reasons given for this by these approximately twenty participants were a lack of time and not enjoying reading.

Table 1: Learner evaluation of the ER activities

Item	2013 (n=114)		2014 (n=104)		2015 (n=126)	
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
1. Did you enjoy the ER activities?	98%	2%	93%	7%	87%	13%
2. Do you feel that your English improved through the ER activities?	89%	11%	89%	11%	86%	14%
3. Do you think you will continue to read English books on your own in the future?	82%	18%	94%	6%	88%	12%

In order to gain a deeper understanding of learners' evaluations of the ER activities, participants had an option to provide reasons for their responses. Common reasons provided for enjoying the ER activities related to cognitive and affective factors. Learners commented that they enjoyed the activities because of the perceived learning effects, such as increased vocabulary and improved reading ability. These effects, in turn, also often appeared to have affective benefits, as the following comments indicate:

Because when I read book in English, I have many unknown words so I can many imagination. It is exciting and interesting!

Because it gives me many English words. I enjoyed learning English.

Sometimes reading in English is difficult for me, but when I could understand meaning, I feel pleasant.

In comments related to question 2 – asking whether learners felt that their English improved through the ER activities – participants also emphasised various learning benefits, from vocabulary learning to improved reading and speaking fluency, as seen in these examples:

My vocabulary was increased. I learnt correct grammar.

I learned a lot of words and I can read books too fast.

I think my reading speed improved.

I could speak more fluently than before.

I think I learned more English words and I can speak English with other people more smooth.

4.2 Evaluation of the individual activities

The post-ER questionnaire also asked learners to rate each of the main activities for how interesting the activity was and for how good the activity was for improving their English ability. For items in the first category, participants rated each activity on a scale from 1 (*boring*) to 5 (*very interesting*). For items in the second category, participants rated each activity from 1 (*poor*) to 5 (*excellent*). The results for these evaluations for each of the three years of the study are presented in Tables 2, 3 and 4.

Table 2: Learner evaluation of individual activities in 2013 ($n=114$)

<i>Activity</i>	<i>How interesting was the activity?</i>	<i>How good was the activity for improving your English ability?</i>
Book talk	3.73	4.20
Book report	3.60	4.12
Reading diary	3.21	3.95
Silent reading	3.22	3.57
Reading and watching <i>A Christmas Carol</i>	4.64	4.09
Talking about <i>A Christmas Carol</i>	3.75	3.85
Speaking test	3.51	4.23
Speed reading ($n=39$)	3.74	4.38

Table 3: Learner evaluation of individual activities in 2014 ($n=104$)

<i>Activity</i>	<i>How interesting was the activity?</i>	<i>How good was the activity for improving your English ability?</i>
Book talk	3.19	3.76
Book report	3.37	3.91
Silent reading	3.44	3.88
Poster Presentation	3.71	3.91

Table 4: Learner evaluation of individual activities in 2015 ($n=126$)

<i>Activity</i>	<i>How interesting was the activity?</i>	<i>How good was the activity for improving your English ability?</i>
Book talk	3.03	3.67
Book report	3.25	4.05
Silent reading	3.20	3.80

Reading a book and watching a movie of the same story	4.31	3.86
Reading a book while listening to the book CD	3.56	3.82
Poster presentation	3.18	3.52
Speed reading ($n=64$)	3.41	4.28

As the results show, in each year of the study the activities were generally rated more highly for being good for improving English ability than for being interesting, with all but one of the listed activities rated more highly for their perceived usefulness in improving English ability.

4.3 Effects on reading attitudes

Analysis of pre- and post-ER data indicated that the ER activities had positive effects on learners' L2 reading attitudes. As discussed in section 3.4, an independent samples t -test was used to analyse data related to reading attitudes each year of the study. In 2013, as Table 5 shows, after doing ER participants perceived reading in English to be more enjoyable, less difficult and slightly less boring. The post-ER reduction in the perceived difficulty of reading in English was statistically significant. Although there was only a slight reduction in the perception of reading in English as boring, as the pre-ER data for this item each year clearly shows, a high level of disagreement with this opinion was already present prior to the ER activities, thus leaving little room for further reduction.

Table 5: 2013 pre- and post-ER reading attitudes

<i>Item</i>	<i>Pre-ER</i>	<i>Post-ER</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>Cohen's d</i>
Reading in English is fun	3.70	3.85	-1.28	.20	-0.17
Reading in English is difficult	4.25	4.02	2.08	.04	0.27
Reading in English is boring	2.17	2.11	0.45	.65	0.06

As Tables 6 and 7 show, the results for 2014 and 2015 also indicated that the ER activities had slightly positive effects on learners' L2 reading attitudes related to the perceived enjoyment and difficulty of reading in English. As in 2013, however, there was little effect on responses related to reading English being perceived as boring. However, as discussed above, the pre-ER data for this item indicates that reading in English was already not generally considered boring prior to the commencement of the ER activities.

Table 6: 2014 pre- and post-ER reading attitudes

<i>Item</i>	<i>Pre-ER</i>	<i>Post-ER</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>Cohen's d</i>
Reading in English is fun	3.57	3.83	-1.59	.12	-0.31
Reading in English is difficult	4.09	3.81	1.65	.01	0.32
Reading in English is boring	2.25	2.23	0.11	.91	0.02

Table 7: 2015 pre- and post-ER reading attitudes

<i>Item</i>	<i>Pre-ER</i>	<i>Post-ER</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>Cohen's d</i>
Reading in English is fun	3.71	3.86	-1.35	.18	-0.17
Reading in English is difficult	4.11	3.92	1.76	.08	0.22
Reading in English is boring	2.00	2.19	-1.72	.09	0.22

Another indicator of the positive effects that the ER activities had on the learners' attitudes to reading in English was the large post-ER increase in learners who stated that they enjoyed reading in English. As Table 8 shows, in both 2013 and 2014, 87% of students indicated that they enjoyed reading in English after doing ER, a substantial increase from the pre-ER opinions, especially in 2014 where the number of learners who stated they enjoyed reading in English increased by 42% after doing the extensive reading activities.

Table 8: Pre- and post-ER percentage of students who enjoy reading in English

<i>Year</i>	<i>Pre-ER</i>	<i>Post-ER</i>
2013	69%	87%

2014	45%	87%
2015	73%	85%
Total	62%	86%

5 Discussion

This study examined the effects of ER activities on aspects of the reading attitudes of EFL learners at a Japanese university. The results indicated that the ER activities had a positive impact on the affective aspects of reading attitudes, especially those related to the perceived enjoyment and difficulty of reading in English. These findings are in line with those reported in Takase (2012) and Yamashita (2013). It seems apparent that through their experiences many learners realised that reading in English need not be difficult and could, in fact, be very enjoyable. As one student commented:

I have never read a English book, so I wanted to read a English book. Because I thought that reading was difficult. But I enjoy reading English books!

A positive effect on the cognitive aspects of reading attitudes was also apparent, with 88% of participants stating that the ER activities improved their English abilities. This effect is similar to the positive effect on the intellectual value variable reported in Yamashita (2013). The higher rating given to almost all of the individual activities for their ability to improve English ability than for being interesting also indicates that many learners valued the ER activities for their language learning capabilities. The finding that post-reading activities such as writing book reports were perceived by learners as very useful learning tasks, even when they did not consider them as particularly interesting is encouraging. It also indicates, as Stoeckel et al. (2012) found, that post-reading assessment tasks do not necessarily negatively affect learners' L2 reading attitudes. It is also encouraging that all of the above effects were achieved in a relatively short period of 15 weeks.

However, this study has several limitations. First, although the study identified several positive effects, how long these effects continue is unknown and is something that future studies should explore. Second, as the study was conducted over three years, variations in the learning conditions each year may have affected participants' responses. For example, although not a focus of this study, factors such as being taught by different teachers and having access to a different selection of graded readers may have influenced learners' opinions. Third, the study examined only a few possible variables related to reading attitudes. Fourth, only the change in variables was examined, not any possible interactions between them. Finally, any findings should be considered the result of the context of the study. Therefore, as ER is implemented in various ways, generalisability of results to different contexts may be limited.

6 Conclusion

The present study has, despite its limitations, provided results of the positive effects of ER on aspects of EFL learner reading attitudes. This study has shown that an ER program can promote positive L2 reading attitudes, although it is not known how long the effects continue. The results also indicated that ER can help motivate learners to continue reading in English, although this study did not investigate the extent to which they do so. Another key finding was that ER activities can be successfully implemented in communication-focused courses, not only stand-alone reading classes. Learners' positive evaluations of multimodal activities such as simultaneous reading and listening or reading and watching book and film versions of the same story also indicate that such activities have great potential for supporting cognitive and affective aspects of language learning. It is hoped that further studies of ER-based activities will contribute to the knowledge of the affective aspects of reading and help resolve some of the questions that remain.

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Appendix A. 2015 Post-ER Questionnaire (English version)

A. Please give your opinion (Circle 1, 2, 3, 4 or 5 for each statement)

1 = strongly disagree 2 = disagree 3 = not sure 4 = agree 5 = strongly agree

	Strongly disagree			Strongly agree	
Reading in Japanese is fun.	1	2	3	4	5
Reading in English is fun.	1	2	3	4	5
Reading in Japanese is difficult.	1	2	3	4	5
Reading in English is difficult.	1	2	3	4	5
Reading in Japanese is boring.	1	2	3	4	5
Reading in English is boring.	1	2	3	4	5

B.

1. How interesting were the books you read? (Circle 1, 2, 3, 4, or 5)

1 = boring 2 = fair 3 = average 4 = above average 5 = very interesting

1 2 3 4 5

2. How interesting were the following activities? (Circle 1, 2, 3, 4 or 5)

1 = boring 2 = fair 3 = average 4 = above average 5 = very interesting

	Boring			Very interesting	
a. Book Talk	1	2	3	4	5
b. Book Report	1	2	3	4	5
c. Speed Reading	1	2	3	4	5
d. Reading a book and watching a movie of the same story	1	2	3	4	5
e. Poster Presentation	1	2	3	4	5

- | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| f. Silent Reading | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| g. Reading while listening to the book CD | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

3. Did you enjoy the ER activities? (Circle *Yes* or *No*)

Yes No

Why or why not? (Optional)

4. How good were the following activities for improving your English?

1 = poor 2 = fair 3 = average 4 = above average 5 = excellent

- | | Poor | | | | Excellent |
|--|------|---|---|---|-----------|
| a. Book Talk | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| b. Book Report | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| c. Speed Reading | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| d. Reading a book and watching a movie of the same story | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| e. Poster Presentation | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| f. Silent Reading | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| g. Reading while listening to the book CD | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

5. Do you feel that the ER activities improved your English?

Yes No

If *Yes*, **how** did the activities improve your English? (Optional)

6. Do you think you will continue to read English books on your own in the future?

Yes No

Why or why not? (Optional)

7. Free Comment: Do you have any other comments on the CEP extensive reading activities? For example, was there anything you particularly liked or didn't like?