Research Note

Implementing an Extensive Reading Project at a Medical School in Japan

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Introduction

In this report, we discuss our ongoing attempts to implement an Extensive Reading (henceforth ER) project as part of a compulsory foreign languages course delivered to first-year students at Nippon Medical School. We begin by introducing ER and English teaching at the School, before going on to discuss the practical issues that arose as we attempted to implement the project in 2015, and then our attempts to address and resolve these problems in 2016. We conclude the report by discussing some issues that we hope to address in the future.

Extensive Reading

Research has found that students who read substantial amounts of text regularly for enjoyment outside of the classroom have higher levels of reading achievement (Guthrie & Cox, 2001, p. 159). However, the way in which reading has traditionally been taught has focused on analysis of comparatively short and difficult texts, which means that language learners may not be getting the kind of extensive reading practice that has been found to be predictive of higher reading achievement.

ER is an approach to teaching reading that focusses on students reading large amounts of relatively easy texts, usually for pleasure, in order to improve their ability to read fluently (i.e. to read quickly while maintaining

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comprehension), learn vocabulary, and increase their motivation to read. An important resource in an ER project is a library of books, usually called *graded readers*, which are written at a level of lexical and grammatical difficulty suitable for language learners. Graded readers at the easiest levels feature only a relatively small variety of English words (only the most common words), whereas more difficult graded readers will more closely resemble native-level texts, with more complex grammar and the inclusion of less common (and more difficult) vocabulary items. Studies have found that ER projects lead to improved comprehension and reading-rate (e.g. Elley, 2000; Robb & Stusser, 1989; Tanaka & Stapleton, 2007), and that ER is also associated with positive attitudes to reading (e.g. Elley, 2000; Guthrie & Cox, 2001; Lightbown, et al. 2002).

Day and Bamford (2002) set out ten principles for successful ER programmes, which they call "the basic ingredients of extensive reading" (p. 136-137). These principles, which focus on reading easy texts for pleasure, promoting learner autonomy and choice, and de-emphasizing assessment, are as follows:

1. The reading material is easy.
2. A variety of reading material on a wide range of topics is available.
3. Learners choose what they want to read.
4. Learners read as much as possible.
5. The purpose of the reading is usually related to pleasure, information and general understanding.
6. Reading is its own reward.
7. Reading speed is usually faster rather than slower.
8. Reading is individual and silent.
9. Teachers orient and guide their students.
10. The teacher is a role model of a reader.

<div align="right">(Day & Bamford, 2002, pp. 137-141)</div>

However, ER has not been without its criticisms. For example, Mori (2015, p. 131-2) has found that, in a context such as Japan where students are learning English as a foreign language, the reality is that students' motivation may not be so straightforward. She concludes that no studies provide convincing evidence

for ER's ability to promote intrinsic motivation, and that it is naïve to assume that simply giving students choices of interesting texts to read will lead to increases in motivation to read. Furthermore, understandings of motivation may differ in different cultural contexts, so that while choice and autonomy, practiced by following the third principle in Day and Bamford's (2002) list, may enhance intrinsic motivation in a Western context such as the US, it is argued that in East Asia learners may be more motivated when respected others make choices for them (Iyengar & Lepper, 1999; Kitayama, et al., 2007), rather than when they are asked to make choices for themselves.

How to effectively implement an ER programme into an existing curriculum also needs consideration. ER places demands in terms of resources, such as a library of graded readers, and time, as students need to regularly read large amounts of texts (Grabe, 2009, p. 312). So those who start to run an ER programme need to decide whether to set up a classroom library and/or work collaboratively with their school library and also whether to run ER as a standalone activity or as part of classwork.

A traditional approach to ER has seen it as a standalone activity that is separate from other classwork, often done outside of class and or in silent reading time set aside in class. For example, Macalister (2008) describes how ER may be successfully implemented in an ESL context as a standalone activity, by setting aside time for silent reading each day in class, with the classroom teacher modelling good reading behaviour, so that the students were not expected to do the majority of reading on their own outside of class. However, the class in this study met every day for three or four hours, which meant that enough time was available to do this. This is not a luxury available to all language teachers.

The view of ER as a standalone activity has also been challenged. Researchers have argued that ER should be incorporated into class programmes, for example as a springboard to other language learning activities, as learners may not read books on their own outside of class, and also because this may support learners and build motivation (Green, 2005; Macalister, 2015; Mohd Asraf & Ahmad, 2003; Robb, 2002).

One direction we should bear in mind when designing an ER programme is

suggested in Grabe and Stroller (2011). Referring to the reading motivation study by Takase (2007) in a Japanese high school context, they suggest that "If we can improve students' motivation for L2 reading through instruction, we should also witness improved comprehension over time" (p. 124). Then if we can set up a (successful) ER project as a standalone activity with certain specifications in mind, and if we can see some improvement in reading motivation, this has a potential to be regarded as an instructional practice that positively affect student motivation to read.

Reading at NMS

Developing reading proficiency in English has been widely acknowledged as an important aspect of English learning, and many instructional approaches have been devised and carried out to suit individual educational settings. In a Japanese university context, particularly in a medical school setting, there is likely to be a greater need for nurturing the reading ability of English as "the language of science, technology and advanced research" (Grabe & Stroller, 2011, p. xiv). Grabe and Stroller maintain that "many people in multilingual settings need to read in an L2 (and not only English as the L2) at reasonably high levels of proficiency to achieve personal, occupational and professional goals" (2011, p. xiv). Thus, as ER has been found to improve reading comprehension, speed, and possibly motivation, bringing ER as an approach to the teaching of English reading into our curriculum seems a reasonable step towards meeting the needs of students.

The English Programmes before 2014

Before the current curriculum started in 2014, compulsory English classes for the first year were given twice a week over an academic year (30 weeks). In two days of a week, English classes were given concurrently with German/French classes over two sets of 90-min sessions, by allocating the half of the students (about 60 students) to English and the other half to either French or German. For example, a student who took English in the first period needed to take either French or German in the second period. Within the limitation of the

curriculum at that time our department had wanted to cover four strands, and at the same time, wanted to organize smaller class sizes. To address both of the issues we decided to divide each English class (of 60 students) into two groups, which were taught by two different teachers, conventionally by a pair of a full-time teacher and a part-time teacher. As a result, students had four sets of 15-week sessions, each of which covered reading, writing, listening, and speaking.

The reading component, given in the same time slot as the writing component, was mainly taught by part-time teachers. Its focus varied slightly according to their specialization, but mainly on intensive reading of academic texts, including ones on medical topics. As the writing class was considered to involve more work load for checking students' writing assignments outside their regular class time, our department took its responsibility among full-time members.

The new curriculum

Since the new curriculum was introduced in 2014, our department has maintained the small class size policy. In 2014 English classes were given three times a week (instead of two in the old curriculum), but each class lasted 70 minutes (instead of 90 minutes). One of the three slots in a week followed the old curriculum and was used for reading/writing. Another was used for medical communication, which was situated as a development of the listening/speaking component in the old curriculum. The last slot, added in the new curriculum, was used for discussion/presentation purpose to incorporate communicative aspects of English learning more fully. In the new curriculum, therefore, the total number of English classes became higher and the total English class time became longer; however, the total class time given to the reading component has become shorter (70 min session over 15 weeks).

The new curriculum at NMS has been set to meet the so-called "global standards" as many other medical departments/schools in Japan have intended to do so, moving towards outcome-based education programmes. One way of applying them to English education has been suggested by Japanese Society for Medical English Education. Their guidelines include being "able to read

and understand textbooks and articles in English" in the outcomes of English Education. It seems evident that acquiring reading fluency has been, and will be an important aspect of English education.

Extensive reading at NMS in 2015

In 2015, the Department of Foreign Languages brought in three new teachers to deliver English classes to all first year students. As there were only five English teachers in the department, this represented a large change in personnel, and brought with it opportunities to discuss teaching practices. One new direction suggested by the new teachers was that the course may support the development of reading fluency through the implementation of an ER project. The Department already had a pre-existing library of graded readers at various levels of difficulty, which had been little used. Given the range of TOEFL scores of first-year students at the school, the graded readers seemed to offer a way in which to cater to all of their needs, and discussion quickly turned to how to make use of them.

The majority of first-year university EFL classes in Japan run over the course of one academic year, or at least one semester. This gives teachers a period of between 10-15 weeks contact at a time with a particular group of learners, and teachers wishing to implement an extensive reading project can manage that project over the course of the semester or year from the classroom.

However, the situation is a little different at Nippon Medical School. There are three terms over the academic year, with the first two terms being approximately twelve weeks each, while the third is six weeks. There are approximately 120 first-year students, who are divided into four groups with about 30 students in each. In order for each teacher to teach all first year students in a term, the terms are divided into two parts. In the first part of the term, a teacher will deliver their course to two of the four groups, and then in the second part of the term the teacher will deliver their course to the other two groups. Therefore, teachers do not see the groups throughout the whole of each term. Rather, they meet each group for approximately six weeks in each of the first two terms, and for about three weeks in the third term. By way of example, the

teaching plan for English 1A in Term 1 is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. *Plan for English 1A in Term 1*

	Teacher A	Teacher B
Weeks 1-6	Groups 1 & 3	Groups 2 & 4
Weeks 7-12	Groups 2 & 4	Groups 1 & 3

As can be seen, two teachers share responsibilities for one course (in this case English 1A). However, the individual teachers' components are independent from each other, so that English 1A should not necessarily be thought of as one course taught over the semester, but should be thought of as two different courses, one taught by each teacher for six weeks. Although the term is ordinarily scheduled to last twelve weeks, in the event of public or school holiday classes may sometimes be cancelled so that courses may run for a shorter amount of time.

This situation meant that in 2015 the teacher responsible for teaching reading only saw each group of learners for six weeks at a time, which presented us with problems regarding the best way in which to implement the ER project. For example, if we wished to encourage students to be doing extensive reading across the whole duration of each term, how should we monitor and provide support to those students who were not currently taking the reading classes? As some of the students began their reading classes halfway through the term, how should we set the project up so that all students could begin the ER project from the start of the term?

A further complication was that the teacher responsible for teaching the reading classes was working at the university part-time. Our solution for this was that, in order to provide support to students and manage our library while the part-time reading teacher was not on campus, one of the full-time members of the department took responsibility for coordinating the ER project. That is, one (part-time) teacher took responsibility for setting up and monitoring the ER project from within the classroom, while another (full-time) teacher took responsibility for coordinating the ER project outside of the classroom.

Introducing MReader

In order for the full-time teacher to be able to effectively monitor all 120 first-year students from outside of the classroom, it was decided to look for a suitable online system. Our basic requirement was that the system should be able to track the amount of books that students read. MReader (http://mreader.org/index.php) and Xreading (http://xreading.com/) were the two options that we found. Xreading is an online library that was developed to make ER programmes easier for teachers to manage. While in many ways the system seemed suited to our needs, the electronic nature of the library was problematic for us. Firstly, we would have needed to set up students with accounts, which are not free. Deciding how to set up the accounts and whether or not we wanted to place an extra financial burden on our students meant that this option seemed less suitable for our situation. Furthermore, we were unsure if learners would want to read electronic, rather than physical books. As we already had a library of physical books available, and had little time in which to set up the ER project, we decided to opt for a system that would let us use the physical library at our disposal.

This led us to choose MReader. MReader, designed and maintained by Thomas Robb at Kyoto Sangyo University, is an online site that students can be registered to which allows teachers to track their reading progress.

Should we quiz students? Defying principle 6

In order to track students' progress, and so obviate the need for book reports or summaries, MReader includes quizzes that are designed to check that students have read and understood the graded readers. Once a student has read a book, they sign into the site and take the relevant quiz. If they score more than 60% on the quiz, that book is marked as 'read' and the number of words in that book is added to the student's total for that term. It seemed this would provide us with a useful way of managing the ER project across the term-time.

The inclusion of online quizzes, which students need to pass in order to successfully complete the ER project, may be seen as conflicting with Day and Bamford's (2002) original ten principles, in particular principle six: reading is its own reward (Robb, 2015). However, Yoshida (2004) has argued that in a

Japanese university context teachers need to make extra efforts to get students to read, and that seeing reading as its own reward may be better thought of as a long-term goal rather than an immediate goal. We felt that, in a medical school where most students are not necessarily highly motivated to study English, students may be reluctant to read for its own sake. Robb (2015, p. 148) has argued that the defining factor of ER is reading large amounts of material, and that any project that accomplishes this goal may be defined as "extensive reading". We decided that, as we expected many of our students to have low motivation to do large amounts of reading, the MReader quizzes could provide some encouragement for the students to read, and hoped that positive reading experiences may help achieve a longer-term goal of encouraging students to develop reading practices.

2015: The procedure and problems

At the beginning of the first term, twenty minutes were set aside to explain the ER project in a special introductory session given to all students. Students were then given time to choose a book from a book trolley to read at home, and they were also instructed to read the book within a week. A week later, more time was set aside in a special class given by the part-time teacher to all students on the same day, in order to introduce students to their MReader accounts, explain their reading targets, and to show them how to take a quiz. Students were advised to keep reading throughout the remainder of the term in order to achieve their reading targets.

However, due to a lack of coordinated planning, we had some problems in the first year of implementation. The part-time teacher set the students a target of reading at least one book a week, or 75,000 words over the term, and in order to achieve a passing grade for the reading course that he taught, students needed to reach this target. However, the teacher arrived at this total of 75,000 words independently, and the full-time teacher had already set a target of 60,000 words on MReader, which all students noticed when they first signed into their accounts. The full-time teacher had arrived at the 60,000 word total by taking the average amount of words in the graded readers, multiplying this by the number

of weeks the term ran for, and then rounding the number down to make the target more achievable for lower level learners. This meant that students had been given three different targets: one book a week, 60,000 words, and 75,000 words, which created some confusion for them.

Students were slow to proceed with the ER project, even those who were taking the reading classes first. It was not until the end of the first term, when the students felt pressure to meet the aims of the course in order to avoid failing, that they began to take the MReader quizzes. We also noticed that a very large number of students were engaging in suspicious behaviour. For example, some students took a large number of quizzes in a single day, which suggests that they were taking quizzes for books that they had not read (MReader allows teachers to restrict how many quizzes a student can take in one day, and we needed to switch this feature on to prevent this behaviour continuing, which upset some students who actually did want to read more than one book in one day, for example in their free-time at the weekend). Other students explained that they first opened the quiz for a book on MReader, and then searched for the answers to the questions in the book. They had not understood that this was not the way in which MReader was intended to be used, and rather than focussing on the reading first, they were concentrating on answering the quiz questions. MReader also has features that allow teachers to check for suspicious behaviour, such as students who take the same quizzes at the same time, and students who have a high number of quizzes in common. We found many students took the same quizzes, often at approximately the same time, and often from the same IP address. When we confronted the students with this, nearly half of them admitted to attempting to cheat the system.

The word targets, quizzes, in-class activities, and so on, did not motivate the students to take ER seriously. Most of the students did not attempt to read books on a weekly basis, many of them regularly attempted to cheat the system, and many only showed interest in the project near deadlines (if at all). This was particularly noticeable at the initial stage in the first term. Nobody started to take MReader quizzes until mid-May, and even at the end of May over half of the students still read no book. At the end of June, about two weeks before the term-

end deadline, only 38% reached the MReader target of 60,000 words, and nearly 30% read less than 30,000 words (the half of the target word counts). Although a small number of students were keen to meet their reading targets, we wanted to see that happening in a wider range of students (in a compulsory English course).

Extensive reading at NMS in 2016

In the 2015-16 academic year we had encountered a number of problems in trying to implement the ER project. There had been confusion about reading targets and how credit would be assigned, students had not read regularly throughout each term, a large number of students did not reach their targets, many of those who did reach their targets were only motivated to do so when deadlines approached, and a large number of students had attempted to cheat the MReader system.

ER as a standalone "reading project" implemented collaboratively

In order to address these problems, we revised our approach in the 2016-17 academic year. Firstly, we decided that credit for ER would not be given as part of the requirements for any one class (as happened in 2015-16), but would be given as a standalone unit that counted towards the students' total grade assigned for the year. By not tying ER to any one class in particular, we aimed to emphasize that it was the students' responsibility to do the project in their own time. However, we were clear that support was available, and that if students had any problems they could approach us in class or in the Department of Foreign Languages, where the graded readers were kept.

Setting up of the ER project took place in an introductory session, and then in three different classes taught by different teachers over the following two weeks. This involved collaboration between four different teachers. The introductory session was given to students in the first week of the academic year in order to explain the foreign language courses offered to them. During this session, ER was briefly introduced and Figure 1 was shown to the students in order to illustrate how the courses in the Department of Foreign Languages

department were organized. It was explained that the green boxes were out-of-class projects that students were expected to do by themselves. Emphasis was placed on the fact that the Reading Project (bottom left) carried the same weight as the regular classes. The dotted line was intended to show that the Reading Project covered reading skills, which would also be covered in English 1A.
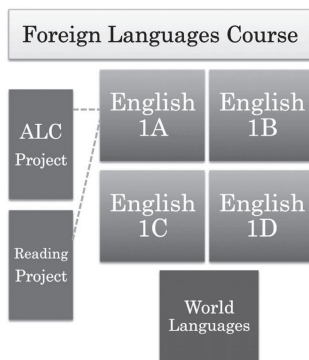

Figure 1

A week later, a short amount of time was set aside during the first reading class in order for one of the teachers to clarify the concept of extensive, as opposed to intensive, reading. On the next day, 20 minutes of a discussion class taught by different teachers was set aside to remind students about extensive reading, and to give students time to select their first book from the book trolley that had been brought to the classroom. They were given a deadline to read this book by, and told to bring their book to the 'medical communication' class (English 1D) on that day.

More practical and structured use MReader

A week later, on the day of the deadline, time was set aside in the first 'medical communication' class, taught by yet another teacher, in order to give a full 70min hands-on session devoted to the reading project to make sure that everyone started working on it. First, the MReader site was introduced to the students. For ease of access, a link to the site was created on WebClass (an online

educational support system available at NMS), yet careful explanation was given about the ID and password that should be used specifically for this site. (It turned out later that this like was more frequently used in later months than expected, suggesting that it facilitated MReader access.) Once they accessed their own "Reading Report" page, it was made sure that they familiarized themselves with various features on the page, and that they were notified of their individual goals to reach that were shown in their own page. Their individual reading targets had been set beforehand (by the full-time teacher who managed MReader) both for the first term and for every four weeks, based on their TOEFL scores (higher TOEFL scores meant higher reading targets). It was also explained that their targets were the minimum amount that they needed to read, and that every 1,000 words that they read over the target would give them extra credit. It was aimed that introducing the monthly reading targets would motivate students to make a good start and help them maintain regular reading habits.

After the preparatory session, the students took their first MReader quiz in class. This helped in making sure that the kind of problems or uncertainties the students encountered were solved on the spot (without discouraging them to carry on using the site). For example, MReader may (only occasionally) not include quizzes for some graded readers that are newly published, or MReader may ask game-like questions that may confuse students (eg. sequencing jumbled sentences on the screen).

Those who finished a quiz moved on to return their books and select new books from the trolley. They were allowed to borrow a book at a time from our library and were encouraged to use the School Library to borrow more because we needed to avoid running out of graded reads at certain levels, which was a problem in 2015. They were also given instructions on how to fill out the sign-out sheet. At this time, students were given a deadline to take the MReader quiz for their next book, as well as come to the Department of Foreign languages to return the book and select a new one.

At this point, the ER project was considered to be set up, and the full-time teachers monitored the project by frequently checking MReader, and by talking to students when they came to the office to select or return books. Time was not

given in class to do ER-related activities, or to otherwise manage the ER project. Messages or reminders about the ER project were given via electronic and actual noticeboards that students needed to check on a daily basis.

Following this process meant that students had clear reading targets for which credit was assigned in a clear way, and they could see that the Department treated the ER project seriously. The set up of the project was handled in a collaborative manner, with coordination amongst a number of part-time and full-time teachers, and this meant that the ER project was not seen as being simply a part of a reading class managed by one teacher, but an important project in its own right. Further, by initially setting deadlines by which to read the first books, we ensured that all students made a productive start to the project and got into good habits early on, whereas in 2015-16, many students didn't get off to a quick enough start, which meant that the targets became too hard to reach. As a result, over 80% of the 2016 students took at least one MReader quiz in April, and nearly 50% took more than two quizzes, meaning these students read at least two books during (less than) the last two weeks in April After making a good start, over 20% of the students read more than four books, keeping one-book-a-week reading habits. At the end of their third month, about a week before the term-end deadline, approximately 42% of the students had already reached their individual 1st-term targets, and another 30% had read more than three quarters of their target word counts. Less than 5% had read below a half of their target.

Future considerations

We need to give some consideration to Day and Bamford's (2002) fourth principle: "learners read as much as possible". We have found that in 2016 the amount that students read tailed off towards the end of the first term, once they had achieved their targets. This means that students were extrinsically motivated to hit the targets that we set them, and once the targets had been met, they were no longer motivated to keep reading.

Although the project was successful in that almost all of the students reached their targets for the first term, this suggests that the project may not have been successful in developing the students' enjoyment of reading, at least in the

first three months of implementation. If they had been enjoying their reading, we might expect them to have continued to read beyond their minimum targets. As well as this, the targets may have been set a little too low, as most students were able to reach their targets well before the final deadline. We may not, therefore, have been encouraging out students to "read as much as possible".

Related to this is the issue of exactly how we set the target. Do we focus on the number of words (which is a feature of MReader), or do we wish to focus on promoting regular reading by asking students to read a certain number of books a week? Setting a numerical target ensures that students will read enough, and will not simply choose books because they are short. However, once students have reached this target, they often stop reading, which means that they do not read regularly throughout the duration of the term. One possible solution to this problem is to ask them to read at least one book a week, and to also ensure that they reach their word target while doing so (i.e. both targets need to be reached). However, this again means that there are two targets, and experience has shown that this may confuse some students.

Conclusion

We are still implementing the project, and future research is required to properly evaluate how successful it has been. However, our experiences to date suggest that adopting a coordinated, structured, and collaborative approach to extensive reading, in which a number of teachers work closely together to help set up and implement the project, is necessary if we wish for students to regularly engage in extensive reading outside of the classroom. This involves lots of work in the beginning stages of the project in order to help students develop good reading practices, such as setting tight deadlines for the first few books to be read by. Furthermore, it seems as though impressing upon students that the teachers and department consider extensive reading to be of high importance may be another important factor in encouraging them to engage in the reading. In 2016-17, the reading project was set up in such a way as to give the impression that it carried a similar amount of weight as each of the regular classes.

It is not clear how much the reading project is developing students' pleasure of reading, or whether or not the amount that they are reading is sufficient to have a positive effect on their reading proficiency. Future research will help to address these questions. In the future, we will need to consider what our actual goals are for this project. Is it our goal that students will develop an interest in reading English books for pleasure, or do we simply hope to encourage students to read a large amount of words in the hope that this will lead to improvements in reading speed and comprehension, regardless of whether or not they enjoy reading for its own sake?

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