

An ER Trial in an EFL Repeaters' Course at University:

**Aiming to Enhance English Study
by Reducing Negativity Toward English**

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英語多読を用いた 大学英語再履修クラスでの試み

——英語嫌い学生の抵抗感を減らし
学習効果を上げることを目指して——

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Abstract

In a small English repeaters' course, a trial aimed at reducing negative affective factors and promoting English proficiency of unmotivated Japanese university students was conducted. For this purpose, activities such as Extensive Reading were introduced in a classroom setting. From the results of pre- and post-tests of English, although statistically significant gain was not observed because of the small sample size, English score effect sizes markedly increased. Furthermore, from a questionnaire administered at the end of the semester, students' negative feelings toward English study were found to be reduced.

要 旨

大学の英語嫌いの学習者の多い英語再履修クラスで、英語への抵抗感を軽減させ、かつ学習効果を上げる試みとして、絵本からの英語多読と多読本の音読等を取り入れて英語のインプット量を増大させることを目標とした授業を1セメスター間実施し

た。学期開始時と終了時に行った英語テストの結果をノンパラメトリックテストにかけた結果、9名という少人数であったこともあり、統計的有意差は確認できなかったものの、英語力向上の効果量は大であることが判明した。また学期終了時に実施したアンケート調査の結果、英語嫌いの度合いが改善されたことが分かった。

キーワード

EFL (English as a Foreign Language)

ER (Extensive Reading)

Reading Aloud Activity

Affective Filter

1. Introduction

Despite great efforts of many earnest English teachers, there is a general impression that the number of students who dislike English study is increasing in Japan. As a result, many teachers sigh to see students drop out of university English classes or to find them fail on achievement tests. Because obtaining credits on language classes is a requisite to graduating at most Japanese universities, failed students naturally have to take an English repeaters' course in following years.

In repeaters' courses, learners are generally unmotivated and reluctant to learn (Akao 2015, Yoshida 2015). Students in such repeaters' courses typically ask how many classes they can be absent from during the semester and still pass the course. Such phenomena are unfortunately often observed in the university at which the author currently works.

When the author asked students in a repeaters' English course why they had to repeat the class, many replied that they didn't like English, they couldn't understand the class, they couldn't achieve high enough scores on achievement tests, or they couldn't fulfill attendance rates for passing the course. To improve this situation, strategies should be implemented. In particular, such an approach should enable students to learn English effectively without feeling high pressure or stress, thus enabling them to enjoy learning English.

A possible solution is practicing Extensive Reading (ER) in class. In ER, learners can choose books according to their level and taste, and are exposed to a large amount of simple and easy-to-read English texts. ER has already shown to effectively dramatically increase the amount of English input experienced by learners and to be a valid English learning method (Kimura 2013, 2016). Additionally, ER can be a solution to the problem that Ota, Kanatani, Kosuge, and Hidai (2003) highlight, that the amount of English input learners are exposed to in English classes in Japan is inadequate. Furthermore, by ER, negative affective factors against English learning that hinder English study might be reduced if high-burden activities such as after-reading tasks are not required. Reducing negative affective factors is important because English course repeaters are identified as reluctant English learners who do not like studying English. Krashen (1987) explains in his "affective filter hypothesis" that "low anxiety appears to be conducive to second language acquisition, whether measured as personal or classroom anxiety" (p.31).

Therefore, ER and accompanying activities were experimentally implemented in an English repeaters' course from April to July in the first semester of 2016. The aim was to raise learners' English proficiencies by providing a large amount of English input and by trying to reduce their negativity toward English as much as possible.

2. Methods

2.1 Study Purpose

The objective of this study was to observe changes in English proficiency and attitudes toward English study of EFL learners in a university English repeaters' course. The approach involved practicing simple and easy ER activities and reading aloud practice sessions that followed ER activities. ER activities and reading aloud activities were chosen to expose participants to as large an amount of English as possible without exerting too much pressure and stress on them.

2.2 Participants

Study participants were nine Japanese university students who enrolled in and completed an "English I" class for repeaters in the first semester of 2016. "English I" is a subject originally allocated in the first semester of the first year of university. Three additional students were enrolled at the beginning of the semester, but they were excluded as participants because they did not fulfill the university's attendance rate requirement (75 %). The participants majored from social science, sports-related fields, information-related fields, or music. None majored in English. Only one was female, and three were juniors while the remaining six were sophomores.

In the pretest, the past version of the 3rd grade EIKEN Test in Practical English Proficiency given at the beginning of the semester, correct answers totaled 53.3 %. Only three participants gave over 60 % correct answers, which is the borderline for passing the first-stage examination of the 3rd grade test.

2.3 Principles to Practicing ER in Class

Day and Bamford (2002, pp. 137-140) and Day (2015, p. 295) highlighted 10 basic principles for teaching ER: (1) the reading material is easy; (2) a variety of reading material on a wide range of topics must be available; (3) learners choose what they want to read; (4) learners read as much as possible; (5) the purpose of reading is usually related to pleasure, information and general understanding; (6) reading is its own reward; (7) reading speed is usually fast rather than slow; (8) reading is individual and silent; (9) teachers orient and guide their students; and (10) the teacher is a role model of a reader.

In this study, the above 10 principles were adapted as much as possible. Additionally, Furukawa (2010) and Takase (2010) asserted the importance of the SSS (*Start with Simple Stories*) method to practice ER effectively. Furthermore, Takase (2012) notes the importance of securing a set time for reading in class.

Based upon Day and Bamford's principles, as well as Furukawa and Takase's findings, the study participants were given 30 minutes to read English books of their own choosing in every class meeting that lasted

90 minutes. While selecting books, they were always encouraged to avoid choosing books that were too difficult for them to read so that the text would always be easy and understandable for them. Following Krashen's (2004) suggestion, "Simply providing time to read results in more reading" (p.85), and to also relieve participants of any burden, they were not assigned any post-reading tasks other than to write brief reading records. They were only asked to record the titles, the levels, and the number of words of each book they finished reading, and very short summaries or reactions to the books.

One additional important rule to practicing ER in this class was the absence of dictionaries. This was because participants' reading flow shouldn't be disturbed by looking up dictionaries and also because they should be encouraged to understand English sentences without translating them into Japanese (Sakai and Kanda 2005, Takase 2010).

2.4 Materials

To comply with the basic principles of ER mentioned above, "Graded Readers" (GR), "Leveled Readers" (LR) and "Children's Books" were chosen as reading materials for the participants. GRs are designated for EFL (English as a foreign language) learners, LRs are series of books for children whose first language is English, and Children's Books are books targeting primary school children whose first language is English. Krashen (2004, 2009) emphasizes that when we receive 'comprehensible input', language acquisition occurs. In this sense, GRs, LRs, and Children's Books are ideal reading resources for beginning EFL learners, especially for the participants of this study whose English proficiency is limited. Because these types of books are always accompanied by affluent illustrations that assist with limited vocabulary and grammatical knowledge, they are easily comprehended and usually enjoyable.

Liu and Nation (1985) and Nation (2001) assert that to understand the content of reading materials without difficulty, at least 95 % of the words used in the book should be understood. Thus, when starting reading, the author strongly recommended participants to attempt lower level GRs, LRs, and Children's Books with a headword number of 250 or under. The university library holds approximately 3000 ER-designated books. However, books suitable for the study participants numbered only approximately 500.

To investigate the students' English proficiencies, the past version of the 3rd grade EIKEN Test in Practical English Proficiency (Obunsha, 2010) was employed. The 3rd grade EIKEN test is appropriate for junior high school graduates (Obunsha 2010). Before conducting the test, it was confirmed that no one in the class had ever taken this version of the test officially or unofficially. Their average score at the beginning of the semester was 34.7 out of a possible 65 points (53.4 %). The test comprised 15 grammar questions, 5 writing questions, 15 reading questions, and 30 listening questions. The participants were given 40 minutes to answer grammar, writing and reading sections of the test, and the listening section took approximately 20 minutes to complete.

The same test was used at the beginning and at the end of the semester as pre- and post-tests, respectively. This was done according to Yoshida (2014), who stated that the same version of a test should be used when it is used for the purpose of comparing scores. The difficulty level should be the same for both pre- and post-tests, however, this is not practically possible if different test versions are used. The interval of the

pre- and post-tests was 14 weeks. Aside from these pre- and post-tests, no achievement tests were given in class.

The class was conducted in a classroom located at one corner of the university library, thus the participants could easily access the bookshelves where ER books were kept and find books of their own choosing.

A questionnaire consisting of 15 Likert scale questions and one open-ended question was given at the end of the semester. The aim of administering the questionnaire was to identify changes in both participants' attitudes toward English study and participants' recognition toward their own English skills.

2.5 Time Used for ER in Class

The class was delivered 16 times throughout the semester. In the first and second classes, orientation including explanations on class policy and ER activities, and a pre-test were conducted. The last class was used for the post-test. In all of the remaining 13 class meetings, 30 minutes was devoted to ER activities including time to fill out their reading records. However, only two attended all of the classes on time, while others were sometimes absent from or attended classes late. This resulted in an average of 347 minutes total time spent on ER activities per participant.

2.6 Activities Practiced in Class Aside from ER

In each class, after 30 minutes of ER, usually 50–55 minutes were allocated to complete other activities. Approximately 5 minutes were used to introduce books that had potential to attract participants' interest, or to ask participants to introduce their favorite books to other members.

To enhance participants' exposure to easy comprehensible English, the first part of the 50- to 55-minute period was used to listen to an ER book recording once, then the actual book was used to repeat out sentences aloud at least five times after the teacher's model. Ushiro (2009) notes that reading aloud is the only activity that allows learners to understand English sentences without translating into Japanese. In this activity, grammatical explanations were de-emphasized. However, when the past tense forms of irregular verbs appeared, their original forms were confirmed, and simple explanations added when necessary. In the last 10 minutes of the class, each participant was told to remember 3–4 different lines from the material they practiced in the lesson, and then asked to recite them one by one to conclude the day's class.

3. Results

3.1 Total Number of Words Read by Participants

The highest number of words read by a participant in the class was 20,777 and the lowest was 7044. The average number of words read by all participants was 13,575. The highest number of books read by a participant was 53 and the lowest was 13, with an average of 34.7. Thus, the average length of books they read was 391.6 words.

According to their attendance rates, the length of time spent on reading books was 347 minutes (5 hours and 47 minutes) on average during the semester.

3.2 The Results of Pre- and Post-Tests

The results of the 3rd grade EIKEN test practiced once at the beginning and once at the end of the semester were examined by the non-parametric test. Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics of the results, including *z* scores and *r* values, which indicate effect sizes. Although the mean score of each section including grammar, writing, reading and listening as well as the total score increased, no statistically significant difference was shown for any of these sections, probably due to the small sample size. However, when *r* values are examined, the effect sizes of the grammar section, the reading section, as well as the total score, were found to be large, and that of the writing section lay in the mid-range. The effect size of the listening section was found to be small.

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics of the 3rd Grade EIKEN Test Including *z* Scores and *r* Values (*N* = 9)

Section (HPS)	Pre-test				Post-test				<i>z</i>	<i>r</i>
	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	Max	Mini	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	Max	Mini		
Grammar (15)	8.00	3.20	11	1	9.11	2.37	12	4	-1.69	-0.56
Writing (5)	2.11	1.05	3	0	2.44	1.13	4	1	-1.00	-0.33
Reading (15)	7.56	2.07	11	5	8.89	2.20	12	6	-1.71	-0.57
Listening (30)	17.00	4.30	23	8	19.33	4.12	24	12	-0.76	-0.26
Total (65)	34.67	7.75	47	23	39.78	6.65	47	31	-1.69	-0.56

Note. HPS = Highest possible scores. *r* = Effect size

3.3 Questionnaire Results

Table 2 shows the results of a questionnaire given at the end of the semester. This questionnaire consisted of two parts: 15 Likert scale questions and one open-ended question. Question numbers 1–8 investigated the participants' impressions of ER activities, numbers 9–13 examined whether participants perceived changes in their English skills, and numbers 14 and 15 investigated if participants' negative feelings toward English had changed. These 15 questions were originally in Japanese and given in a random order.

In the second part of the questionnaire, participants were asked to write any reactions to ER activities. However, only four participants wrote comments in this section and all others left the section blank.

The comments were written in Japanese and translated as follows: "Even when I encountered unknown words, I became able to infer the meaning by judging the atmosphere. When a foreign customer visited my part-time workplace, I even managed to understand a bit of what he was saying despite being unable to answer him in correct English", "I became able to continue reading, skipping unknown words without paying too much attention", "I felt I was able to keep reading because the contents of the books were interesting", and "I feel I am now more accustomed to English by doing ER".

Table 2 Questionnaire Results ($N = 9$)

		Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1	It was fun to read English books.	3	5	1		
2	I want to continue reading English books.	3	6			
3	I came to like English more than at the beginning of the semester.		4	5		
4	My resistance toward English lowered compared with at the beginning of the semester.		4	4	1	
5	I feel my English has improved by reading English books.		4	5		
6*	My English has not improved during the semester.			4	4	1
7*	It was a burden to read English books.		1	2	5	
8*	It was meaningless to read English books.				7	2
9	It became easier to read English books than at the beginning of the semester.	3	5	1		
10	It became easier to listen to English than at the beginning of the semester.	1	4	3		
11	I know more English words than I did at the beginning of the semester.	2	4	3		
12	There was a moment when I forgot I was reading in English.			3	5	1
13	Even when there is an unknown word, I don't feel disturbed and can continue reading.	3	4	1	1	
14*	I didn't like English at the beginning of the semester.	4	2	3		
15*	I don't like English now.		2	3	4	

Note. Questions with * marks are negatively worded items.

4. Discussion

Participants' reading records revealed that approximately 73.5 % of the books the participants chose to read were under the 250 headword level and only approximately 27.5 % of them were at the 500 word level. No one challenged higher level books. Such higher level books may have been too difficult for them to read without guidance due to insufficient vocabulary and grammar knowledge. Additionally, participants were strongly recommended against selecting books that were too difficult for them to read, which might have influenced them in choosing easier-to-read books. This advice was given because Kimura (2016) found increased scores on the pre-2rd grade EIKEN test given as the post-test compared with when given as the pre-test among those who read shorter, easier books more than others during their ER activities.

Although the mean scores of all sections including grammar, writing, reading, and listening, as well as the total scores increased in the post-test, no statistically significant differences were observed. This is most likely due to the sample size being as small as nine, and also due to the short time spent on ER. However, it is encouraging that the minimum and maximum scores for all sections of the test, except the maximum total score, increased in the post-test, and the average total score increased by more than 5 points out of 65

possible scores.

Furthermore, effect sizes of changes in score were noticeably large in the grammar section, the reading section, and in the total score. However, that for the writing section lay in the mid-range and that for the listening section was small. Therefore, from the viewpoint of effect sizes, it may be determined that the ER activities had an affirmative impact on participants' grammatical and reading proficiencies of English.

From the questionnaire results, affirmative reactions were observed on the whole. Eight students responded that they enjoyed reading books in English and all nine students answered that they wanted to continue to read English books. These tendencies were exactly what were aimed for in this study. Furthermore, eight reported having an impression that they can now read English more easily than before the course, and six reported feeling their vocabulary had grown. Seven thought that they were not too disturbed by unknown words that appeared in stories. From such affirmative impressions, their affective filter against English could be considered to have been lowered by the activities practiced in this class.

Probably because the time devoted to ER was short, participants didn't reach a point where they felt their English proficiency had improved. More than half of the participants (five) did not think they had improved, and none agreed to the statement that there was a moment they forgot a story they were reading was written in English.

Encouragingly, only two participants reported disliking English at the end of the term, a decrease from six at the beginning of the semester. The same tendencies were observed from the comments they wrote on the questionnaire.

5. Conclusion

Because of the small sample size, concrete conclusions cannot be drawn from this study. However, by examining the effect sizes of the grammar and reading section test results, ER activities were found to positively influence grammar knowledge acquisition and reading proficiency for reluctant learners.

Additionally, by exposing participants to an abundance of easy plain English sentences and reducing the stress of the participants in class through ER activities, the affective filters of these students were notably lowered, and even motivated learning in some.

To statistically prove the above observations, further investigations are necessary using more participants over a longer period. Currently, this study shows that ER activities are potentially effective in reducing negative affective factors of reluctant unmotivated EFL learners with low English proficiencies, and in even motivating them in studying English.

One regret is that although much effort was poured into lowering the pressure and stress participants experienced in class and into encouraging them to continue coming to class, disappointingly, three participants dropped out mid-term. This may be attributable to disciplinary problems as they always reported being unable to get up early enough to attend class. Thus, more efforts are necessary to ensure the class is interesting to motivate students to rise early enough to attend class.

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