

**M-READER AS A CATALYST FOR CHANGE IN A JAPANESE
UNIVERSITY EFL EXTENDED READING PROJECT**

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ABSTRACT: *This practical action research examines the choice between using unabridged novels and graded readers in the context of an extensive reading project. The comparison mainly consists of data on word-count gains as recorded throughout two ten-week sessions with the same target group. For the comparison, thirty-five first year non-English-major Japanese university EFL students in a year-long communication class were assigned to read an unabridged novel through a ten-week period during the first semester of the school year. For another ten-week period during the second semester, the same group read graded readers in tandem with the M-Reader computer-assisted language learning program. The findings suggest that a change in pedagogy in favor of the method involving graded readers with the M-Reader program is the most beneficial choice for the course.*

KEYWORDS: CALL, EFL, ER, extensive reading, Japanese university, M-Reader

INTRODUCTION

The intention of this study was to improve the results of an extensive reading (ER) project with CEFR level A2 students in a Japanese university English as a foreign language (EFL) communication class. Prior to the study, the researcher had been using unabridged novels in Japanese university EFL courses due to his belief that students would benefit from reading novels. However, in recent years, there was an apparent lowering of student motivation for the ER project which was reflected in poor test scores for several classes.

At the start of 2019, the researcher was introduced to M-Reader, a computer-assisted language learning program (CALL) that works in tandem with graded readers. This first experience showed that the M-Reader program has the potential to help students maintain their motivation, enhance their reading comprehension and develop their self-directed learning skills. As a result, the researcher decided to perform a yearlong rudimentary comparison between the methods. The study was guided with the research question: What are some easily observable comparisons between the use of unabridged novels and graded readers with the aid of CALL in the target Japanese university EFL course and do those observations warrant change?

LITERATURE

Extensive Reading in an EFL Learning Environment

ER sometimes referred to as sustained silent reading (SSR) is an approach to language learning which involves students reading books that they find interesting (Krashen, 2011; Nation, 2015). ER is unlike intensive reading (IR) which involves reading shorter passages and answering questions to check comprehension (Soliman, 2012). An example of IR would be reading-comprehension questions in standardized tests such as the TOEIC. In Japan, there has traditionally been a focus on analyzing this type of text. Therefore, less focus has been on ER even though it has shown success in improving reading accomplishments (Stone & Nishikawa, 2016).

According to Krashen's acquisition-learning hypothesis, information that is "learned" is distinct from knowledge that is "acquired" (Krashen, 1982, as cited in Krashen, 2014). An example of learned information would be a Japanese student's study of how to read and write *kanji* (Chinese based writing). An example of acquired knowledge would include how the student developed the means to speak before entering school to study grammar, reading, or writing. In Japan, students learning a foreign language do not have the same exposure to the target language as a child may have to their native language (King, 2013). Reading provides an added means of input for the L2 learner.

Krashen (1985) put forth the input hypothesis, otherwise known as $i+1$. What someone understands is noted as i . The $+1$ is that which is just beyond their current knowledge. Using schema, context, and existing linguistic understanding, a person can gain knowledge by exposing themselves to information that is just above what they know. ER provides an environment for acquisition in tune with $i+1$ (as cited in Krashen, 2011).

Krashen (1994) explained that students with a good deal of time devoted in school to ER show growth in literacy development tests. Also, in the same paper on his pleasure hypothesis, he stated that enjoyment of reading can lower filters that may block L2 acquisition through inspiring a better attitude towards the task (as cited in Krashen, 2004). Day and Bamford (1998) furthered Krashen's pleasure hypothesis with their bookstrap hypothesis. This examined the learner's psychological response to successes they may incur in their learning experience, especially early. If they find enjoyment, they can nurture a positive learning attitude which grows exponentially (as cited in Bechelaghem, 2016).

Unabridged Novels

Tsai (2012) discussed three major points in defense of using unabridged novels for L2 students. Novels tend to stimulate intrinsic motivation. The stories pull the reader along, and there is a sense of accomplishment upon completion. ER with unabridged novels exposes readers to authentic vocabulary and linguistic examples. Furthermore, these written works of art are bridges from which the reader can traverse distances in culture to compare with their own. These can include "historical, social, political, and economic facts that shape the cultural background of the novel" (p. 104).

ER provides a situation from which the students can achieve acquisition through engagement with books as the external input (Krashen, 1994; 2011; 2014). While many ER proponents have stated the importance of readers choosing their material (Chien & Yu, 2015; Day, 2002; Krashen, 2011; Nation, 2015), studies have suggested that, contrary to the West, Japanese students are often motivated when a respected authority figure advises them as to what choice to make (Iyengar & Lepper, 1999; Kitayama, et al., 2007 as cited in Stone & Nishikawa, 2016). Also, in a study on Japanese students reading unabridged novels McLean and Poulshock (2018) noted the students' pride at reading a book they thought of as more adult, instead of books that were *kantan sugiru* (i.e., very easy)" (p. 87).

On the other hand, an in-depth study of ER on Japanese university students, Beglar, Hunt, and Kite (2012) concluded that unabridged novels are not as effective for improving the rate of reading. They inferred that for the time spent reading an unabridged work, the student could read more words in the simplified material. For this study, the participants read the book *The Magician's Nephew*, which is the first book from C.S. Lewis's Chronicles of Narnia series. It has a guided reading level (GRL) of T and a Lexile level of 790L as sourced from Houghton Mifflin Harcourt (2015). The GRL level T means that they are around the fourth or fifth-grade reading level for a native speaker (Barton, 2020). However, Nation (2015) noted that novels for young native speakers of English use words that most often surpass the vocabulary size of L2 learners.

Mitchell (2018) illustrated Smith and Turner (2016) showing the broad span that Lexile levels cover in terms of correspondence to CEFR levels. In her chart, A2 (the level of the participants in this study) is covered by 180L to 800L, with B1 starting from 700L. Smith and Turner point out that even publishers of graded readers are quite loose in their assignment of levels based on Lexile range (2016). These measurements for reading levels of novels for native speakers are challenging to connect with L2 learners.

Graded Readers

Contrary to Krashen's input hypothesis (i+1), Day and Bamford (1998) contended that what a student reads should be just below what they understand (i-1). This is so the student can read information faster. Day's and Bamford's bookstrap hypothesis noted that a learner's early successes in reading can help to shape their motivation. According to Nation (2015), graded readers are books written with carefully managed levels of vocabulary appropriate for low or intermediate level L2 learners. This assures that

students are reading at their correct level. Therefore, students can quickly get through a book without breaking their train of thought by checking a dictionary (Takase and Otsuki, 2012).

CALL programs such as M-Reader and X-reading make the use of graded readers easier for self-access learning. For this study, the participants used M-Reader <https://mreader.org/index.php/>, a program created by Thomas Robb of Kyoto Sangyo University in 2008 with the aim of helping ER programs run more efficiently (Robb, & Kano, 2013; Robb, n.d. (a)). Currently, it is used in over twenty-five countries with more than 100,000 users. It has a database of over 7500 quizzes coinciding with thousands of graded readers. M-Reader allows students to sign into their own page and take quizzes after finishing graded readers. The quizzes consist of ten questions that can be answered in five minutes. If over 60% of the answers are correct, the student gains credit for the number of words from that graded reader. The word-count and cover image for the completed book are added to their page. The teachers can monitor these gains and the progress for each student (Robb, 2015; Robb, n.d.(a)).

The use of M-Reader in a large-scale study has shown effectiveness for self-access learning by comparing pre- and post-study testing scores of students who used the M-Reader autonomously (Robb, & Kano 2013). In a report on the introduction of a program at a Japanese university utilizing graded readers in tandem with M-Reader, Gann, Jennings, and Sakellarios (2020) noted instances of teachers' reticence. Some who have literature backgrounds tended to balk at the idea that the sense conveyed by the words of the original authors are not accurately depicted in the graded readers.

Also, some professors were reluctant at the start of that program because they were unwilling to change methods they had been using for years. The former of these criticisms was acknowledged by Day (2013). He noted that critics of graded readers feel that they are inauthentic and simplified. Some say they aren't interesting because many are badly written and sometimes even a bit difficult to understand. Day negates these ideas by saying, "just because a book is authentic does not automatically mean that it is well written" (p. 25).

An entertaining example of this notion can be found from an 1895 criticism of Fenimore Cooper's writing style for *The Last of the Mohicans*. Mark Twain (1946) gave a slice of Cooper's prose, "Without any aid from the science of cookery, he was immediately employed, in common with his fellows, in gorging himself with this digestible sustenance." Twain interpreted this for the reader as simply, "He and the others ate the meat raw" (p. 296).

METHODOLOGY

This action research study was designed to improve the results of an extensive reading (ER) project with CEFR level A2 students in a Japanese university EFL communication class. The study stands as a self-reflective inquiry concerned with the researcher's own pedagogical practice based on systematic data collection and analysis to bring change (Creswell, 2012).

The participants (n=35) were first-year non-English major Japanese university students age 18-20. They were spread over two required EFL communication classes on the same campus. Their placement would denote them as CEFR level A2. According to Tannenbaum and Wylie (2013) as well as Foley (2019), this correlates to a TOEIC score from as low as 101 to around 250.

The students were assigned to read unabridged novels during the first semester of the year-long course. During the second semester, the same participants read from graded readers and logged their word-count by passing quizzes on M-Reader. This study involved collecting data to gain an understanding of which method, between unabridged novels and graded readers, would be better suited for the target students. The data considered in this study relied mainly on comparison of word-counts between the two reading methods from the same group of participants over two semesters. Information has also been gathered from an exit survey taken by the participants.

Unabridged Novels

The participants read *The Magician's Nephew*, the first book from the Chronicles of Narnia series by C.S. Lewis. It was chosen due to its GRL level and Lexile range. As noted in the literature review, the challenge of accurately choosing an unabridged English novel for a selection of thirty-five students by matching the GRL or Lexile range to a group assigned into classes based on a less than rigorous placement system is nearly impossible.

The participants were given thirty minutes for ER each class, and also encouraged to read outside of school. They were asked how many pages they had read at the start of the third, fifth, seventh, and tenth weeks. Word-counts were generated from these page-number reports by dividing the number of pages in the book (221 pages) from the total word-count of 41,062. The total words per page (186 words) was multiplied by the student page-number reports, then averaged throughout the entire group to get an overall view for each recorded count.

At the end of the ten-week period, the participants were informed that they would have extra time to finish reading the novels before the final test. The participants were given the summer break (an extra six weeks) to finish reading *The Magician's Nephew*. Overall, they were given 18 weeks to finish the novel. In the exit survey, the participants were asked if they had finished the unabridged novel. 63% reported that they finished all 41,062 words in the 18 weeks. 37% did not finish the book, and this likely related to the 25.7% of participants who failed the final test. (Figure 2).

Graded Readers

At the start of the second semester, the participants were told that they would be doing a different type of ER program. Emphasis was made for them to just enjoy the graded readers and to try to increase their word-count as much as they could, there would be no interview examination. A half-hour was set aside every class over ten weeks for reading. The students were also encouraged to read outside of class.

Before the start of the semester, the researcher was granted administrator access to set up the use of M-Reader for the participants and therefore have the ability to check their word-counts throughout the semester. There was no need for the students to report how much they had read. The participants registered with the M-Reader program. After finishing the books, they could take the exit quizzes and increase their word-count record on the website. They acquired the graded readers from the university library which has a selection of over a thousand graded readers. They are organized by level similar to the TOEIC correspondence of the Kyoto scale as used by the M-Reader website (Robb, n.d. (b)).

To get credit for the number of words from a graded reader, the student needed to pass a quiz. If they did not pass it, they would have to start again with a new graded reader. They were not allowed to retake quizzes. Overall, the participants took 351 quizzes. Of those, 20.51% were failed and 79.49% were passed.

FINDINGS

Word-Count Comparison

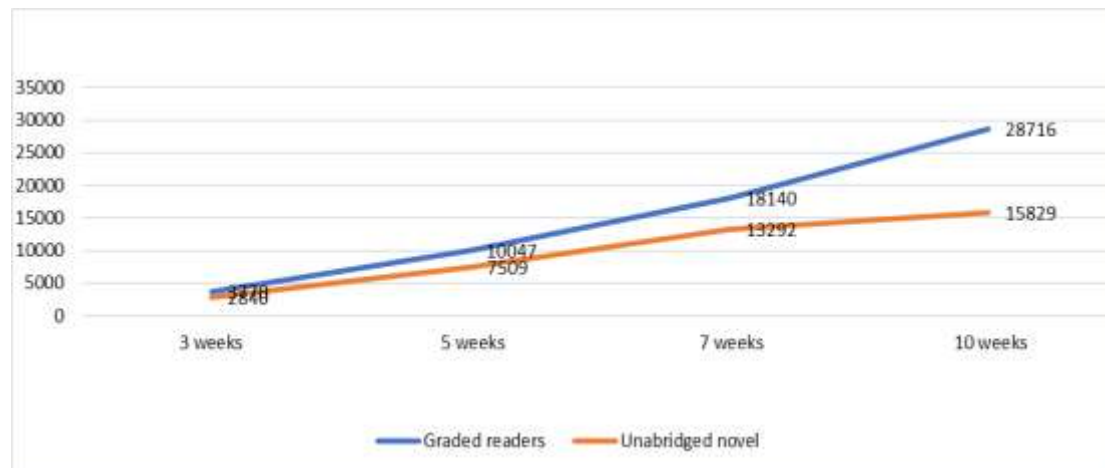


Figure 1. Word-count comparison over 10 weeks for graded readers and unabridged novels

A comparison of the word-counts between the unabridged novels and the graded readers (Figure 1), have similarities, yet favor the use of graded readers. A comparison of the first record shows that the graded readers have a 3770 word-count, whereas the unabridged novels show a count of 2840 words. This shows a clear lead for graded readers. The participants read almost 33% more words on average in the second term by the first check at 3 weeks. Between the third and fifth weeks, the average increase was almost the same, at around 165%. Between the fifth and seventh week, the rise in the average word counts is also similar, both close to 80%. Between the seventh and tenth week, the average rate of increase became smaller. In the case of the unabridged novels, the average word-count increase fell to 19.9%. The final count for the graded readers shows an average word-count increase of 58.3%. Apart from the slowing of average word-count rate increase between the recorded weeks, it is apparent that the average word-count for the graded readers remained higher throughout the study.

Survey Data

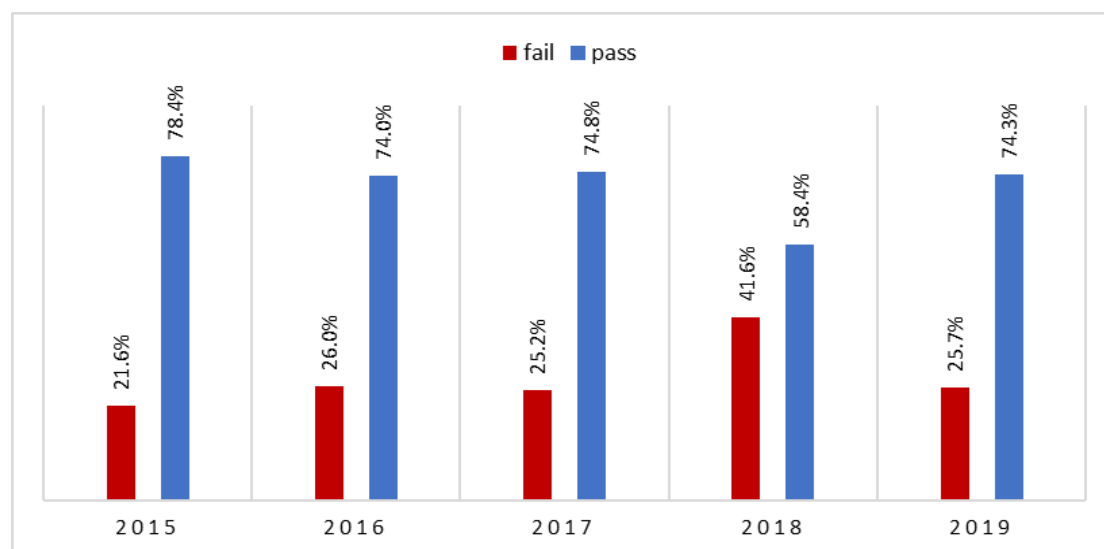
The data collection for this study also consisted of a voluntary and anonymous exit survey (n=35) with eight multiple-choice questions in both English and Japanese. The survey clarifies which method was more effective from the participants' point-of-view. In the survey results 86% of the students claimed to hold preference for the use of graded readers. This is complimented by two questions in which 74% stated that they feel they both read and understood more when using the graded readers. The vast

majority of the students (91%) also found the unabridged Narnia novel more difficult to read.

For the final question the students were asked if they thought that their English reading skills had improved. Although it is not possible to determine specifically which methodology increased their English reading competence, it was satisfying to see that 97% reported some degree of self-assessed improvement.

DISCUSSION

At the end of the unabridged novels ER project, the students took spoken interview examinations. These consisted of conversations centered around the concepts of author, character, plot, and theme. The rubric for scoring was based on knowledge of the terminology, relevant examples from the book, and understandability of the answer. Except for the questions about the author, the answers could vary based on the student



perceptions and opinions about the story.

Figure 2. Pass/fail percentages from unabridged novel interview examinations 2015 – 2019

The score averages between 2015 and 2019 (Figure 2) show the reason for the choice to engage in this practical action research. The scores from 2015-2017 are acceptable, yet not ideal. The test scores from 2018 show that action needed to be taken to improve the ER project for the students.

The benefits of ER for language learning are well documented. (Beglar et al., 2012; Day, 2002; 2013; Day & Bamford, 1998; Day & Robb, 2015; Krashen, 1994; 2011;

2014; McLean and Poulshock, 2018; Nation, 2015; Stone & Nishikawa, 2016). The usefulness of an ER based structure for these classes is solid. However, the methods by which the ER project would be enacted in the future has been the focus of this study. Practical action research was considered suitable for finding a solution (Creswell, 2012).

The comparison of the current method of ER (unabridged novels) with a method previously unused for these classes (graded readers in tandem with M-Reader) was decided upon due to the researcher's recent exposure to M-Reader, and the plethora of literature favorable to the use of graded readers (Day, 2013; Day & Robb 2015; Kovář, 2017; Mason & Krashen, 2017; McLean & Poulshock, 2018; Nation, 2015; Takase & Otsuki, 2012). In previous years the students would relay their progress reading the novels by reporting their current page numbers on a weekly basis. The researcher decided to compare this data with information gathered on word-counts of the same students reading graded readers over a similar time period.

As mentioned before, the word-count for the graded readers remained higher in this study from start to finish. The participants were given 18 weeks to read *The Magician's Nephew* which has 41,062 words (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2015). It is not clear what the final average word-count was for the unabridged novels. However, in the exit survey, 37% of participants reported not finishing the novel. It is notable that after the ten-week period for using M-Reader with the graded readers, the students were not required to continue with the ER project. Further reading was voluntary and done outside of class. Most participants continued using the M-Reader program until the last day of the semester which was four weeks after the final count (15 weeks total). For the graded readers, the registered final average count was 42,413 words. This is considerably higher than for the unabridged novels.

There are two main factors supporting the use of graded readers in tandem with M-Reader. First, the graded readers are tailor made for the various student levels. (Day & Robb 2015; Kovář, 2017; Nation, 2015). This creates a more comfortable reading experience for the students, as well as a higher degree of autonomy in their learning process, as it lends itself to the students' choosing their own titles to read. Second, the ease of the M-Reader CALL program for both recording data and providing specialized testing is paramount to bridging the compromise between a pure ER program, and the need to test students. According to Day's (2002) ten principles for ER, "reading is its own reward" (p. 137-140). In pure ER the students read solely for the pleasure of

reading. However, as a part-time teacher, this researcher felt more job security by giving the students tests to justify such long-term assignments.

This practical action research has resulted in clarifying plans for future ER projects. Both the word-count numbers and the survey results point to the use of graded readers in tandem with M-Reader to be the method that is more suitable for the students. Additionally, the process brings the project closer to the ideals of a pure ER program (Day, 2002). Therefore, future classroom practices will reflect these findings.

LIMITATIONS

The word-count for the unabridged novels was based on the participants' self-reporting of their current page numbers. Furthermore, for the data collection of the graded readers, participants only needed to make a score of 60% on the quiz to gain the full word count for the graded reader. These methods of data collection are rudimentary and a future study with more refined quantitative data would create an accurate proof as opposed to an overall impression.

This experience of clarifying a better method for the ER project was important to document. However, the decision to create this practical action research study came late, as the students were already engaged in reading the unabridged novel. The study could certainly have benefitted from more planning beforehand to take advantage of richer qualitative information. A future study would use a multimethod approach executed with more advanced planning.

CONCLUSION

This paper examines the use of ER in a small selection of Japanese EFL university classes with CEFR level A2 students. A comparison was made between using unabridged novels and graded readers with the aid of the M-Reader CALL program. The word-count method, while rudimentary, made it clear that the pedagogy warranted more examination. The exit survey reinforces the word-count favor of the M-Reader based method by showing that the participants' preferences leaned more in favor of graded readers.

The literature reviewed for this study supports the use of graded readers over unabridged novels. However, in this researcher's perspective it is the combination of

the CALL program M-Reader that makes the use of graded readers more palatable. The fact that most of the students continued reading the graded readers and increasing their word-counts on their M-Reader profiles, even after the assignment was finished, suggests that this approach stimulates an intrinsic motivation that brings the method closer to a more ideal concept of an ER project.

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