

Young Learner Perceptions of an Audio-Assisted Extensive Reading Program

日本人小学生英語学習者の音声併用多読学習における認識

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Abstract

This paper presents the results of a survey investigating the young learner experience of an audio-assisted extensive reading program forming part of the English foreign language curriculum at a Japanese elementary school. Prioritizing learner independence and extended exposure to a wide range of reading material, extensive reading can be made more accessible to young learners through audio narration and illustrated graded readers. Survey participants expressed feelings about the audio-assisted extensive reading program that were overall positive. However, the survey also revealed features of the reading program that could be improved upon in the future. Areas for improvement include the expansion of the reading program library, the provision of audio material that is easier for young learners to follow, and a greater focus on development of learner confidence through a better self-awareness of learning progress.

Keywords : English/EFL/extensive reading/TEYL/YLE/young learners

I. Introduction

Extensive reading is an approach to learning languages that prioritizes learner independence and extended exposure to a wide range of accessible reading material (Day & Bamford, 1998; Nation & Waring, 2020). Though extensive reading may be taking place in foreign language classes at elementary schools around the world, studies on extensive reading programs for young learners appear much less frequently in academic research journals than those concerning older students. Recent meta-analyses by Krashen (2007), Nakanishi (2015), Jeon and Day (2016), and Liu and Zhang (2018) make this point clear. The lack of research means much remains to be learned on how best to incorporate this approach into the young learner classroom.

One variation on extensive reading that appears to be appropriate for beginner-level learners, a category which could be said to include most young learners, is

audio assistance. A study by Chang and Millet (2015) found that beginner-level secondary students of English as a foreign language benefited from audio assistance. They reported that the addition of aural input when reading allowed for greater gains in reading rate and comprehension level when compared with students who read without audio assistance. Another form of assistance that aids in the comprehension of text is illustration. In a handbook on the topic of young language learners, Pinter (2017) writes that illustrations provide semantic cues through which learners can be taught to guess the meaning of text.

The incorporation of audio and illustration closely mimics the way in which young learners are often introduced to reading in their native language at home and school. It is commonplace, for example, for parents and teachers to read picture books to children. With the inclusion of audio and illustration, there may be movement away from extensive reading as purely a reading activity. Nevertheless, audio-assisted extensive reading of picture books is an authentic and age-

appropriate interaction with written text for young learners.

Desiring students to have such authentic and age-appropriate exposure to written English, the audio-assisted extensive reading program at Hokuriku Gakuin Elementary School was introduced in 2016 using narrated and illustrated graded readers. The reading program expanded significantly in 2017 and since then has continued to be an essential part of the school's English curriculum. Formal and informal assessment not only of students' reading fluency but also their general English proficiency has shown year-upon-year improvement that coincides with the implementation of the reading program. It is of course difficult to attribute all gains to the reading program with absolute certainty. However, the circumstances are compelling to say that the reading program has had a real and positive effect on actual language learning.

As satisfying as evidence of language learning might be to teachers, extensive reading is an activity that places the learner experience at its core. The subjective experience of young learners as they participate in an extensive reading program is of the utmost importance when evaluating the impact that the program has had. With this in mind, a survey was conducted at Hokuriku Gakuin Elementary School to investigate how young learners perceive its audio-assisted extensive reading program. This study follows previous description of and research on the reading program at Hokuriku Gakuin Elementary School by the author (Shreves, 2019; Shreves, 2020).

II. Method

Participants

Participants in this study included 26 students at Hokuriku Gakuin Elementary School in the 5th and 6th grades. This group of participants included the entire 5th and 6th grade population at the school excepting students with extended absences.

At Hokuriku Gakuin Elementary School, students in both the 5th and 6th grades participated in the audio-assisted extensive reading program for 4 years inclusive of the academic year at the end of which the

survey for this study was held. As a part of this program, students borrowed one book per week from the class library to take home. The class library consisted of illustrated graded readers from Oxford Reading Tree, and students were able to freely make selections from the available titles. Audio narration was provided for each book either in the form of an attached CD or, in the early years of the program, on the publisher's website. Students were encouraged to listen to the audio as they read their selections at home. They were also encouraged to read aloud by repeating after the audio, shadowing the audio, and reading aloud independently. The students kept each selection for one week before returning it and choosing another. In 5th and 6th grade, students additionally read aloud to each other in pairs during class time. Students kept a record of their reading history in a reading log for each year of their participation in the reading program.

A small number of the participants transferred into Hokuriku Gakuin Elementary School during the course of their primary education. Though these students consequently did not participate in the reading program as long as their classmates, it was determined that there was no reason to remove them from the study. The survey questions did not demand participation in the full length of the program for responses to be of value to this study.

Materials

Taking inspiration from the suggestions on extensive reading program evaluation by Day and Bamford (1998), the survey questionnaire included 10 statements to which students responded on a 5-point Likert scale. These statements were formulated to question participants' feelings towards reading in English as well as features of this particular reading program. There were also 3 open-ended questions to provide additional opportunities for participants to express their opinions. The questionnaire instructions, statements, and open-ended questions can be seen in Figure 1. The questionnaire also asked about students' reading habits. Because these questions did not pertain

Figure 1.
Survey Questionnaire

Read the statements. Then circle the number that best represents your feelings.

1 = I disagree. 2 = I somewhat disagree. 3 = I'm not sure. 4 = I somewhat agree. 5 = I agree.

1. I enjoy reading in English.	1	2	3	4	5
2. Reading helps me learn English.	1	2	3	4	5
3. I can read in English well for my age.	1	2	3	4	5
4. I understand the English books that I read.	1	2	3	4	5
5. The English books are the right level for me.	1	2	3	4	5
6. I can find English books that interest me in the school's collection.	1	2	3	4	5
7. I like reading with a partner during English class.	1	2	3	4	5
8. Listening to the CD while reading in English is helpful for me.	1	2	3	4	5
9. I got better at reading in English this year.	1	2	3	4	5
10. I want to continue reading in English in the future.	1	2	3	4	5

Read the questions. Then write your replies in the appropriate box. [Boxes omitted.]

In your opinion, what has been positive about reading in English?

In your opinion, what has been negative about reading in English?

What else do you want your English teachers to know?

Read the statement. Think carefully. Then check the box.

I have been honest. My responses on this survey reflect my true feelings and experiences.

to participants' subjective experience of the reading program, responses related to reading habits are not reported in the study results, nor are they included in Figure 1.

A checkbox was placed at the end of the questionnaire next to a statement indicating that the participant had responded honestly. This checkbox was included in order to encourage reflection among the young learner participants. Their English and homeroom teachers were present during the administration of the questionnaire, and this presence may have influenced their responses. It was hoped that the opportunity for reflection and revision provided by the checkbox would allow for more honest responses.

The questionnaire was originally drafted in English. Consideration was given to translating it into Japanese. However, it was ultimately decided that the questionnaire should remain in English to allow the act of completing it to be a language-learning opportunity

for the participants.

Procedure

The survey questionnaire was administered to participants at the end of the academic year during their regularly-scheduled English class by their English teachers, one of whom was a Japanese teacher of English and the other a native English-speaking assistant language teacher. One participant who was absent from school on the date of administration completed the questionnaire on the next date of English class attendance.

Participants received an explanation of the purpose of the questionnaire and instructions on how to complete it. Extra attention was given to explaining how to respond to Likert scale questions. Each questionnaire item was read aloud, and participants were given time to respond before moving on. The participants' native Japanese-speaking English teacher

offered translation support when needed. Several participants noted translations on their surveys. Participants were instructed to respond to the open-ended questions in Japanese so they could more fully express their thoughts.

Finally, participants were asked to check the box next to the statement indicating that they had responded to the questions honestly. This prompted many participants to review their responses and several were observed making changes. Some participants also wished to confirm the meaning of one or more questionnaire items. After participants finished any revisions and indicated their honesty, questionnaires were collected.

III. Results & Discussion

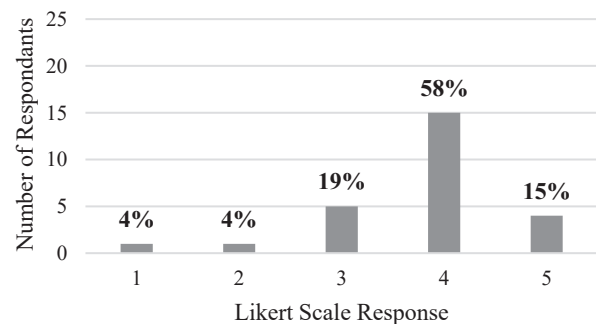
In the following section, results of the survey are reported thematically. Concerning the reporting of Likert scale data, responses of 1 and 2 are reported as indicating disagreement, and responses of 4 and 5 are reported as indicating agreement. A response of 3 is considered as showing uncertainty. In addition, all percentages have been rounded. The open-ended questions produced a variety of responses from the participants. Therefore, a limited representative sample of the most relevant responses to the open-ended questions are given below where appropriate. Participants' responses to these questions have been translated from their original Japanese into English by the author.

Enjoyment

One of the most fundamental principles of extensive reading is that it is enjoyable for language learners (Day & Bamford, 1998). The results show that the majority of study participants do find reading enjoyable. 73% percent of participants indicated agreement with *Statement 1* (Figure 2), "I enjoy reading in English." A much smaller percentage, 8%, indicated disagreement, while 19% expressed uncertainty.

Figure 2

Responses to Statement 1: I enjoy reading in English.



Understanding of Purpose

While extensive reading is often presented as an activity focused on enjoyment, it is of course also intended to be an opportunity for language learning. *Statement 2* (Figure 3), "Reading helps me learn English," was included to ascertain if young learners also perceived it as such. The results indicated that 73% do. For this statement, one response equaling 4% indicated disagreement, and 23% indicated uncertainty.

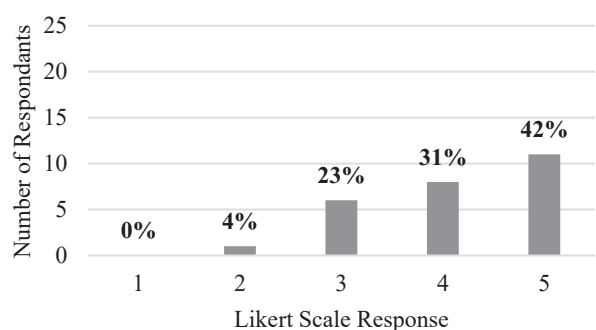
In describing what can be learned from the reading program, one participant wrote:

- "You can understand words from reading English books, and you can understand pronunciation if you listen to the CD." (Grade 5 participant)

Similar comments from other participants showed a widespread awareness of the possibility to build vocabulary. Comments showing an awareness of the potential to improve pronunciation through listening to the audio also appeared but to a lesser extent.

Figure 3

Responses to Statement 2: Reading helps me learn English.



Learning Progress

Both *Statement 3* (Figure 4) and *Statement 9* (Figure 5) were included to ascertain participants' sense of their own learning. *Statement 3* asked participants whether they could "read well for their age". It appears that participants had some difficulty in evaluating themselves in this way, and 38% indicated uncertainty. *Statement 3* produced the second highest instance of uncertainty among the participants, with the first being *Statement 7* regarding pair-reading which is reported below. *Statement 9* produced a more positive assessment of learning. In response to the statement, "I got better at reading this year," 65% of participants agreed, and a lower percentage, 27%, indicated uncertainty.

Though participants generally seemed less equipped, or perhaps hesitant, to express a positive assessment of their own learning in response to the statements, they did leave comments that showed an awareness of progress. Many participants shared that they had learned new words from reading in English with comments such as:

- "The number of English words I know is growing." (Grade 5 participant)
- "I understand words that I didn't know before" (Grade 5 participant)
- "I can learn a lot of new words, and when they come up in English class, I understand the meaning." (Grade 5 participant)

Other participants expressed their learning progress in different terms:

- "It was just a little, but I became able to read in English." (Grade 6 participant)
- "I felt that English was familiar." (Grade 6 participant)
- "My reading scores have improved." (Grade 6 participant)

From such statements, participants do seem aware that learning is taking place.

It is possible *Statement 3* and *Statement 9* were a better assessment of participants' self-confidence than what was intended. The development of self-confidence is also a worthy goal, especially in young

learners. Perhaps through an increased focus on developing self-confidence, this reading program could also positively impact young learners' perception of their own learning.

Figure 4

Responses to Statement 3: I can read well for my age.

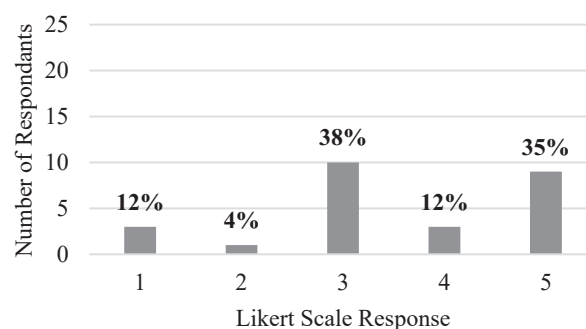
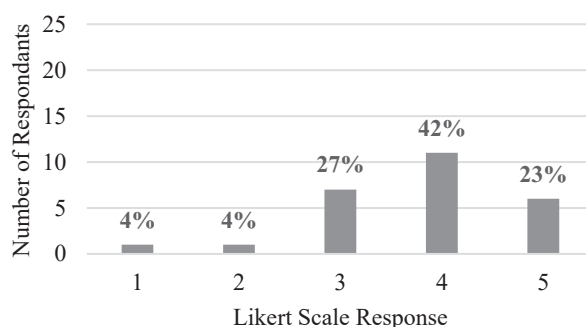


Figure 5

Responses to Statement 9: I got better at reading this year.



Reading Material

Central to any extensive reading program is its library of available books. Extensive reading programs often employ graded reader series to help learners identify appropriate reading material. It is a widely and long-held belief that learners should freely choose books that interest them and that they are easily able to understand (Day & Bamford, 1998; Nation & Waring, 2020).

According to the survey results, 81% of participants indicated agreement with *Statement 4* (Figure 6), "I understand the English books that I read." An even greater percentage, 84%, indicated agreement with *Statement 5* (Figure 7), "The English books are the right level for me." It is interesting to note that more participants indicated the highest level of agreement,

by selecting 5 on their questionnaires, for *Statement 5* than *Statement 4*. This would seem to indicate that some participants may feel a book is at an appropriate level even if they may not equally feel that they are able to fully understand the content. This could suggest that these participants are comfortable with a certain amount of ambiguity in their reading material. It is possible that young learners are more comfortable with ambiguity than older learners, perhaps due to their everyday experience of the world. If this is the case, then it may be less important for young learners to be provided with reading material that falls “well within the linguistic competence of the students” (Day & Bamford, 1998, p.8) or that contains only “2% unknown words” as Nation and Waring (2020, p.4) suggest.

Figure 6

Responses to Statement 4: I understand the English books that I read.

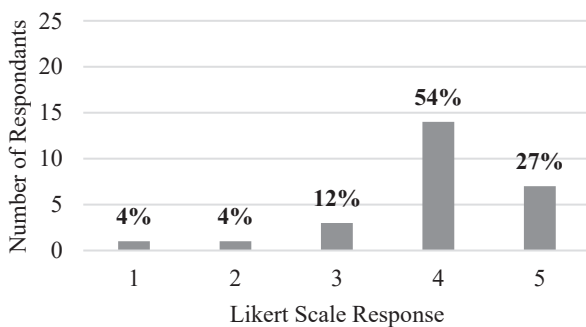
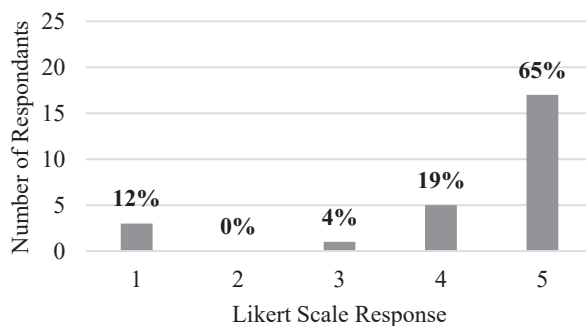


Figure 7

Responses to Statement 5: The English books are the right level for me.



Participants commented that that illustrations contributed positively to comprehension:

- “From the pictures and the words, I understand what the characters are doing.” (Grade 5 participant)
- “There are pictures, so it’s easy to match up the meaning with the words and understand the story.” (Grade 6 participant)

This highlights the importance of illustrations in providing contextual information to young learners as they read.

However, another participant expressed concern about comprehension of the stories:

- “There was no Japanese translation, so I was a little worried about whether I understood the stories.” (Grade 6 participant)

It is possible that such a sentiment is due to a lack of confidence rather than any actual errors in comprehension. Regardless, for a young learner feeling this way, reading at a lower level in the graded reader series could prove to be a more enjoyable experience.

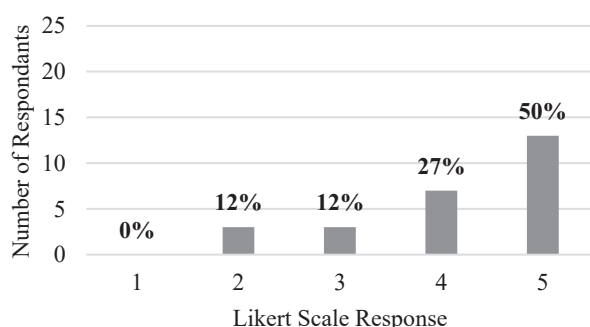
Statement 6 (Figure 8) focused on the participants’ level of interest in the collection. Here, a slightly smaller majority, 77%, of participants indicated agreement. The Grade 5 students were particularly forthcoming in expressing a variety of thoughts on the available books:

- “There are interesting stories.” (Grade 5 participant)
- “I want to read Doraemon comics in English.” (Grade 5 participant)
- “The stories are childlike.” (Grade 5 participant)
- “A beginners’ corner would be fun.” (Grade 5 participant)
- “I want to read more difficult books.” (Grade 5 participant)

Ideally, an extensive reading library would be accessible and inclusive for everyone in the learner population it serves. While the classroom library of available books did receive a generally positive response from a majority of students, the above participant comments are a reminder that students remain who are not fully satisfied.

Figure 8

Responses to Statement 6: I can find English books that interest me in the school's collection.



Audio Material

Providing students with audio is seen as an essential part of this reading program. It is believed that audio assists in comprehension and affords students greater independence as they read. A small majority of 61% of the participants reported agreement with *Statement 8* (Figure 9) regarding the helpfulness of listening to the CD accompanying each book. The relatively less positive response toward audio came as a surprise. However, comments by the participants provided useful insight as to why participants may be less satisfied with the available audio.

Participants expressed the following frustrations:

- “The CD is a little fast.” (Grade 5 participant)
- “The CD is long. I get tired.” (Grade 5 participant)
- “It’s difficult to understand the CD.” (Grade 5 participant)
- “The CD falls out of the book easily.” (Grade 5 participant)

From these comments, it is easy to see how a young learner could develop a less favorable view of using the attached CDs for reading support.

Nevertheless, other participants found value in the accompanying audio:

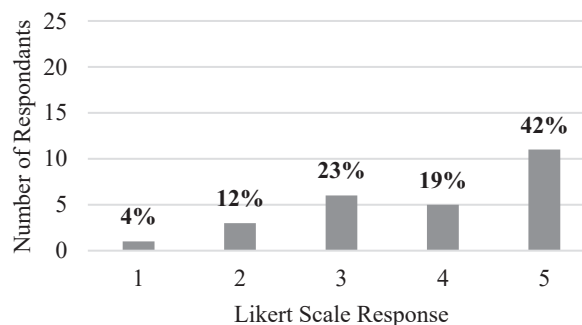
- “I know when to turn the page because of the sound.” (Grade 5 participant)
- “The books come with a CD, so it’s easy to understand them.” (Grade 5 participant)
- “It was good to learn a lot of English words by listening to the CDs.” (Grade 5 participant)
- “With the audio, I could read fluently.” (Grade 6 participant)

participant)

From this mix of feedback on audio material, it is clear that consideration must be given to how best to extend the benefits experienced by some to all young learners in the reading program.

Figure 9

Responses to Statement 8: Listening to the CD while reading in English is helpful for me.



Pair-Reading

Like providing audio, having 5th and 6th grade students read to each other in pairs during class time is also viewed as an essential activity. Pair reading easily allows teachers to circulate around the room and observe students’ reading fluency in a time-efficient manner. Through pair-reading, students are exposed to a greater number of books over the school year. Reading aloud to each other also allows for the reading program to expand into the development of speaking and presentation skills.

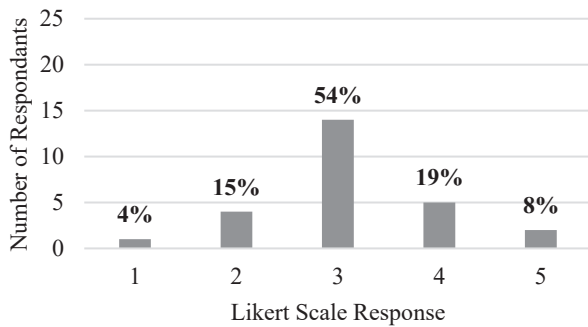
Though the students in this study weren’t observed during class to be especially stressed by or opposed to reading aloud in pairs, the survey results indicated that it was not necessarily an activity of which they were fond. According to their responses, 73% either reported disagreement or uncertainty to *Statement 7* (Figure 10), “I like reading with a partner during English class.”

The participants didn’t provide any specific comments related to pair-reading in response to the open-ended questions. In 5th and 6th grade, some students are newly hesitant towards partnering with someone of the opposite gender, which could be the source of some of the participants’ discomfort with

reading together. There may also be issues of self-confidence, especially when paired with a partner who may be perceived as demonstrating greater reading fluency.

Figure 10

Responses to Statement 7: I like reading with a partner during English class.



Future Intentions

Statement 10 (Figure 11) inquired about whether students would like to continue reading in the future. According to the data, 65% of participants showed a desire to continue, 8% did not, and 27% indicated uncertainty.

One participant commented on their desire to continue reading:

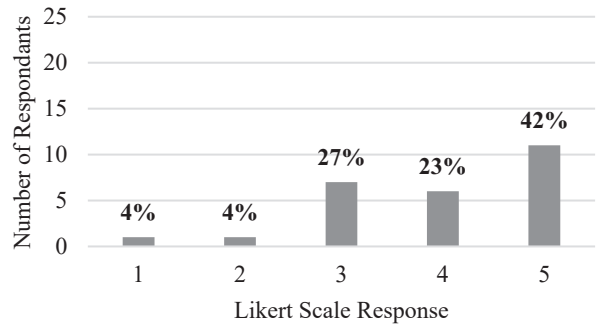
- “Reading aloud for over the last several years was fun, and I learned from it. I’d like to continue this kind of activity even in junior high school.” (Grade 6 participant)

Such a comment could be a sign of growing intrinsic motivation to continue reading, which would be ideal.

It must be noted that the number of participants who would like to continue reading is slightly lower than the number of participants who expressed enjoyment of reading. The reading program does require a significant investment of time and energy on the part of young learners, and while teachers may wish for students to develop a habit of reading, they must also be mindful of feelings of burn-out. Care must be taken that participating in a reading program does not diminish enjoyment of reading.

Figure 11

Responses to Statement 10: I want to continue reading in English in the future.



IV. Implications

Since undertaking the survey, elements of this particular audio-assisted extensive reading program have been modified to better support those young learners who responded less positively than their classmates. Notably, the selection of available graded readers for each class was adjusted for the academic year following the survey. Previously, each class library consisted primarily of one level of graded reader, and the level increased with each school grade. In certain cases, students were offered readers of a higher or lower level to suit their particular needs, but the majority of class members were encouraged to read at the same level. It was thought that this would challenge students to read at a higher level each academic year and become more and more confident at that level as the year progressed.

After the survey, graded readers of greater range of levels were placed in each class library. Students now have more freedom to choose from lower- and higher-level books without teacher intervention. Students have subsequently been observed varying the levels of their book selections week-to-week. It appears that some students make their selection with a greater focus on the level, and others with a greater focus on the content of the story. Learning more about the thought process of young learners as they choose books to read may offer valuable insights for the development of an extensive reading library and how to best guide young learners towards appropriate reading selections. Further into the future, it may be desirable for the

reading program's collection of books to expand to include series by additional publishers in order to offer students an even greater variety of material. With greater variety will come a greater possibility for students to find something of interest.

Regarding audio material, additional narration was recorded by the students' native English-speaking assistant language teacher. This allowed for more control over the speed of narration, which was slower than the publisher-produced audio narration. Some students have since indicated a preference for books with teacher-recorded audio. One possible reason is that the familiar accent of the voice on the recording may be easier for the students to understand. While it is hoped that students will feel comfortable communicating with people of various accents in the future, at this stage in their education, familiarity may be of more value.

Another intervention that appears needed, but has not yet been given focused attention since the survey, is the fostering of self-confidence. One means to achieve this could be through the development of a growth mindset, an idea widely popularized in a book by Dweck (2007). If younger learners have greater awareness of both their ability to learn, as well as their actual progress, they may have an improved outlook on reading in a foreign language. Greater confidence and sense of accomplishment may have the additional benefit of reducing discomfort while reading in pairs during class as well. If mistakes are seen as a normal part of the learning process, and not something to be fearful of, it may become less intimidating to read aloud in front of others.

V. Conclusion

Overall, participants' positive survey responses show that audio-assisted extensive reading has a place in the foreign language curriculum for young learners. Young learners can and do enjoy reading, feel they can understand age-appropriate graded reading material, and show a growing awareness of the potential for language learning. Despite the overall positive response, this survey has also brought to attention

areas for improvement in the reading program under study. With continual program evaluation and improvement, audio-assisted extensive reading has the potential to better satisfy the needs and desires of young learners.

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