

# Considerations for Conducting Research on the Extensive Reading Program at Hokuriku Gakuin Elementary School

## 北陸学院小学校における多読指導に関する考察

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### Abstract

In recent years, extensive reading has been linked to positive cognitive and affective learning outcomes in English as a foreign or second language. Cognitive effects have been categorized in meta-analyses as relating to reading comprehension, reading rate, and vocabulary acquisition, while affective effects relate to motivation and attitude towards language learning. Review of recent research has revealed that extensive reading studies pertaining to young learners and long-term programs are lacking. Because the Hokuriku Gakuin Elementary School extensive reading program meets both of these criteria, consideration is given to how such research could be undertaken in this context. After a brief description of the Hokuriku Gakuin Elementary School extensive reading program, reasons why assessing outcomes is a worthwhile endeavor are explored. A discussion of research methods for assessing cognitive and affective effects follows, and further observations are made on adjusting research methods to suit young learners generally and Hokuriku Gakuin Elementary School students specifically.

**Keywords :** EFL／extensive reading／research methodology／TEYL／young learners

### I Introduction

As young learners around the world are introduced to compulsory foreign language classes in ever-larger numbers, *extensive reading* (ER) has emerged as one way in which exposure to a foreign language can be substantially increased in a non-immersive language learning environment. In their work on ER, Day and Bamford (1998; 2002) build upon the study of reading and language acquisition and its application to second and foreign language learning. Most fundamentally, ER is an approach to reading that prioritizes learner autonomy, enjoyment, and breadth. Under the guidance of the teacher, learners read a variety of self-selected material that falls “well within the learners’ reading competence in the foreign language” (Day & Bamford, 2002, p. 137).

Participation in ER has been reported to contribute to gains in both the cognitive and affective domains of language learning (e.g. Day & Bamford, 1998). In recent years, the growing body of ER research has allowed for a number of meta-analyses to be published that look for further insight into its outcomes. These meta-analyses include those by Jeon and Day (2016), Krashen (2007), Nakanishi (2015), and Zhang and Liu (2018). While differing in the precise criteria for study inclusion in each meta-analysis, the aforementioned papers attempt to ascertain the common characteristics of ER programs that lead to predictable outcomes. Furthermore, what is apparent from these papers is the particular need for further research on young learners and ER programs lasting longer than a year, of which there is a relative lack.

The ER program at Hokuriku Gakuin Elementary School, described in detail in the following section,

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could offer a unique opportunity to respond to calls for further research. Pertaining to young learners of English and having been a key component of the school's English curriculum since 2017, it has the potential to satisfy the two perceived holes in the body of ER research. This paper will therefore describe the ER program at Hokuriku Gakuin and consider how it could be studied given the unique characteristics of young learners and its integration into the curriculum.

## II ER at Hokuriku Gakuin Elementary School

The ER program at Hokuriku Gakuin Elementary School (HGES) began in the second semester of the 2017 academic year and is now fully established as an integral part of the school's English curriculum. Initially introduced exclusively to upper grades, the ER program expanded to include all grades beginning with the 2018 academic year and continuing to the present. During its implementation, the ER program has undergone a series of changes as teachers and students have made discoveries about the features contributing to its success.

In the HGES ER program's current form, each student receives one book containing a CD with text narration per week. The book is taken home for the duration of the week where the student listens to and reads it. The following week, the book is exchanged for another. Each classroom has a box of graded readers from which students may freely select their books for the week. With each book read, students complete a simple reading log. The reading log serves to track which books were taken home and the number of times each was listened to and/or read. These reading logs are monitored by both parents and teachers.

While the majority of student engagement with the ER program occurs at home, there are also a number of complementary in-class activities. At the outset of the school year, and as needed throughout, the ER program is explained to students and guidance is offered on age-appropriate reading strategies. Once a week, a small number of lower-elementary students read their books – with the help of a teacher – to their

classmates in front of the class. Upper-elementary students engage in weekly pair-reading during which one student reads as the other listens for a set amount of time before switching roles. Additionally, students complete monthly or bimonthly book reports on recently read titles. Finally, for summer homework, students are presented with the extra challenge of memorizing and reciting the text of one book.

## III The Case for ER Program Research

As with any part of a curriculum, the ER program must be assessed for the value it brings to students' English education. Addressing the evaluation of ER programs, Day and Bamford (1998) offer that doing so could illuminate whether goals of the program have been achieved, what any unanticipated or unintended results of the program are, and whether opportunities for improvement exist. Answering these questions seems especially important in light of the resources an ER program requires.

Any ER program, by necessity, requires a library of books large enough to offer learners a variety of choice. It also requires the purchase of other items needed to facilitate the program. In the case of HGES, this has included the purchase of book boxes, CDs, and protective book cases. While the budget required for introducing an ER program may be the greatest at its outset, experience at HGES shows that there continue to be necessary purchases as materials wear out through heavy use.

The resources required are not only financial. An ER program also requires preparation and oversight from many individuals. The time required of both English subject teachers and classroom teachers is not to be underestimated. At HGES, although English subject teachers are primarily responsible for the oversight of the ER program, some ER activities, such as the exchange of books, may be led by classroom teachers outside of English class hours. Additionally, contributions made by guardians must not be forgotten. The HGES ER program, in its current form, asks guardians to assist in tasks such as completing the reading log and helping students to use a CD player in

order to access narration. Guardians may also answer students' questions about English words and listen to and/or read books together. Without their continued support, the ER program would be much less likely to lead to learning gains for HGES students.

Finally, there is a trade-off between ER program activities and other language learning activities that could be completed in its absence. While one might initially think of activities taking place during English class time, the opportunity cost may actually be much larger in certain cases. At HGES, students read their ER program books at home. Consequently, there also exists a trade-off between ER and the many other activities – academic or otherwise – students and their guardians could be engaged in. In asking teachers, students, and guardians to devote time to ER, it is important to ensure that ER has the desired outcomes.

#### IV Research Methods for Assessment

In seeking to answer the research questions posed by Day and Bamford (1998), there are a variety of methods that could be employed. Day and Bamford (1998) write that “the method of evaluation will normally be a test or a questionnaire or both, depending on the purpose of the evaluation” (p. 157). Fortunately for researchers in the field of ER, the recent meta-analyses by Jeon and Day (2016), Krashen (2007), Nakanishi (2015), and Zhang and Liu (2018) serve as a valuable resource for additional research design ideas. By reporting on the features and results of ER studies both individually and collectively, it is easier than it may once have been to find those studies with designs most appropriate for replication in a particular context. While acknowledging that studies exist addressing the effects of ER on affect, the aforementioned meta – analyses are primarily concerned with studies reporting effects in the cognitive domain such as reading comprehension, reading rate, and vocabulary acquisition.

*Reading comprehension:* Investigating general reading comprehension seems an obvious choice for ER research. According to the meta-analysis by Nakanishi (2015), existing ER studies have used

scores from a variety standardized English proficiency tests – such as TOEFL, STEP EIKEN, and the Secondary Language English Proficiency Test (SLEP) – to do so. With the increase of elementary school English education, there are now also a growing number of standardized proficiency tests specifically for young learners, and many cover the four skills of reading, writing, listening, and speaking. A researcher could use the scores from the reading portion of a proficiency test to track any changes in reading comprehension over the time during which an ER program is taking place.

For young learners, it is especially necessary to employ proficiency tests that are specifically designed for their level of cognitive development. It likewise seems particularly important that the reading portion of the test mimics the natural conditions of children's exposure to written text, that is, with illustrations and familiar story settings and arcs. A recent volume edited by Wolf and Butler (2017) explores the validity of some of these English proficiency tests for young learners.

Despite any issues of validity, isolating learning gains that could be specifically attributable to ER would be difficult. This is particularly true for an ER program that is administered as one part of a broader English curriculum at a school, as is the case with HGES. Students would be expected to improve their English ability over time as they continue their classes, whether or not ER were taking place. One method that could perhaps offer greater insight into the relationship between ER and scores on proficiency tests could make use of HGES students' reading logs. Data from the reading logs, such as the number of books read and /or the average number of times each book was read, could be compared to standardized English proficiency test scores, looking for statistically significant correlations.

*Reading rate:* Though reading rate has been shown to have a higher effect size than either reading comprehension or vocabulary in the meta-analysis by Jeon and Day (2016), its relevance and appropriateness to ER for young learners is questionable. Reading for

enjoyment, especially books with illustrations, may occur at a relatively slow pace. A slow pace could even indicate a greater engagement with the text and illustrations. For young learners, a high level of engagement with English text seems a worthy goal, even if it is at the cost of speed. If speed is not the goal of ER for young learners, then research on other possible outcomes would be more relevant.

*Vocabulary acquisition:* As envisioned by Day and Bamford (1998), learners should be comfortably able to read an ER text. Specifically, Hu and Nation (as cited in Day & Bamford, 2002, p 137) have suggested that learners should already know 98% of the vocabulary used in the reading material for ER to be most effective. It follows then, in theory, any vocabulary acquisition gains would come from the 2% of unknown words.

However, it is also worth noting that young learners may have a much lower percentage of vocabulary knowledge prior to reading an age-appropriate text. Such texts are often illustrated books, with illustrations providing contextual information which serves to supplement existing vocabulary knowledge. By taking advantage of the information contained in illustrations, young learners may be able to enjoy and benefit from ER at lower existing vocabulary levels.

Whatever the existing vocabulary knowledge may be at the outset, its growth can be measured through pre- and post-tests. As with reading comprehension, Nakanishi (2015) details a variety of standardized vocabulary tests that have been used in previous ER research. Similarly again, using such tests to do ER research in a context where young learners are continuing to receive other input through English classes is unlikely to produce results that are directly attributable to ER. Instead of standardized vocabulary tests, a corpus could be made of the ER texts for a particular program and from which high frequency content words could be drawn and tested. If a researcher were able to eliminate words that were featured vocabulary items in English class textbooks or other teaching material, an ER corpus-based vocabulary test could become even more tailored to a

particular program.

*Affect:* In addition to effects in the cognitive domain, ER could also be evaluated for its affective effects on young learners. The positive effect on attitude and motivation is central to Day and Bamford's (1998) conception of ER. If young learners develop a joy of reading and an intrinsic interest in English, they may be better placed for later English education when, in combination with their greater cognitive development and meta-linguistic awareness, they are more efficient learners.

To study an ER program's effect on affect, a researcher may rely on questionnaires. Day and Bamford (1998) offer sample questionnaire items that could be employed in this line of research. Questionnaires for children would require particular care regarding length, word choice, and any desire that young learners may have to please their teachers, guardians, or other adults. For the validity of the research, it would be essential to eliminate any incentive for children to be untruthful.

## V Additional Considerations

Many of the research methods explored above would make use of indicators of statistical significance. With any piece of research producing such values, it is correlation, not causation, that is revealed between two given factors. Additional research with different methods must be carried out to better investigate any causal relationship between correlated factors that emerge. While research producing correlation has limits in providing a compelling case for the continued implementation of ER programs, the insight such research provides would be useful.

It must also be remembered that ER prioritizes the development of a joy of reading. If children begin to associate ER with testing, or even repeated questionnaires associated with researching affect, the nature of the activity could change in a way that may be detrimental to the development of any sort of intrinsic interest to engage with written English. It may be best to use research methods that require little to no additional direct testing or surveying of students. If

designed this way, students might not negatively associate the ER program with testing, and therefore the completion of research is less likely to negatively influence young learners' enjoyment of the ER program.

Research would most likely be completed during the school day during English class. This again raises issues of trade-offs. A researcher should be confident that the results would merit the use of class time. For the benefit of the young learners, it would be ideal if they were given the opportunity to learn from any tests that they took in the name of ER program research. Turning the research into something more akin to formative assessment means class time could be used without taking away from their education.

In the context of HGES specifically, the ER program was not designed or initiated to acquire research insight. There was no academically rigorous study of it at its outset, nor were there any intentionally-created experimental control groups. So-called *natural* experiments could occur when children transfer into the school, though the number of such students is so small, only case studies could be reported. Reaching the threshold of statistical significance would be an unrealistic goal. Nevertheless, there is potential for HGES ER program research to produce data useful to the wider language learning community.

## VI Conclusion

The call for further research on both young learner and long-term ER programs is a compelling one to heed. At the most basic level, the research results would give weight to arguments of whether or not this particular program should be continued, especially in light of the resources required for its implementation. The results may also be used to redefine the goals and/or modify the features of ER programming. Depending on the research design, results may indicate which features are most closely related to maximized gains. Such insight could indicate how the program could best be supported within the curriculum.

Whichever research methods may be employed to

evaluate the HGES ER program, the results could provide opportunities for it – and others like it – to become a more effective language learning experience. By adding to the collection of ER program academic literature, best practices can be ever more clearly defined. For teachers and school administrators seeking evidence of ER effectiveness and guidance on program administration, an increasing body of relevant research would be a valuable resource worth developing.

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