

# Effectiveness of a long-term extensive reading program: a case study

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Japanese English education has been suffering students' low proficiency of English mainly because of the absolute lack of students' exposure to English in real life situations. Japanese students are rarely required to use English at their talking or writing activities on or off campus. For most of them English is a subject to learn but not a language to use. We needed any effective means to increase their exposure to English language if we want to improve their English proficiency without sending all to studying abroad. One of the candidates is extensive reading (ER) that is recently gaining popularity in Japan. We expect our students fill their mind with the scenes of the stories and have virtual experiences with the protagonists of the stories while reading.

This paper reports a case study of a five-year extensive reading program for reluctant Japanese EFL learners. The effectiveness is measured with TOEIC tests, and three groups of students are compared. Group A, control group, had traditional English education based on grammar and translation method for six years. Group B, experimental group, had 45-minutes extensive reading classes once a week additionally to the traditional English lessons for five years starting from their second year. The students of Group C posed their English education at their third year, stayed in English speaking countries for one year, and resumed their traditional education after returning to Japan for three years. They all belong to the same college where students' initial English proficiencies are middle level of Japanese EFL learners of the same age. All the students took two TOEIC tests in the third and sixth year, and the score increments are compared to each other (Table 1). The students of group C took the both tests after their staying-abroad.

**Table 1: TOEIC score increments with/without ER**

Group	N	1 <sup>st</sup> Test		2 <sup>nd</sup> Test		Increment		
		M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	t-value
A	23	323	76.6	387	93.3	64	86.7	(control)
B	13	410	118.8	516	113.5	106	96.7	0.047
C	4	539	10.3	565	51.5	26	55.3	0.036
National average		386 <sup>*1</sup>		484 <sup>*2</sup>		98		

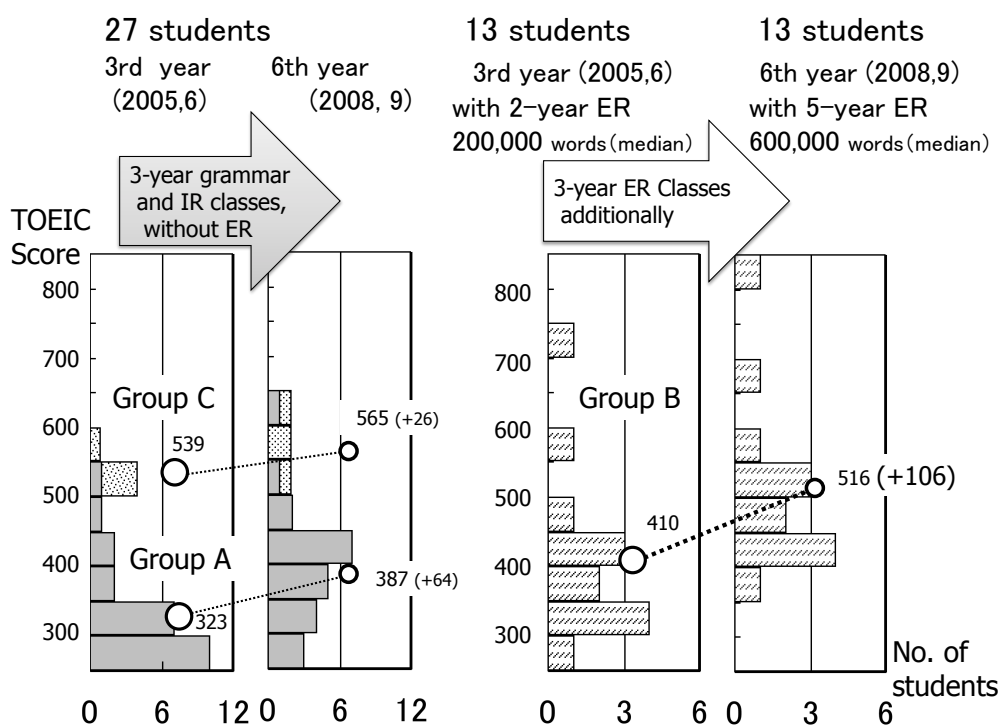
\*1 Average score of 11,513 third year high school students reported in ETS (2006)

\*2 Average score of 59,176 third year university students reported in ETS (2009)

Average TOEIC scores of group A, control group, were both lower than national average scores of the students in the same ages. During the three years between the two tests, it increased 64 points in average. Group C had the highest score in the first test just after their studying abroad and the score exceeded the national average of the third year high school students. But the score increment was significantly smaller than the one of group A. The students of group C hardly improved their English skills in traditional English education after their studying abroad, and they were losing the advantage.

The students of Group B scored higher than the ones of group A, and the average score was slightly higher than national average at the first test. The score increment of group B was also significantly higher than the control group. Their average score at second test was higher than national average of the third year university students.

Score distributions of group B (Figure 1, right hand side) also show that both the students of lower and higher proficiencies improved their TOEIC scores during the three years. It shows that additional five-year ER lessons were effective to improve English skills of students with widely different levels of proficiency.

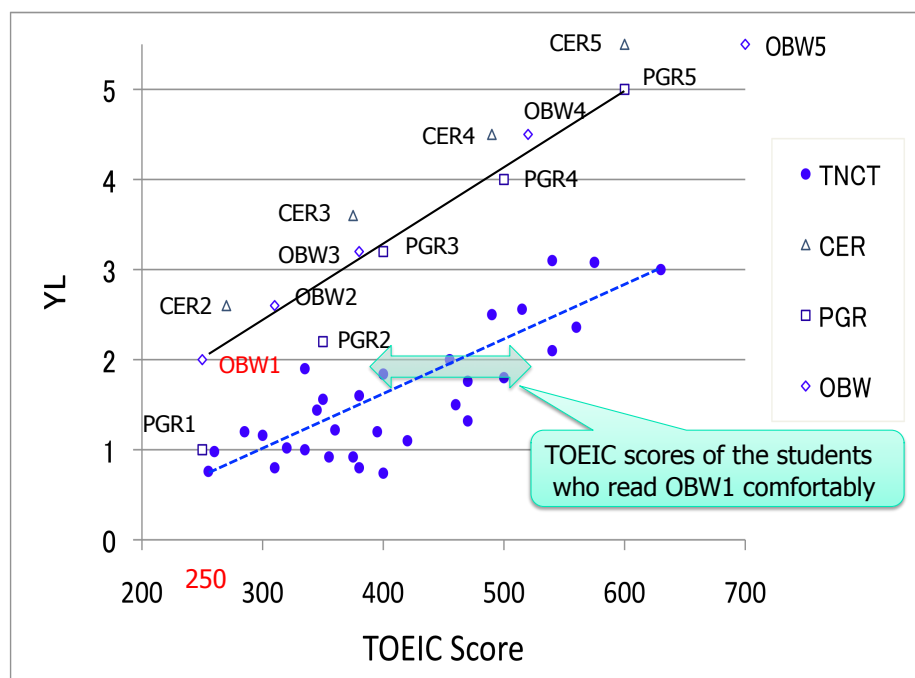


**Figure 1: TOEIC score distributions with/without ER**

One of the features of the ER program is its long duration. All the students of group B followed the same instruction to read English texts regularly in and out of the classes and took their reading histories in journals. During the five years, a half of the students

read 600,000 words of English texts, which is considered to be more than ten times of the amount read by the students of control group.

The second feature of the extensive reading program is the readability of English texts. The students in group B had started their reading from picture books, tried to read as many easy-to-read books as they could find in the college library, and became to read story books in A2/B1 Council of Europe levels in their fourth or fifth year of the program. They have been reading far easier-to-read books than the ones recommended by many ER programs such as Edinburgh project (Figure 2). The solid line in Figure 2 show the recommended readability levels shown by Mateer (2009) and they are roughly equal to the recommended readability levels of Edinburgh project. The vertical axis of Figure 2 is expressed in YL, the readability scale for Japanese EFL learners proposed by Furukawa et al. (2010), which shows the YL of each level of major Graded Readers: Cambridge English Readers (CER); Penguin Graded Readers (PGR); and Oxford Bookworms (OBW). The broken line in Figure 2 shows the actual readability levels of the students in our ER program.



**Figure 2: Readability levels of recommended English texts**

For example, Oxford Bookworms level 1 (OBW1) is the book series recommended to the students of TOEIC score 250 according to Mateer, but the students who read OBW1 smoothly in our ER program scores about 450 in TOEIC test. If we recommend our students whose TOEIC score were 250 to read OBW1, the only thing they could do is to translate every word into Japanese and it took them to complete the 6,000 words of texts

more than several hours. Such an activity is commonly done in Japanese high schools, but it is not *reading* but translating. We also found that reading English texts is oftentimes fun for Japanese EFL learners, but translating is rarely so for them.

This study showed the effectiveness of a long-term ER program in an EFL environment. The long duration allows the students to read easy-to-read English books comfortably and enjoyably without little intervention of English-to-Japanese translation. It also suggests the needs of far more easy books for EFL learners compared to ESL learners.

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