

Incubating English Thinking Mind Through ER in an EFL Environment

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Japan is a rare developed country where English is not spoken even in university campuses. Most Japanese people do not rely on English because every English papers or books are quickly translated into Japanese, major movies have Japanese transcripts or audio tracks, and English is taught by grammar-translation approach in schools. English speaking teachers have also difficulties because their students hardly use English out of classes and the class-time is limited.

Under this complete EFL environment, some extensive reading (ER) programs have recently succeeded to improve English fluency of Japanese students drastically. They are long-term ER programs using sustained silent reading (SSR) classes with the Starting with Simple Stories (SSS) method. In those programs, students have scheduled reading time and wide selection of books to read from a library of affluent readability levels and genres. With the help of pictures and narrated audio, they could start reading with less intervention from their mother tongue.

This paper reports a case study of such successful ER programs conducted in a small college of technology in Japan. The 5-year program had 30 lessons through every year, each of which was a weekly 45-minute SSR at the college library. 20 students finished the program, and their TOEIC scores were compared to the ones of 58 fellow students who didn't join the ER program, the ones of former students who had attended shorter ER programs, and the national average score of university students. The significantly higher gain in TOEIC scores shows the effectiveness of a long-term ER program, and suggests the advantage of SSR and the SSS method in an EFL setting.

The reason of success is that the ER program incubated an English thinking mind even in the middle of a complete EFL environment. It opens an opportunity for Japanese EFL learners to improve English proficiency without staying in English speaking countries. Quantitative analysis showed two thresholds in reading amount for Japanese college students, where they seem to start reading with ease and without translation into Japanese. The average readability level of their books must be set far easier than the ones recommended for ESL learners.

The roles of the college library, the transformed relationships between the teachers and students, and the possibility of a learning community supported by ICT are also to be reported.

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