

**Response to the critiques of the Aka (2019) article,  
“Reading performance of Japanese high school learners following a one-year  
extensive reading program”**

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First, I would like to thank Dr. Meredith Stephens for the insightful response to my article, “Reading performance of Japanese high school learners following a one-year extensive reading program” (Aka, 2019). Her constructive feedback on my article has helped me to expand my knowledge on the topic. I would like to clarify here that the purpose of the above study was to investigate the effects of extensive reading on the development of Japanese high school learners’ linguistic knowledge and reading abilities. The findings revealed that the experimental group, who received a year of extensive reading, scored higher on the linguistic knowledge and reading sections of a post-test than the control group, who received grammar instruction instead. The study was conducted because previous studies on this topic have had some experimental limitations, as many studies have neglected the use of control groups, and few longitudinal studies have been conducted with high school learners. Overcoming these limitations would help to reveal the real effects of extensive reading; this possibility encouraged me to begin conducting further research on this important topic.

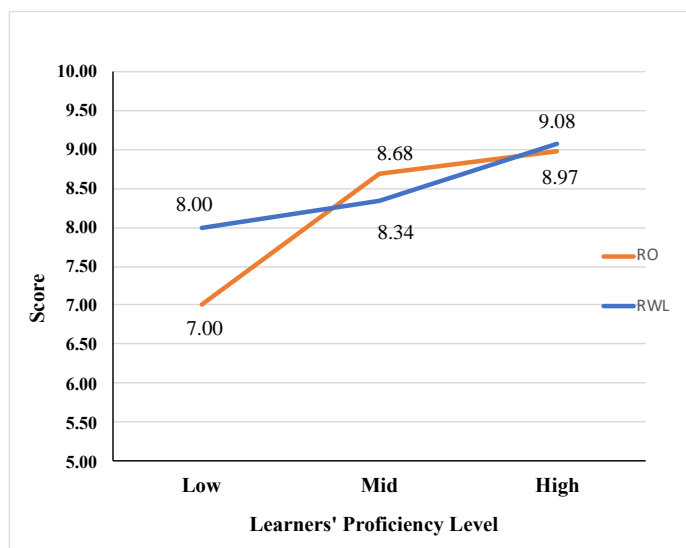
There is no denying, as Dr. Stephens mentioned, that bi- and multiple-modal input might have enhanced learners’ linguistic knowledge and reading comprehension skills more because many studies on bi-modal input have shown the positive effect of augmenting learners’ vocabulary knowledge (Brown, Waring, & Donkaewbua, 2008; Teng, 2016; Webb & Chang, 2012), reading rate and comprehension (Chang & Millet, 2015), listening comprehension (Chang, 2009), and so on. My unpublished research, which I presented at the 4<sup>th</sup> Extensive Reading World Congress (ERWC), also supported the effects of reading while listening (RWL) on learners’ reading comprehension, especially among low proficiency groups (Aka, 2017). While acknowledging that bi- and multi-modal input is effective, I also suggest that learners need to become autonomous readers over time without depending heavily on audio support, which is a natural reading behavior. Moreover, there is a possibility that long-term use of bi- and multi-modal input might prevent students from learning to read autonomously. In this article, I would like to assert the importance of autonomous reading by discussing the findings of previous studies and the results of my unpublished research on the effects of bi-modal input – that is, the reading only (RO) mode and the reading while listening (RWL) mode – on reading comprehension and learners’ perceptions of them.

As suggested above, bi-and multi-modal input is an important approach to supporting learners’ reading fluency development. Amer (1997) showed that RWL helps learners to move beyond the

bottom-up reading style and develop positive attitudes toward reading. Chang and Millet (2015) compared two groups of participants, audio-assisted and silent reading groups, and found that both groups improved their reading rates and reading comprehension levels after the intervention, but the improvement of the audio-assisted reading group was substantially higher than that of the silent reading group. Brown, Waring, and Dankaewbua (2008) also investigated the rate at which English vocabulary was acquired from the three input modes: RO, RWL, and listening only (LO) to stories with two test formats: 1) multiple-choice recognition test and 2) a meaning-by-translation test. The findings indicated that more repetitions were needed in listening (15-20) and reading (10-13) than reading while listening (7-9) for substantive improvement in incidental learning. Teng (2016) also investigated the effects of both the RO and RWL modes on vocabulary acquisition, and the best results occurred for the RWL group. These findings are similar to those of Brown et al. (2008), who found that the RWL mode required less word exposure than the RO mode for learners to acquire new vocabulary. These studies supported the effects of bi-modal input, however, the RWL mode works best when learners reading rates are slightly slower than the speech rates in audio recordings (Chang & Millet, 2015). In other words, if learners are able to read faster than the audio recording, they might feel frustrated listening to the audio while reading.

My unpublished research presented at the 4<sup>th</sup> ERWC, compared the effects of RWL and RO on the reading comprehension of Japanese high school learners (Aka, 2017). The purpose of this study was to investigate whether the RWL mode is more effective than the RO mode in reading comprehension and to examine how learners perceive them in relation to their own reading comprehension. In the study, each participant undertook reading comprehension tests in both the RWL and RO modes. The results showed no statistically significant differences between the two modes, implying that neither mode influenced the learners' reading comprehension scores.

In the next stage, the study divided the participants into three different proficiency groups based on their scores of the New Vocabulary Levels Test (McLean & Kramer, 2015). The reason for dividing the participants into different proficiency groups is that it provides us with more detailed information about who needs audio support and who does not understand the passages. The findings showed that the different modes of reading did not affect reading performance in the high proficiency group (HPG) or middle proficiency group (MPG), while the low proficiency group (LPG) scored higher using the RWL mode than the RO mode (Figure 1). This is an indication that learners in the LPG depended more on audio support while reading than the HPG and MPG in order to understand the reading passages.



**Figure 1.** Reading comprehension test scores in RWL and RO modes

In addition to the reading comprehension tests, a questionnaire was also implemented asking the participants whether they preferred the RWL mode or RO mode. In addition, one open-ended question was asked to the learners about why they preferred that mode and how it affected their reading comprehension. The results showed that 60.84% of the students preferred the RWL mode to the RO mode to help them comprehend reading passages, while 39.16% of learners responded that they better understood the passages with the RO mode (Table 1). Overall, a large proportion of participants preferred the RWL mode to RO mode, especially those in the LPG. This result implies that low proficiency learners need more audio support than high and middle proficiency learners.

Table 1. *Learners' perceptions of the RWL and RO modes*

	RWL	RO
HPG ( $n=51$ )	30 (58.82%)	21 (41.18%)
MPG ( $n=69$ )	39 (56.52%)	30 (43.38%)
LPG ( $n=46$ )	32 (69.57%)	14 (30.43%)
Total ( $n=166$ )	101 (60.84%)	65 (39.16%)

In the open-ended question, the participants were asked to explain their preference for the RWL or RO mode. The participants who preferred the RWL mode made comments such as the following:

Student 1: I can better understand how the words sound like.

Student 2: **I can better understand the meaning of the words by listening to the audio.**

Student 3: By the listening to the audio, **I did not need to read the passage by myself.**

Student 4: It is hard to understand without knowing how to pronounce words, but listening to the audio gives you appropriate sounds; therefore, it is easy to understand the meaning of a passage.

Student 5: Information from listening to the audio tends to **remain more in my memory** than without audio support.

On the other hand, the participants who preferred the RO mode made comments as the following:

Student 6: I can take the time to read a passage **at my own pace**.

Student 7: I can re-read a passage until I understand.

Student 8: There is no time to think during reading while listening mode, **as the audio does not stop**.

However, with reading only mode, I can take time and go back to unknown words or sentences again and guess their meanings.

Student 9: I can read something again that I could not understand well.

Student 10: **I can read at my own pace**.

Based on their comments, students who preferred the RWL mode faced difficulties decoding written words into phonologically correct sounds. They felt comfortable listening to the audio recording of the passage while reading along. However, Student 3 mentioned that he did not need to read it by himself, which indicates that some students may just listen to the audio without reading the passage. On the other hand, most of the learners who preferred the RO mode answered that they liked it because they could read at their own pace. Their comments indicate that some of them might have read back and forth repeatedly to comprehend the passage, while others read faster than the audio recording, which prevented them from reading at their own pace.

The result of the reading comprehension tests and the learners' perceptions of the two modes of readings suggest that as a learner's proficiency level increases, the less they need audio support to help with their reading comprehension. In this study, the participants in the HPG and MPG had already achieved 80% of comprehension levels in both RWL and RO modes, while learners in the LPG scored 80% in the RWL mode, but only 70% in the RO mode (Figure 1). The results of the questionnaire also showed only 30% of learners in the LPG felt comfortable with the RO mode compared to the RWL mode, while over 40% of learners in the HPG and MPG reported that they preferred the RO mode to the RWL mode. Therefore, using the audio support might help low proficiency learners improve their reading fluency skills. During the process of reading while listening to an audio version of the story, low proficiency learners have likely been learning the words by making form-meaning connections through reading while listening, which in turn improves their reading abilities.

I do not believe that the mono-modal approach is an effective approach for all learners. Learners should engage in ample supplementary reading using a multi-dimensional approach in their private studies, which would enhance their reading skills and improve their general English learning motivation as well (Cheetham, 2017). However, a one-year bi- and multi-modal extensive instructional program in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom, as Dr. Stephens suggested, might prevent higher learners' progress toward the goal of autonomous reading. Cheetham (2017) also pointed out that the benefits from bi-modal input vary from learner to learner. In the EFL classroom, some learners still need audio support while reading, whereas others who can read faster than audio recordings are better off reading by themselves without audio support because this is a natural reading behavior. It would be great if each learner

could adjust the speed of the audio recording to a level that is appropriate for them. In reality, however, learners in the EFL classroom usually listen to audio recordings all together due to technological limitations; therefore, some learners might consider the speed too fast while others might consider it too slow. This is one of the limitations of my research.

I am also interested in the effects of bi-and multi-modal input on the development of learners' reading fluency skills. According to Cheetham (2017), the learning benefits of bi-modal input may not occur soon after the intervention. In other words, it takes time for learners to get accustomed to the bi-modal learning method; however, Cheetham (2017) points out that bi-modal input helps learners reduce input overload compared to mono-modal input and improves their reading ability over time. In future research, I would like to more clearly identify at what point learners still need audio support for reading comprehension, and at what point they do not. In addition, I would like to investigate what aspects of audio support would contribute to learners' reading comprehension. I would like to thank Dr. Stephens again for her insightful comments on my article. I hope this response has served to dispel any doubts concerning the subject.

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