Student Preferences in Reading Activities in an Extensive Reading Environment

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This paper discusses the results of a survey about reading activities in an extensive reading class completed by 122 students at the end of their second semester. This survey is a follow-up to an earlier survey given to the same class at the end of the first semester (see Enbody,2000). The earlier survey was completely free-response. This survey, however, required students to answer a specific set of questions. These questions were designed to find out how many students continued to read on their own during the school break. Other questions asked students to rate how much they liked or disliked different reading activities and which ones they found most effective.

Key words: Reading activities, Extensive reading

Introduction

Extensive reading is an approach to language learning which places the learner in an environment where he or she can learn new vocabulary and grammar at a level that is not so difficult that it discourages the learner from continuing. The learner can view language in the context of a natural setting, as opposed to disjointed, repetitious, grammar exercises or guided reading so difficult that a dictionary must be used to decipher each word. Extensive reading does not replace traditional language learning activities. It provides extra support and content-material, that will enhance other learning activities. Extensive reading is very effective in helping students to acquire a large sight-vocabulary (see Critchley, 1998; Nation, 1997). Extensive reading does not rely on ineffective error correction as is so common in traditional reading classes.

Studies done to evaluate the effectiveness of traditional error correction on student writing has shown it to be very ineffective (see Cohen and Robbins, 1976; Cohen, 1987; Greenbaum and Taylor, 1982; Semke, 1984). Colin Davis (1985) reports that students participating in extensive reading programs consistently outperformed students who had not been involved in extensive reading programs. Extensive reading can, over the long term, provide marked improvement in all aspects of language ability (see Robb and Susser, 1990; Donnes, 1999; Day and Bamford, 1998; Waring, 1997; Bell, 1999). Extensive reading is ideal for the foreign language environment or situations where the teachers are not native speakers. Mason and Krashen (1997) showed that students learning English in extensive reading courses in Japan where students read in English but wrote their

summaries and comments in Japanese, performed as well as, and in some cases, better, on cloze tests than other students who were required to write their summaries in English. Extensive reading, if continued over a long period with just the necessary encouragement from the teacher, can provide an effective language learning environment that can be conducted by native or non-native speakers with ease.

Class description and procedures

This was the second semester of an introductory course to reading in an extensive reading environment. Students had received an introduction and explanation of the course and activities in both English and Japanese in the first semester and so were already familiar with the basic class procedures. To see the introduction see Appendix A in Enbody（2000）.

As in the first semester, students were given time to choose a book they wished to read. They were advised to choose a book that was not too difficult for them. If more than 5-6 words on a single page were unknown to the student they were advised to choose an easier level book. "Unknown" words did not include proper nouns such as names of people or places. A reading-diary sheet was distributed with several sample pages already filled in to show students how to keep a record of what they had read each day and how to write a short summary of what they had read（see Appendix B in Enbody; 2000）. Most students wrote summaries in Japanese, but were allowed to write in English as well if they so desired.

Students were allowed to exchange books at any time in class or during the week. Students were required to read a minimum of 30-minutes in English every day. A diary sheet recording how long they read, how many pages, and a short summary of the reading material was collected at the beginning of each class. Students had a separate journal to write summaries during in-class reading activities and extra vocabulary from their reading done at home. Student summaries were reviewed each week but no error correction was given. Summaries were only reviewed to see if the students had understood what they had read. In the second semester, four in-class reading activities were used. These are described below.

Reading Activities
Activity one:

Students were given 30-40 minutes of class time to read any book of their choice. They were instructed not to use a dictionary during this time. If the book was too difficult they were advised to exchange it for an easier one. At the end of the reading time, students were to close their books and write a short summary of what they had just read. They could write in Japanese or English. They were instructed not to read the book again but to write from what they remembered about what they read. They were told not to worry about what they couldn't remember.

Activity two:

At the beginning of each class the students were seated in groups of four. Each student would take a turn to explain to the other students in that group about the book he or she had read that week. They

could speak English or Japanese（all chose Japanese）. Speakers were to limit their book report to three minutes. The other students would listen and could ask questions if something was not clear. After the speaker finished, the other students would write a short summary of what they had heard. They were told to work from memory and not ask questions at this time. When the students had written their summary, the next speaker would begin.

Activity three:

The teacher would distribute a few pages from a graded reader or some other source. The teacher would then read the story to the students at a normal pace. The story was read twice and the students were free to just listen or to read along with their own copy of the reading material. After the teacher had concluded the reading the students were asked to write a short summary about the story. They were told not to read their own copies when they were writing their summary.

Activity four:

In this activity the students read whatever book they liked for a 30-40-minute period. Then, instead of writing a short summary they were asked to answer specific questions provided by the teacher. Of course, since students were reading from different materials the questions were not about any one character or place. Students would be asked about the main character or the theme of the story. Students were asked to describe the characters in the story.

Survey procedure

The students were given a survey questionnaire.

All students were asked to respond to the same set of questions. Some questions required a simple yes-or-no reply, other questions asked students to rate the effectiveness of an activity on a scale of 1-5 with 1 representing the least effective or least liked activity and 5 representing the best liked or most effective. Some questions required the students to determine the results of an activity on a percentage basis. Although 127 students participated in this course, only 122 students were present when the survey was taken. The results are based on the responses given by those 122 students.

Discussion of results

There were 9 questions. Question（1）asked the students if they would like to continue to read books in English on their own after they had completed this course. 77.8 percent said that they would. 22.2 percent said that they wouldn't. The high number of yes answers reflects the general positive trend seen in the free-response questionnaire submitted last semester. But, since the question wasn't put directly to the students in that survey, there had been no way to know how many students would have answered yes to such a question had they been asked.

Question（2）asked students if they had read books in English on their own during the school break. Only 35 percent said yes. 65 percent said that they had not. This shows that while many students would like to read English on their own, without some support structure such as an extensive reading program, many don't continue to read on their own.

Question（3）asked students if they thought reading books in English even without a dictionary would help them to improve their English language ability. 86.1 percent said yes, they thought it would. 18.9 percent said that they thought it would not. See table ［1］ for a graphical representation of responses to questions 1,2, and 3.

Table 1 Responses to questions 1,2 3
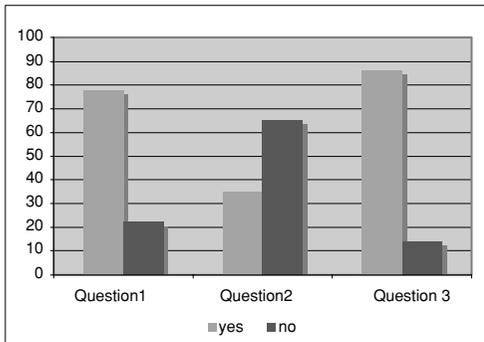
Question（4）asked students to decide how well this course helped them to learn new vocabulary. There were four choices given. 13.9 percent said that this course helped them learn many new words. 66.3 percent said that this course helped them learn some new words. 19.6 percent said that the course helped them to learn only a few new words. none of the students responded that the course helped to learn no new words. See table ［2］.

Table 2 Responses to question 4
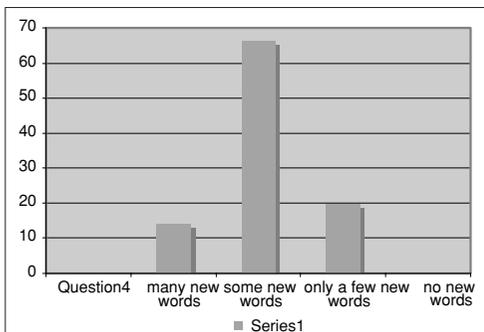
Question（5）asked students to give a percentage value to how often they were able to guess the meaning of new words from the context of the story. Only .3 percent of students said they could guess the meaning 90 percent of the time. 32.7 percent of the students said that they could guess correctly 70 percent of the time. 34.4 percent of the students said they could guess correctly 50 percent of the time. 23.7 percent of the students said they could guess correctly only 30 percent of the time. Only .49 percent of the students said they could only guess correctly 10 percent of the time and no one said they could guess correctly 0 percent of the time. The highest number of students who could guess the meaning of new words in context without dictionaries were in the 50 to 70 percent range. This indicates that if students are reading at a suitable level for them they are able to acquire a large vocabulary without the need of word-by-word translation with a dictionary which is the common practice in traditional reading classes. See table ［3］ below.

Table3 Responses to question 5
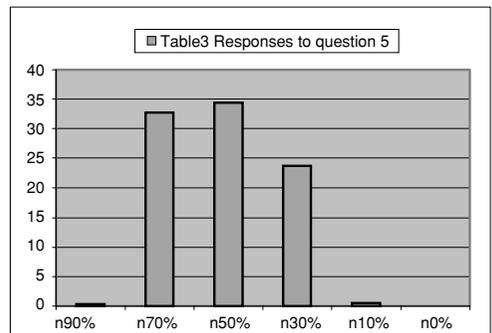
Question（6）asked the students to rate each of the four reading activities described earlier in this paper. They were asked to give a rating of 1-5 with 1 representing *worst* and 5 representing *best*.
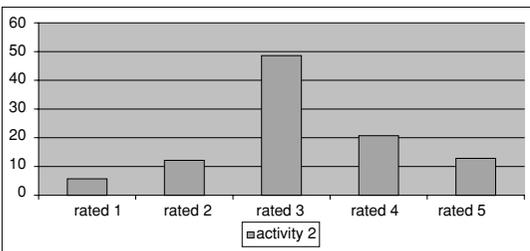
As can be seen in table ［4］ below for reading-activity one, which was the activity where the students read something of their own choosing and write a summary, .01 percent gave it a rating of 1. 6.5 percent a rating of 2. 42.6 percent gave it a rating of 3. 36 percent gave it a rating of 4 and 13.1 percent gave it a rating of 5. The largest number of ratings were at levels 3 and 4 indicating that this activity was somewhat popular with the students.

Table [4] reading activity one
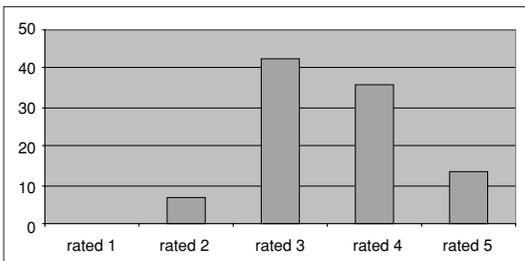
For reading-activity two, which was the activity where students told other students about the books they had read at home, 5.7 percent of the students gave it a rating of 1. 12.2 percent of the students gave it a rating of 2. 48.3 percent gave it a rating of 3. 20.4 percent gave it a rating o 4 and 13.1 percent gave it a rating of 5. This activity was popular but a little less so than activity one. See table ［5］ below.

Table [5] reading activity two

Reading-activity three, which was the one where the teacher read a story and the students then wrote summaries about what they had heard, was a little less popular than reading-activities one and two. As can be seen in chart ［6］ below. 10.6 percent of the students gave it a rating of 1. That is the most ratings of 1 for all four reading activities. 28.6 percent of the students gave this activity a rating of 2, more ratings of 2 than in any of the other activities. Surprisingly, despite the higher number of ratings 1 and 2, 45 percent of the students gave this activity a rating of 3, which is similar to the other reading activities. 12.2 percent of the students rated this activity a 4 and only .03 percent gave it a 5. This activity seems to be one that students either liked, or did not. There wasn't much spread above rating 3.
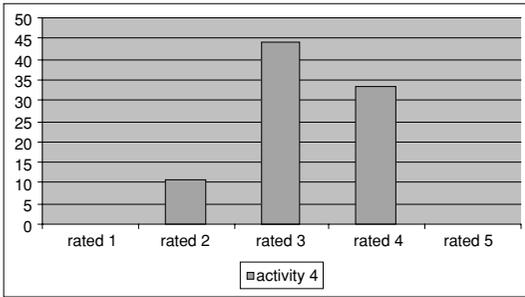
Table [6] reading activity three
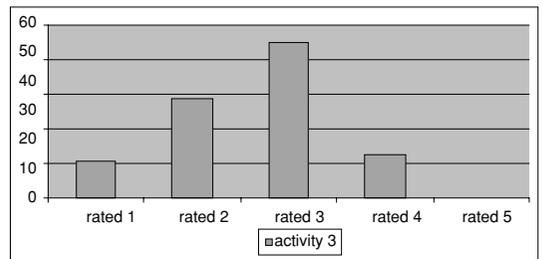
In reading-activity four, the students answered questions provided by the teacher about the material they had just read, .03 percent gave it a rating of 1. 10.6 percent gave it a rating of 2. 44.2 percent gave it a rating of 3. 33.6 percent gave it a rating of 4 and .08 percent gave it a rating of 5. This activity was about as popular as reading-activities one and two. See table [7] below for a graphical representation.
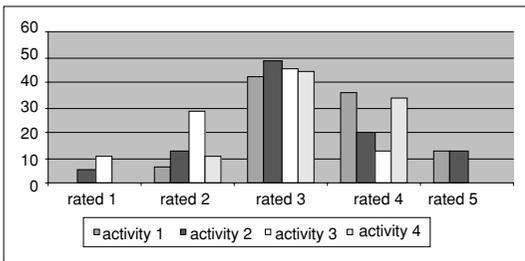
Looking at the results for all four reading activities combined in table ［8］ below we can see that all

Table [7] reading activity four

four activities averaged about the same amount of number 3 ratings. Most of the differences appear in the lower and higher ratings.

Table [8] reading activity ratings combined

In question（7）students were asked if they thought reading books in English helped them to understand English grammar better. 77 percent answered yes. 23 percent answered no.

In question（8）students were asked if they felt that reading stories in English had helped them to better understand new conversational expressions. 86.8 percent answered yes, while only 13.1 percent answered no. It would appear that many students had confidence that they were improving their language ability just by reading stories in English and trying to understand the meaning of new expressions from the context of the story. See table［9］ below for a graphical representation of responses to

questions 7 and 8.

Table 9 Responses to question 7,8
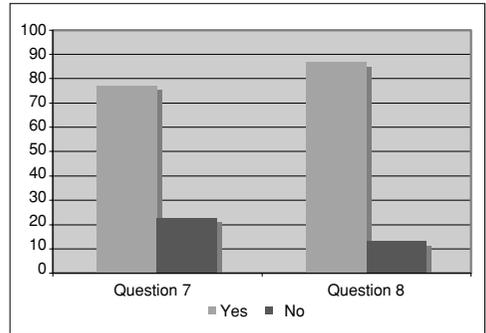
In the final question, number［9］, students were asked to rate this course on a scale of 1-5 with 5 being the best or most enjoyable. Fortunately, as can be seen in table［10］, the course appears to have been popular with most of the students. Only .09 percent gave it a rating of 1 and only .01 percent gave it a rating of 2. 22.1 percent of the students gave a rating of 3. The largest number of students, 46.7 percent, gave the course a rating of 4 and 27.8 percent gave it a 5.

Table 10 Responses to question 9
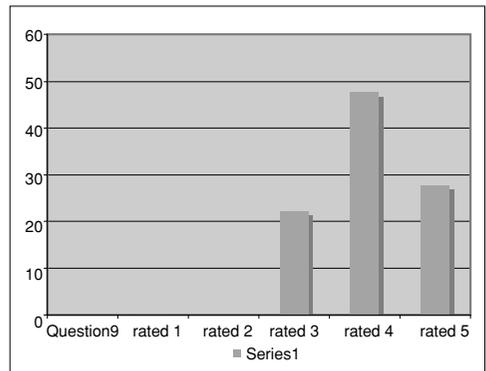
Conclusion

In both, the questionnaire given at the end of the first semester, and the one given at the end of the second semester, many students indicated that they

would like to continue reading books in English for enjoyment even after the course had been completed. However, response to question (2) shows that many students did not read anything over the summer break. This indicates that many students cannot continue their reading on their own without a support structure like an extensive reading program. An extensive reading environment provides students with a positive atmosphere that encourages them to read. It also provides a little push for those who need a goal to motivate themselves. When students work in groups, telling each other about what they have read, students get an idea about what other books are available. Also, they are encouraged to try to read what they know their friends have already read. An extensive reading program can be enhanced with additional vocabulary building activities. To be truly successful, students need to read on a regular basis over an extended period of time. They need time to gain the confidence that they really can learn without translation or over emphasis on grammar based activities. A constant exposure to natural English in context will do more to build a student's language awareness than any amount of drilling. But, the student must be reading to understand what he or she reads-not just going through the motions to please the teacher or turn in the required homework. This survey showed that most students do believe that this kind of reading activity is effective. To actually prove the level of effectiveness, more studies will need to be done comparing the results in a variety of tasks between those who have participated in an extensive reading program over a long period of time with those who have not. The final point is that to be really effective, extensive reading programs need to be implemented at the curriculum level with the full support of the institution in terms of time allotted to reading classes and a large and interesting supply of reading materials for the students to choose from.

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Appendix A

This is a copy of the student survey form. The numbers filled in the blank spaces here are raw scores that have been converted to percentage scores

1. Would you like to continue reading books in English even after this class is finished? Y [77.8%] N [22.2%]
2. Did you read Books in English between the end of this class last semester and this semester? Y [35%] N [65%]
3. Do you think reading books in English will help you improve your English language ability? Y [86.1%] N [13.9%]
4. Did reading books in English help you to learn :
   Many new words [13.9%] some new words [66.3%] only a few new words [19.6%] no new words [0%].
5. How often were you able to guess the meaning of new words from the context of the story?
   90% [.3%] 70% [32.7%] 50% [34.4%] 30% [23.7%] 10% [.49%] 0% [0%]
6. How much did you enjoy the different activities listed below. 1= least 5= best
   * Reading a story and writing a short summary of what you read:
   1 [.01%] 2 [6.5%] 3 [42.6%] 4 [36%] 5 [13.1%]
   * Telling your classmates about the story you read and hearing about their story:
   1 [5.7%] 2 [12.2%] 3 [48.3%] 4 [20.4%] 5 [13.1%]
   * Listening to the teacher read a story and answering questions about the story:
   1 [10.6%] 2 [28.6%] 3 [45%] 4 [12.2%] 5 [.03%]
   * Answering teacher-made questions about the story you read:
   1 [.03%] 2 [10.6%] 3 [44.2%] 4 [33.6%] 5 [.o8%]
7. Did reading books in English help you to understand English grammar better?
   Y [77%] N [22.9%]
8. Did reading books in English help you to understand new conversational expressions? Y [86.8%] N [13.1%]
9. How much did you enjoy this class? 1= least, 5= best.
   1 [.09%] 2 [.01%] 3 [22.1%] 4 [46.7%] 5 [27.8%]

Appendix B

This is a copy of the student survey form. The numbers filled in the blank spaces here are the raw scores, or the actual number of student responses to each question.

10. Would you like to continue reading books in English even after this class is finished? Y [95] N [27]
11. Did you read Books in English between the end of this class last semester and this semester? Y [43] N [79]

12. Do you think reading books in English will help you

improve your English language ability? Y［105］N［17］

13. Did reading books in English help you to learn :

Many new words［17］some new words［81］only a few new words［24］no new words［0］.

14. How often were you able to guess the meaning of new words from the context of the story?

90%［4］70%［40］50%［42］30%［29］10%［6］0%［0］

15. How much did you enjoy the different activities listed below. 1=least, 5= best

* Reading a story and writing a short summary of what you read:

1［2］2［8］3［52］4［44］5［16］

* Telling your classmates about the story you read and hearing about their story:

1［7］2［15］3［59］4［25］5［16］

* Listening to the teacher read a story and answering questions about the story:

1［13］2［35］3［55］4［15］5［4］

* Answering teacher-made questions about the story you read:

1［4］2［13］3［54］4［41］5［10］

16. Did reading books in English help you to understand English grammar better?

Y［94］ N［28］

17. Did reading books in English help you to understand new conversational expressions? Y［106］N［16］

18. How much did you enjoy this class? 1= least, 5= best.

1［11］2［2］3［27］4［57］5［34］