

Promoting Learner Autonomy Through Extensive Reading

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Abstract

This study focused on 165 Japanese medical university students who engaged in extensive reading (ER) activities outside the classroom for two semesters. It aimed to see if ER could enhance their capacity to become more autonomous learners. This was because ER was designed as an activity to be done outside the classroom and primarily left to the learners, although the amount of reading was part of the grade in the reading class. The study also investigated the change in reading attitude and motivation to reading English through the ER activities. First, students' post-course reflective reports were examined quantitatively with Co-occurrence Network Analysis (CNA), providing a graphic visualization of potential relationships between entities represented within written material by the KH Coder. Secondly, to see how the keywords extracted by CNA in their reports were presented, the contexts were examined carefully line by line. By doing so, prominent keywords such as 'fun' and 'not good at' related to ER were revealed. The result shows that perception of the activity with emotion could lead to improved motivation for reading English materials and a change in their attitudes to reading in English. In addition, some learners demonstrated increased autonomy when writing about their reading strategies and perceptions of the ER activities. These findings support the claim that ER is an effective way to promote learner autonomy and motivation for university students learning English.

Keywords: Extensive Reading (ER), Learner Autonomy, Motivation, English as a Foreign Language (EFL)

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Introduction

The aim of this study is to investigate the effects of extensive reading (ER) on the learner autonomy and motivation of 165 Japanese medical university students in an English reading course. ER is an approach to language learning in which learners read large amounts of self-selected materials at a comprehensible reading level. In contrast to intensive reading, ER focuses on reading for pleasure and meaning rather than learning unknown language. Some of the claimed benefits of extensive reading include that it can improve learner motivation and reading attitudes (Day & Bamford, 1998; Lake, 2014; Lake & Holster, 2014; Mikami, 2020, Shin & Ahn, 2006; Takase, 2012, Yamashita, 2013), be effective for vocabulary learning (Nation, 2015; Pigada & Schmitt, 2006), and enhance learner autonomy (Chanthap & Wasanasomsithi, 2019; Takahashi & Umino, 2020).

Learner autonomy has been defined as the learner's capacity to take control over their own learning (Benson, 2011). According to Little (2006, p. 2), it is important because autonomy is a basic human need which "is nourished by, and in turn nourishes our intrinsic motivation" thus explaining "how learner autonomy solves the problem of learner motivation: autonomous learners draw on their intrinsic motivation when they accept responsibility for their own learning and commit themselves to develop the skills of reflective self-management in learning: and success in learning strengthens their intrinsic motivation". As Japanese educational contexts typically have not emphasized learner autonomy, many learners have few opportunities to develop these skills. Given that ER has been advocated as an effective way of enhancing learner autonomy in several language learning contexts we decided to explore whether out-of-class ER would influence the learner autonomy and motivation of university students in a Japanese English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context.

Literature Review

Extensive reading and learner autonomy

As Benson notes, learner autonomy is "not a method of learning, but an attribute of the learner's approach to the learning process" (2011, p. 2). As ER programs in theory give learners a lot of freedom over their learning, they should be ideal for enabling learners to develop this attribute. Andreano & Wolfe (2019) state that ER programs should provide opportunities to develop learner autonomy and ensure that instructors know about various autonomy supporting strategies and actions. In practice, this involves having challenging yet attainable reading goals, student independence and control over reading choices with little direct decision making by instructors, and a wide range of reading options. Finally, they argue it is better for the ER program to be longer rather than shorter to provide adequate time for continual student growth to occur within this supportive framework (Andreano & Wolfe, 2019).

The influence of ER on language learner autonomy has been explored in several studies. In a study with Thai second-year undergraduate students, Channuan & Wasanasomsithi (2012) used pre- and post-ER learner autonomy questionnaires and semi-structured interviews to investigate the effects of ER integrated with a learner autonomy training strategy framework. The findings indicated frequent learner use of cognitive and metacognitive strategies in ER and improved attitudes to second language (L2) reading and learner autonomy. In another study with Thai EFL undergraduate learners, Chanthap & Wasanasomsithi (2019) reported a statistically significant increase of learner autonomy after implementing a blended learning

and extensive reading instructional model. The results showed that learners developed reading planning ability, including the establishment of reading objectives, selection of appropriate reading strategies prior to reading, and control of their own reading processes. This study also demonstrated the influence of their strengthened intrinsic motivation in the voluntary use of these reading strategies by learners outside of the classroom (Chanthap & Wasanasomsithi, 2019).

Mede, İnceçay, & İnceçay (2014) used oral book reports in an ER program to foster learner autonomy. The findings, collected through reflection papers and semi-structured interviews with students and teachers, showed “a clear-cut positive effect ... on language learners’ autonomy” (Mede, İnceçay, & İnceçay, p. 24). Canh (2021) investigated the effects of ER on learner autonomy with 25 Vietnamese EFL learners. It was found that completing book reports on ER books they had read enhanced learners’ autonomy and fostered a more positive attitude. Finally, Takahashi & Umino (2020) explored the effects of out-of-class ER on learner autonomy in a Japanese as a second language course. It was found that ER could enhance learner autonomy, with some learners continuing to read autonomously after completing the course. Takahashi & Umino (2020) conclude that out-of-class ER can contribute to the development of learner autonomy as “it is a ‘learner-friendly’ framework, providing each learner with a customized way to read extensively” (p. 62).

Extensive reading and motivation

Motivation concerns the choice of a specific action and the persistence and effort expended on pursuing it (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011). As Dörnyei (2001, p. 7) puts it, “motivation explains *why* people decide to do something, *how hard* they are going to pursue it and *how long* they are willing to sustain the activity.” Improving and maintaining the motivation to read is crucial as reading in an L2 “requires a lot of time, effort, and perseverance” (Komiya, 2009, p. 37).

Several studies in Asian EFL contexts have shown that extensive reading can positively affect learners’ L2 reading motivation. Shin & Ahn (2006), in a quantitative, pre-posttest questionnaire study with Korean high school students, found that participants developed a more positive attitude and increased their motivation through doing ER. Yang, Chu & Tseng (2021) studied the effects of ER on the reading comprehension and reading motivation of vocational high school students in Taiwan. They found that students reading ER materials at a level slightly above their capacity enhanced their overall reading motivation and self-efficacy.

In Japan, Takase (2012) explored the effects of extensive reading on the motivation of unmotivated Japanese university EFL learners in a repeater course. It was found that students of varying English proficiencies benefited with almost all learners seeing improvements in their English reading motivation. Lake (2014) studied the effects of ER on the motivation and reading fluency of 244 first-year female students in a Japanese university. He describes the benefits of developing reader motivation and shows how ER can lead to improvements in reading fluency, motivation, and a positive L2 self. Specifically, this study showed increases in L2 reading interest, reading self-efficacy, and reading speed for learners in classes reading one book or more a week (Lake, 2014). Iwata (2018) explored the effects of ER on developing the motivation of Japanese college-level EFL students and found that more students reported liking reading English and most learners either perceived reading in English as less difficult or became accustomed to it through doing ER.

Research has also shown that ER has positive effects on reading attitude and intrinsic motivation. Yamashita (2013) researched the effects of ER on reading attitude, a central component of reading motivation, and found that it positively affected L2 reading attitude. Yamashita argues the results imply that ER has an effect on aspects of reading attitude that affect intrinsic motivation, such as positive feelings and intellectual satisfaction, more than those related to extrinsic motivation. She concludes that the positive feelings enhanced by ER may increase the motivation to read. Similarly, Mikami (2020, p. 32) claims that pleasurable feelings and “a sense of accomplishment in ER can motivate students to continue reading”. However, Mikami (2020), linking learning autonomy with motivation, also warns that negative experiences of ER due to not being able to find interesting or appropriate books autonomously may decrease learners’ motivation to read more. Her study, which explored the effects of goal setting on learner motivation for extensive reading, found that setting, committing to, and attaining goals in an ER program was crucial to enhancing intrinsic motivation and self-efficacy (Mikami, 2020). The implications of these findings are that self-regulated learners who are effective at goal setting and produce a positive influence on their motivation may develop a virtuous cycle toward new learning goals (Mikami, 2020).

Research questions

Based on these research findings and theoretical claims on the possible positive effects of ER on enhancing both learner autonomy and motivation, we wanted to explore if similar effects could be seen in our context when students were given opportunities to read extensively out-of-class.

Specifically, this study addresses the following research questions:

1. What effects does out-of-class ER have on participants’ learner autonomy?
2. What effects does out-of-class ER have on participants’ L2 reading motivation?

Methodology

Participants

The participants were first-year Japanese undergraduates in nursing and pharmaceutical departments and took reading classes for two semesters in 2021. One hundred sixty-five students: nursing 93 and pharmaceutical 72 took the reading course as a mandatory subject. In the first semester, reading classes focused on general topic articles such as culture and globalisation, human relationships and healthy life. On the other hand, the second class dealt with broad medical backgrounds and specific medical technologists. Their English proficiency varied from beginner to intermediate levels. Each reading class consists of between 40 and 50 students. Their main interest was not learning English since they entered the university and passed the national exam to become professional healthcare workers. Our challenge was to make the students studying in the large group interested in English and autonomous learners. To do so, we introduced the extensive reading activity into the class.

Design

ER was a part of the class grade: when the learners read 30,000 words per semester, they could get 20% of the whole rate. Online software, Mreader, tracked how many words they read. It enables them to check their reading comprehension and visualise their progress

individually. After reading a book, Mreader gave the student quiz, and if the response rate was above 60%, credited them the number of words they read. ER was designed as an activity outside the class and could give them the freedom to choose their books and allow them to progress at their own pace. The only advice from the instructor was to select the book they were interested in and put it back on the shelf if they found four or five words they could not understand on each page. By doing so, we believed ER would increase their interest in reading English books and promote learner autonomy.

After the ER activity, we asked them to submit reflective reports about ER. One hundred thirty-eight students (nursing 78 and pharmaceutical 60) cooperated in offering them since it was optional. The reports were analysed with KH coder, free software for quantitative content analysis, to see how they reflect their learning experience. Using it, Co-occurrence Network Analysis (CNA), a data analysis method used to identify patterns of association between different entities in the data, was conducted. In this study, CNA can show us how the frequently used words are related to each other in the students' reflective reports. In addition to the CNA, line-by-line analysis of the reflective reports was done by the researchers to further identify common themes in learners' responses.

Results and Discussion

The reflective reports contain 20,248 tokens and 7,999 types and comprise of 618 sentences and 196 paragraphs. According to the CNA on this data, four major groups: Group 1 (I, Think, Can read, Read, and Book), Group 2 (Vocabulary, Many, Content, and Comprehension), Group 3 (English, Not good at, First, and Agreement), Group 4 (A little, Activity, and Extensive reading) were nominated. Each group consisted of words used more than 60 times in writing data, and they appeared together. In addition, two frequently appearing words, 'feel' and 'fun', are related to several groups. (see Figure 1) Groups 1, 2, and 4 include unmarked words such as 'vocabulary', 'read' and 'extensive reading', which are naturally related to English reading activity. Group 3, however, had marked words such as 'English', 'not good at', 'first' and 'awareness'.

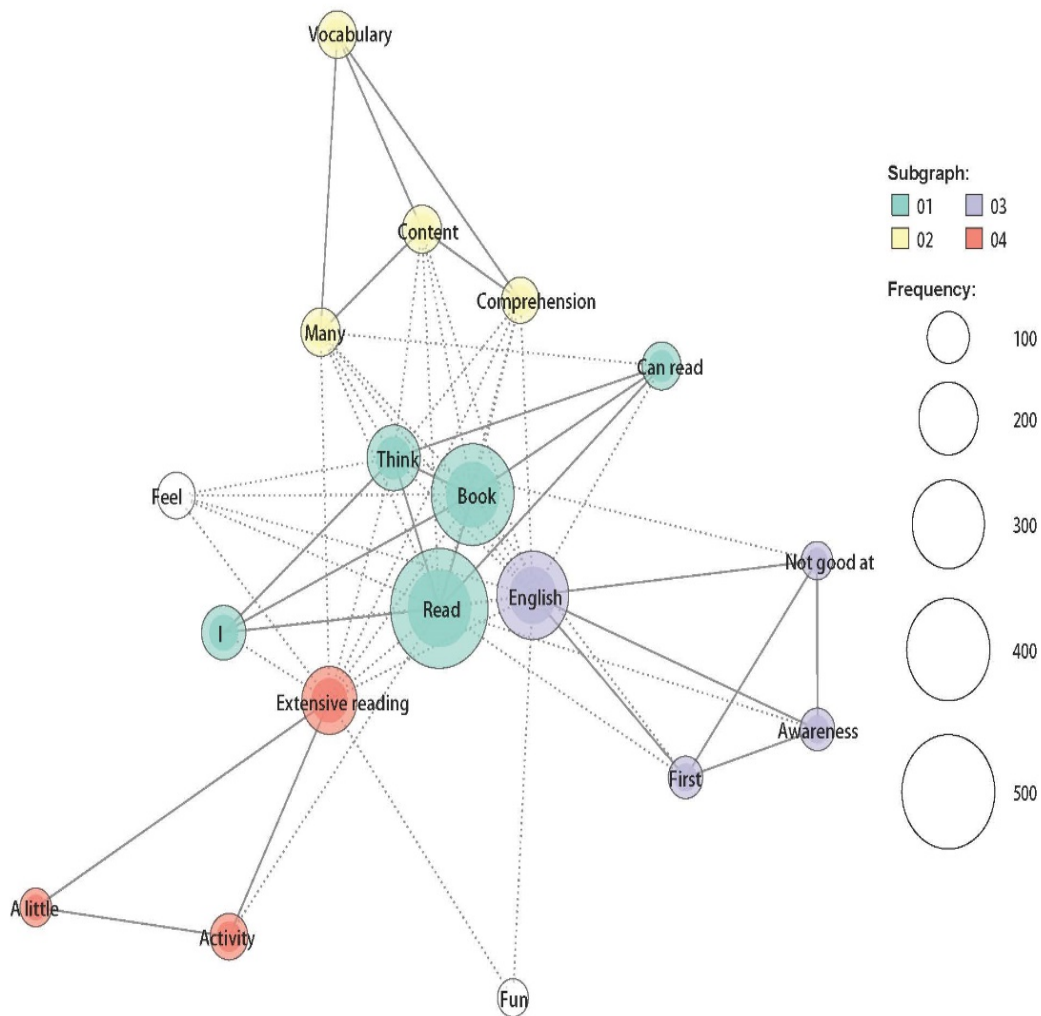


Figure 1: Co-occurrence Network Analysis result

The contents where these words appeared together were extracted to examine the Group 3 words and the words 'feel' and 'fun' in the participants' reports. The sample reports are shown below:

Sample A

*When I started extensive reading, I was **not good at English**, so I read a lot of books with few words. The more books I read, the more I could understand the content. I was aware that I had to look up the dictionary less often and read faster than I did **at first**. Now I try to read books with around 2000 words. I have also started looking for books I want to read by looking at the book's title. I have found it **fun** to read books in English. I am conscious of my speed so that I can read as fast as possible and I would like to continue reading English books to improve my vocabulary.*

Sample B

***At first, I was not very good at English**, so when I saw English books with a lot of words, I lost motivation and chose books with fewer words or books I knew. I read by looking up words I didn't understand or by judging from the pictures. Because of this, I didn't have the content completely in my head, and when answering questions, I narrowed it down to two, but I made mistakes there, and I couldn't answer with confidence. However, as I read more*

*and more, the number of words I could understand increased, and I was able to read more easily without having to look up every single word, so I started to try books with slightly more words and fewer pictures. In the beginning, I could read, but often the questions were not correct, but gradually the percentage of correct answers increased and I **felt** a sense of achievement. Thanks to the reading, I **enjoy** reading English now, and I am less afraid of English.*

Samples A and B show that participants were not good at English at first but developed their reading strategies and finally felt ER fun through reflecting on ER activity. The results of the CNA and qualitative analysis indicate how the students changed their reading attitude in English and found a way through trial and error to be fond of English. The sense of achievement increased confidence and positive emotion, which led to motivation for learning English and learner autonomy.

In summary, ER can promote learner autonomy in several ways. Firstly, ER encourages learners to take responsibility for their own learning. When learners engage in ER, they are often given the freedom to choose their own reading materials and set their own pace. This allows learners to take ownership of their learning and develop their own interests and preferences.

Secondly, ER can improve learners' self-efficacy and motivation. When learners are able to read materials at their own level and pace, they are more likely to feel successful and confident in their abilities. This can motivate them to continue reading and to take on more challenging materials. This positive synergy could lead to learner autonomy.

Conclusion

The findings from the linguistic analyses in this study have shown that extensive reading can be effective in developing EFL learner autonomy and motivation. The findings concur with previous relevant quantitative research in showing that by doing ER learners improved their learner autonomy, for example, by independently planning and implementing their own reading strategies. In addition, learners strengthened their intrinsic motivation by developing more positive feelings about reading in English. As previous researchers have noted (e.g., Mikami, 2020, Yamashita, 2013) if the right learning conditions are provided, ER can enhance the interactive relationship between learner autonomy and intrinsic motivation, in turn leading to a virtuous reading cycle in which learners will continue reading. Research has shown that these learning conditions should include providing a wide variety of reading materials of various levels for learners to self-select from, having challenging but attainable reading targets, and running the ER program long enough to allow learners sufficient time to develop their autonomy and motivation within this supportive framework.

Regarding future research directions, as this study found that linguistic analysis of reflective reports was a useful approach to revealing changes in learner motivation and autonomy, future research could consider employing such an approach in addition to quantitative questionnaire-based methods which have typically been used to explore the effects of ER on learner autonomy and motivation.

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