ER SIG

Practice Article

Student Perceptions of the Ideal Reading Amount

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Abstract

Although studies have shown that extensive reading (ER) can improve English for junior high school students in Japan (Kanatani et al., 1994), one of the barriers to conducting ER is facilitating the total reading amount. Many classes focus primarily on grammar-translation, which tends to cover only 1-2 pages of text in a regular 50-minute class. This paper explains how an instructor can use a set of questions to measure the ideal reading amount using a modified version of the price sensitivity meter, a pricing research tool used to measure the ideal price for a product. This was used to measure the perceived ideal amount of weekly reading. The process can suggest guidelines on how to set initial goals for ER to make it easier for students to adapt to reading extensively.

多読(ER)が中学生の英語力を向上させることは、日本の研究でも明らかにされているが(Kanatani et al., 1994)、ERを実施する際の困難さのひとつは、総読書量の確保である。多くの授業では文法・訳読が中心であり、通常の50分の授業では1〜2ページしかカバーできない傾向にある。本稿では、ある商品の理想的な価格を測定するために使用される価格調査ツールである「価格感度分析」を改良したものを使用して、講師が一連の質問を使って理想的な読書量を測定する方法を説明する。これを用いて、一週間での理想的な読書量の認知度を測定した。このプロセスは、生徒が多読に適応しやすくなるために、ERの初期目標をどのように設定するかについてのガイドラインを示唆することができる。

Although studies have shown that extensive reading (ER) can improve English ability for junior high school students in Japan (Kanatani et al., 1994), one of the common barriers to conducting ER is determining the most efficacious yet tolerable amount of reading involved. With many teachers relying on grammar-translation, followed by teacher explanations in Japanese, how can a teacher possibly ask students to read one English book a week? The author was even told by some homeroom teachers who were from the same English department to not give reading homework outside of class since the students already have a lot of homework from other classes.

Therefore, since the author felt that improving reading skills in an EFL environment was important, he referred to a tool used in pricing research called the price sensitivity meter (PSM) to measure the perceived ideal weekly reading amount in a junior high school in Tokyo. The goal of this practice is to find the perceived ideal weekly amount of reading so students would not feel pressured with reading homework and gain the basic reading skills necessary in order to move to the next stage of reading fluency training, namely extensive reading.

The aforementioned teaching practice was implemented in a second-year junior high school student's class of $N = 64$ in an English conversation class. Since the author had found success in using ER in high school, he thought that it would be ideal to implement it at a younger age. However, ER was met with a lot of negative feedback since the students were only used to grammar translation classes where the teacher would cover 1-2 pages in a 50 minute class.

The objective of this teaching practice was to measure the ideal weekly reading amount in order to lower the barrier to reading extensively. The benefit of this practice is that by measuring the ideal weekly reading amount, students will not feel pressured by a weekly reading activity and in the end, instructors can potentially change their students into avid readers.

Background

When measuring amounts of ER in junior and senior high school, many studies measure the amount of reading and their effectiveness. For example, Kanatani et al. (1994) measured the effects of a 3-4 week ER program in junior high school. Students were given seven short passages at the high school and junior high school level. In a class of 43, it was found that three out of the top five students participated in the ER program.

Another aspect in ER research is overcoming the barriers to ER. Similar to the problems that the author had, the high stakes university entrance exams seem to deter students from conducting ER. For example, in Taiwan, although students felt that ER was beneficial, they still preferred to spend more time on studying for the university entrance exams (Huang, 2015).

However, the Scientific Education Group (SEG), a popular after-school program that conducts ER, has found success with the principles of SSS: start with short simple stories (Furukawa, 2024). This school bases its teaching on scientific principles and holds the view that, in the case of Japan, students should read short, simple stories from graded and leveled readers. Therefore, the author decided to measure the perceived ideal reading amount in order to see what a short simple story was in the eyes of his junior high school students.

Similar Practices

Although there haven't been any prior studies that measured the ideal reading amount in junior high school, one study that did measure the perceived ideal amount of weekly reading was conducted among Japanese high school students undertaking a science course. Chang & Dineros measured the ideal reading amount of science course high school students in their third year and found that the ideal amount of weekly extensive reading was 1200 words per week at the 500-word level (Chang & Dineros 2022, p. 116.) It was also found that although students should be reading at least 2000 words a week, 33% of the students felt that this was "too much" or "slightly too much".

Gaps and Opportunities

Since Chang & Dineros found success in measuring the ideal weekly reading amount among high school students, it was the perfect opportunity to test this practice among junior high school students. This paper attempts to address the problem of having no prior data among junior high school students to the ideal amount of weekly reading.

Description of the Teaching Practice

The practice of measuring the ideal amount of weekly reading was aimed at enhancing the weekly ER program so students could read in English without feeling the pressure of too much reading.

Implementation

Stages in Implementing the Practice

Prior to the practice, students had done weekly speed reading as a warm up activity in English conversation classes that were taught by the author in order to be able to interview the whole year group. At the beginning of the class, students would read a short 45-55 word passage from *Yomitore 50* (Jarrell et al., 2022), which is a short speeding course created for grade 7 Japanese learners of English. This study was conducted after the students had undergone seven sessions of timed ER. This was done in order to have students get an understanding of the reading amount measure that was used in the study. The question concerning volume was measured by the amount of weekly reading that was conducted in the English conversation class.

As per Chang & Dineros (2022), students were asked the following questions as follows:

1. At what amount of weekly reading would you consider the activity to be *a lot*?

2. At what amount of weekly reading would you consider the activity to be *too little*?

3. At what amount of weekly reading would you consider the activity to be *too much that you wouldn't want to do it*?

4. At what amount of weekly reading would you consider the activity to be *so little that it would have little effect*?

The results from the questionnaire showed that the perceived ideal weekly reading amount was 175 words/week. Also, the optimal range of weekly reading was found to be between 150-225 words/week.

Materials and Resources Needed

- A short set of readings of roughly the same length.

- Adapted questionnaire from Chang & Dineros (2022).

- Spreadsheet software to map your data onto a line graph.

After measuring the ideal amount of weekly reading, the instructor changed the amount of ER accordingly by setting the ideal amount as the goal, and starting at the bottom of the optimal range. The instructor proceeded to set the next goal at the maximum range, and by the end of the semester, students felt a lot less pressure to have weekly readings and some even became avid readers.

Adaptations and Modifications

To accommodate different learning styles and paces, various adaptations were made:

1. Use of Technology: Inputting data from the questionnaire took a lot of time. Since each student now has access to a tablet, the questionnaire was created online to make data processing easier.

2. Teaming up with other teachers: Since the practice was only implemented in the author's class, there was not a lot of support for the other classes. By getting the support of the other teachers in the year group, student ideal reading amounts can be calculated among the year group and all of the students can benefit from not being pressured to read too much.

Outcomes and Observations

The implementation of this practice has helped the instructor in many of his classes. After measuring the ideal reading amount, the author changed the weekly reading amount for future classes and there was less resistance to reading in English.

Student Feedback

Although there was not much feedback, some students actually came to the author and asked for recommendations on different material that they could read outside of the class. Also, some students stated that by having these short readings, it helped with the reading section on unit quizzes. Since the students were getting accustomed to reading in English, they gained a more positive attitude even in a testing situation.

Teacher's Observations and Reflections

From the teacher's perspective, by having students start weekly readings at the ideal amount for his school, he has found that more students enjoyed reading in English. Also, there were less complaints from both students and other teachers with the amount of reading that was given by the instructor. By setting achievable reading goals, each student was able to gain confidence in their reading ability as well.

In the future, since the level of students seems to be different each year, it may be a good practice to quickly implement the digitized version of the questionnaire at the beginning of the semester. This way, the students will feel less pressure to read and in the long run, it will be easier to ask students to do weekly ER inside or outside of the classroom.

Discussion

The implementation of measuring the perceived ideal amount of weekly reading was based on practice research and came up with substantial evidence for the instructor. The fact that students perceived such a low figure of 175 words per week as being optimal for extensive reading is not particularly surprising. The Yomitore 50 books, for example, have passage lengths of only 45-55 words. Considering that public junior high school students only have four classes a week, reading 3-4 passages of this length may be seen as an ideal amount. Furthermore, if we look at the word count for Pearson Disney Readers in Japan Extensive Reading Association (JERA)'s booklist, many of the level 1 books fall within 120-130 words (Jera 2024). The students in the study were only in their second year of English where reading was taught, so this amount simply reflects their class experience. The practice of measuring ideal reading amounts can only assist the teacher in making the English learning experience more pleasurable.

Potential Implications for Teaching and Learning

The findings have significant implications for EFL educators in junior and senior high schools in Japan, namely that it is possible and preferable to measure the ideal reading amount based on your school setting. Since student levels and expectations vary by city, there is never a one-size-fits-all standard on the amount of reading that one should assign. Each teacher adjusts the pace of his or her course depending on the level of their students. With the adaptation of PSM for measuring students' acceptable reading amounts (See Appendix), the reading program can be adjusted not only for each year group but also for each school. Furthermore, the ideal reading amount of 175 words per week is much lower than is usually recommended for extensive reading. By finding this value, instructors and curriculum planners can adapt the initial reading goals so that stress is not put on the students, and slowly increase the goals over time. For example, in the author's school, the initial reading amount could start at N=150 words or 3 short passages a week, with a goal of reaching the ideal reading amount of 175 words per week after an appropriate introductory period. After students are used to reading, the next goal could be set at the upper ideal limit in this study at 225 words/week, and then to slowly increase the total reading amount in the next semester. Since students' reading amount gradually increases without demotivating students, this will make it easier for teachers to have their students read one English book a week.

Conclusion

The implementation of measuring the perceived ideal amount of weekly reading amount came to 175 words a week with a range of 150 to 220 words a week. This indicates that they are daunted by the idea of reading enough

words to finish one A1-level graded reader in a week. English instructors need to be more sensitive in the amount of assigned reading since we will risk demotivating students at an early stage of their learning career. The results of this study suggested that for students in Japanese junior high schools, it would not be unreasonable to conduct a mini version of extensive reading with three to four 40- to 50-word passages in Yomitore 50, or one level one Pearson Disney reader or its equivalent per week.

Judging from the results of the study, at only 175 words per week, English instructors need to be careful when setting reading goals and assigning homework. By implementing an adapted version of PSM, the perceived ideal reading amount can be measured and reading curriculum designed so that student reading amount can be increased gradually without exerting too much pressure. Hopefully, this tool can help in your teaching situations and we can motivate our students to love to read.

References

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Appendix

Q6 to Q9 to Measure PSM

これから一週間の読む量に対しての質問です。

Cherry Blossom
My host family took me to Daigoji. This temple has many trees. The cherry trees were pink, and pink is my favorite color! I really liked the cherry blossom tunnel. We saw a historical parade. Men carried the daimyo. He wore a beautiful kimono. I want one too.
（50 単語）

各当てはまるものに〇をつけてください。

6. 一週間の「英語を読む量」は、何単語から「多い」と思いますか。	7. 一週間の「英語を読む量」は、何単語から「少ない」と思いますか。	8. 一週間の「英語を読む量」は、何単語から「多すぎてやりたくない」と思いますか。	9. 一週間の「英語を読む量」は、何単語から「少なすぎて効果がない」と思いますか。
50 単語=1話	50 単語=1話	50 単語=1話	50 単語=1話
100 単語=2話	100 単語=2話	100 単語=2話	100 単語=2話
150 単語=3話	150 単語=3話	150 単語=3話	150 単語=3話
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English Version:

6. From how many words or stories do you think that weekly reading is a lot?	7. From how many words or stories do you think that weekly reading is too little?	8. From how many words or stories do you think that weekly reading is too much that you wouldn't want to do it?	9. From how many words or stories do you think that weekly reading is too little that it would have little effect?
50 words = 1 story	50 words = 1 story	50 words = 1 story	50 words = 1 story
…	…	…	…
750 word and above =15 + stories	750 word and above =15 + stories	750 word and above =15 + stories	750 word and above =15 + stories