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Research Article

Conducting a Graded Reader Program at a Japanese Private Junior High School

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Abstract

This study looked at the rates of student vocabulary acquisition with regards to the first and second thousand words of high frequency used English words as reflected in the New General Service List (NGSL) list. This study was conducted at a private Japanese junior high school with first year students. The students read graded readers from the Oxford Reading Tree and Oxford Bookworm Series. Students took a pre, mid, and post-test using a computer-generated test from the vocabulary levels test website (vocableveltest.org). The results were then analyzed by two different raters. The results from the student's levels test shows that after one 50-minute class a week for eleven weeks, students' results reflected findings found at the university level. This paper adds to the limited amount of research done with younger learners at the junior high school level.

本研究は、新総合業務単語リストに反映されている高頻度使用英単語の1,000語目と2,000語目について、生徒の語彙習得率を調べたものである。 この研究は、日本の私立中学校で中学1年生を対象に行われた。 生徒たちはオックスフォード・グレーデッド・リーディング・ツリーとオックスフォード・ブックワーム・シリーズのグレーデッド・リーダーを読んだ。生徒たちは、語彙レベルテストのウェブサイト（vocableveltest.org）からコンピューターで作成したテストを使って、事前・中間・事後テストを受けた。 その結果を2人の異なる評価者が分析した。 生徒のレベルテストの結果は、学年度の11週間後、生徒の結果は大学レベルの所見を反映したものであった。この論文は、中学生レベルの低学年学習者を対象とした限られた量の研究に新たな一歩を踏み出すものである。

Much of the research done for extensive reading in Japan has been done at the university level. This includes students who have already studied English for six or more years beginning in elementary school through high school, students who want to take English classes at the university level, and during a university course which typically is around 15 weeks. However, there are few studies conducted at the junior high school or high school level in Japan. Some reasons for the difficulty of implementing a graded reader program at these school levels are due to insufficient resources, not enough space for books, uninformed teachers, a lack of time, and the Japanese school system maintaining a *yakudoku* direct-translation method of education for the acquisition of a second language despite changes to the MEXT curriculum. With all these factors having a major impact on English classes with younger learners, many researchers might feel that trying to implement a graded reader program in junior high will be met with fierce resistance.

During this study, the researchers learned how to begin a modified extensive reader program with the goal of increasing student's vocabulary knowledge of the first and second one-thousand high frequency words of English. Most of the words in the simplified texts can be found in the NGSL. These words are essential for students to understand and use if they are going to become fluent speakers and users of English in their future employment and lives. We, therefore, asked the following research questions when performing our research: Did the student's vocabulary test results reflect pre-existing literature findings regarding the effectiveness of ER? What gains of vocabulary knowledge did the students make during the shortened eleven weeks of a graded reader program?

This paper will conclude with why implementing a graded reader program during an earlier stage of English education is beneficial for students to acquire their L2 over the course of their academic careers. Japanese teachers may be nervous or unaware of how to initiate an extensive reading program as it does not follow a teacher-centered, *yakudoku* direct-translation style that they learn as students in university. Japanese teachers are encouraged to continue a *yakudoku* style of teaching when they enter the classroom as teachers after the conclusion of their education, to repeat the same process where they learned their L2. This cycle, unfortunately, does not produce efficient and effective use of time, energy, and resources for all students to acquire their second language. The gains of having an extensive reading program might offset the inefficient and ineffectiveness of the current approach, and instead change the environment to a more student-centered learning environment, where students can acquire vast amounts of vocabulary and increase their reading fluency.

Literature Review

When Nation introduced his Four Strands, he created a specific strand for meaning-focused input (Nation, 2007). This strand is established for students to acquire new vocabulary words and terms while reading simplified texts from their L2. The meaning-focused input strand was put forth to complement the language-focused learning strand, which involves explicit instruction of grammar, intensive reading, text translation, and other various explicit learning methods that draw attention to specific language factors (Nation, 2007; Nation, 2009; Nation and Macalister, 2020). In an L2 language learning setting where there is either limited access to the target language or there is limited time available to receive instruction and practice an L2 language, deliberate learning of language features and explicit instruction are necessary. Deliberate language learning can benefit learners by building their knowledge of language features, improving their reading strategies, expanding their vocabulary knowledge, and increasing their comprehension (Nation, 2009; Nation, 2022).

Language focused learning is essential to EFL/ESL learners, however, there is also a need to heavily supplement deliberate learning with incidental learning, where learners have access to copious amounts of level appropriate meaning-focused input. Nation suggests that an extensive reading program is one option for effectively accommodating the meaning focused input strand (Nation, 2007; Nation & Macalister, 2020). He also suggests that having an extensive reading program is an alternative method to supersede the *yakudoku* direct-translation methods that is prevalent in the Japanese school system (Nation, 2007). Nation further suggests a *yakudoku* direct-translation method is not an efficient or effective method of vocabulary acquisition (Nation, 2007), The *yakudoku* style consists of the following parts: first is directly-translating every word in an L2 given sentence, then reordering the sentence into the L1 grammar structure, and finally adding any functional words or grammar forms to create an approximate L1 sentence equivalent (Hino, 1988).

ER, when executed properly, is known to show various benefits for learners (Beglar et al., 2012; Beglar & Hunt, 2014; Nakanishi, 2015; Nation & Waring, 2019) ER falls in the category of the meaning-focused input strand and thus, as mentioned previously, requires that the learners know approximately 98% of the vocabulary of the text (Nation, 2007; Nation, 2022; Nation & Waring, 2019). This is to lessen the burden the learners feel while reading in their L2 (Schmitt et al., 2011; Waring & McLean, 2015), and allows them to enjoy the text without needing to translate or look up the meaning of the words. Especially when there is a vast difference in reading systems from their L1 to their L2 that the learner must overcome, ER is an effective method to cater to low proficiency learners and provide appropriate reading material that is thoroughly comprehensible (Nakanishi & Ueda, 2011). ER will not only lessen the burden for learners when reading, it will also nurture their motivation towards reading and learning English.

As learners are provided level appropriate reading material, and experience constant reading success, they are able to ascribe their progress and success to their capabilities (Weiner, 1992), thus strengthening their self efficacy (Bandura, 1993), resulting in sustained motivation of the learners towards reading and learning English (Dörnyei, 2001). This is especially crucial for EFL classrooms in Japan, as many of the factors which cause demotivation in English learning are linked to the lack of confidence of the learners, and their experience of receiving low test scores on English tests and low grades in English (Kikuchi, 2015; Kikuchi & Sakai, 2009). Kikuchi (2009) further found that learners of English in Japan found factors such as the need to route learn vocabulary and the overuse of the translation method in class demotivating.

Implementation of ER could solve many of the issues that are mentioned above by providing learners with more positive experiences in learning English, build their confidence, and sustain their motivation. Further, because learners are able to choose the books they want to read for ER, learners have a sense of autonomy which brings about additional motivation in their English learning experience (Dörnyei, 2001). Through ER, learners can build their background knowledge, also known as their 'schema', by getting them exposed to new ideas and concepts (Grabe & Stoller, 2019). The learners could then utilize their schema to maximize their reading comprehension (Nassaji, 2002). Moreover, ER can facilitate reading fluency without affecting comprehension (Beglar et al., 2012; Beglar & Hunt, 2014).

Methodology

Participants

The students in the program were first year junior high school students ($N = 38$). However, only data collected from 35 students was used in the study. Three student's scores were not used because they did not finish all three tests due to absences. The students in this study were in the "advanced" class. These students are different from the "standard" class in that they came from the affiliated elementary school of Green Valley. The students in the "standard" class came from other elementary schools, either public or private. Because the students came from the associated elementary school, the junior high school teachers are aware of the English taught in the elementary classrooms. The teachers then felt that placing these students into their own class was beneficial for the students because their English exposure has been observed and tested by the educational institution.

The Setting

The extensive reading program that was examined during this study took place at the Green Valley Junior and Senior High School in the Kansai area. The original schedule for the graded reader program was estimated at the beginning of the year to consist of about 16 weeks of reading, which was a goal of about one book per week. The students were going to read one book in a 50-minute class every week. After three weeks the students would have

"book presentation" day. The speaking student's goal was to try to get other students to read their selected book when other students reached the level. The listening students would provide feedback about the presentation including their opinion about if they wanted to try to read the selected book in the future. The students would repeat this cycle two times (read three books, one presentation, read three books, one presentation) before graduating to the next upper level of the graded readers. Nation (2022) suggests that students read five books in one level before moving to the next. We decided on six graded readers before allowing the students to graduate to give the students more exposure to the words in the graded readers. Additionally, this allowed the students to maintain a consistent reading and presentation schedule throughout the entirety of the course.

The Green Valley Junior and Senior High School has a large selection of graded readers in their library. These books range from the Oxford Graded Readers, Oxford Bookworm series, and Penguin Readers. Students were encouraged to begin with the Oxford Graded Readers before graduating to the Bookworm or Penguin series. Most students, when given the choice, decided to begin with Oxford books rather than start with the Penguin or Bookworm books when selecting their level to read. One student began with the Bookworm series and two students graduated to this series during the course.

Procedure

During the first class the students were given one book from the 3, 4, 5 and 6 level of the Oxford Reading Tree series (See Appendix A). They were then asked to read two pages and count how many words they did not know on each page (Hiebert & Reutzel, 2010). If the students did not find any new words or only one word, then the book was deemed too easy. If the student found two to three new words, then the book was a match for the students reading fluency. With four unknown words, the book might be a challenge for the student to read. If five or more new words were on each page the book was considered to be too difficult for fluent reading. Once a student found a book from an appropriate level that matched this criterion, they were then allowed to select a book from this level to begin reading during the first designated class. Books in the 0, 1, and 2 levels were deemed too easy and may be suitable for elementary students' level of English. Most students began at level 3 with headwords of about 1,000 words.

Data collected from the participants

During the first class of the course, students were given a vocabulary levels test, which was a computer-generated test found at vocablevelstest.org. There were forty questions in total and there were ten questions from the four 500-word bands. The words were randomly selected for the test and are based on the vocabulary from the NSWL (Browne, 2014). The first one and second thousand words of the NSWL are high frequency words used in daily English. There is a built-in timer for the students to answer the questions and the students were told that if they did not know the answer, they could skip it and move onto the next question. The test was a productive form recall test, in which the students are given an English sentence with the target vocabulary word translated into English (McLean & Raine, 2019). The learners were instructed to write an English word as an answer, to match the translation of the word initially provided to complete the sentence. The computer software marked a correctly spelled word as one point. However, since this was not a spelling test, many students did write English words phonetically. Therefore, we sifted through the answers for correct answers not based on the spelling criteria.

Results

The overall results of the average can be seen in Figure 1. The results from the pre-test (Figure 2) show the students' knowledge of words given the use of government approved materials as they are all using "New Horizon" as their English textbook. The results in the 1,500 - 2,000-word band show that the students knew a disproportionate amount of low frequency words in relation to words in the 1–500-word bands.
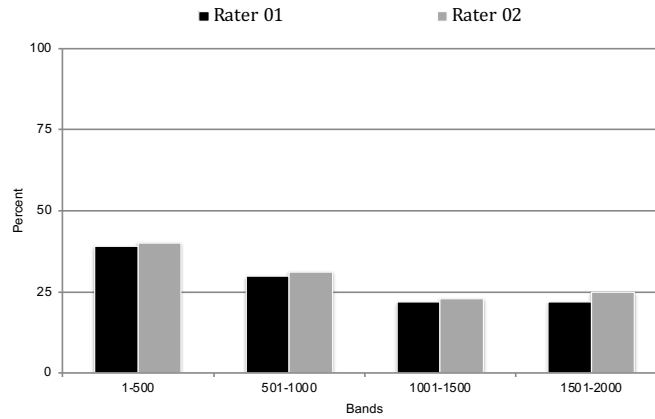
Figure 1

Average of the All-Vocabulary Tests

This suggests that students are learning words and their translations that are easy to translate as opposed to the first one hundred words of the NGSL which are function words, and cannot be easily translated or have multiple usages depending on how they are translated.

Figure 2

Pre-Test Scores for 35 Participants with Two Raters

The results of the mid-test (Figure 3) show that within the first six weeks of reading, and two presentations, the students' results had increased from a pre-test average of 40% to a mid-test average of 52% for the 1–500-word band. These results beginning to reflect research found at the university level (Beglar & Hunt, 1999; Elgort, 2013; McLean et al., 2014). The mid-test shows that at the junior high school learning level, an ER program can produce similar results found at the university level. The results of the final test (Figure 4) also suggest that there were gains but these gains were incremental compared to the increase from the pre to the mid-test.

Figure 3

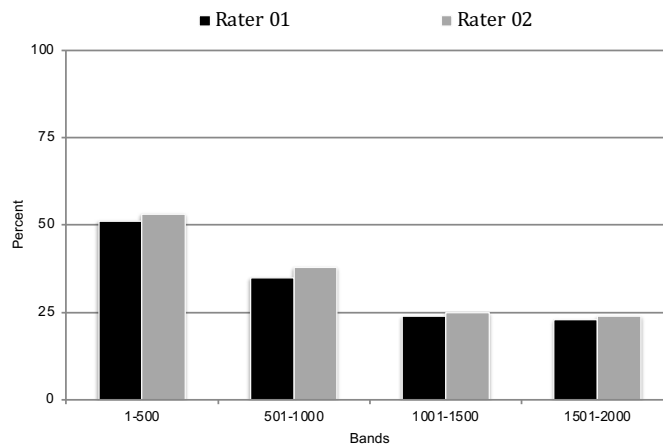*Mid-Test Scores for 35 Participants with Two Raters*
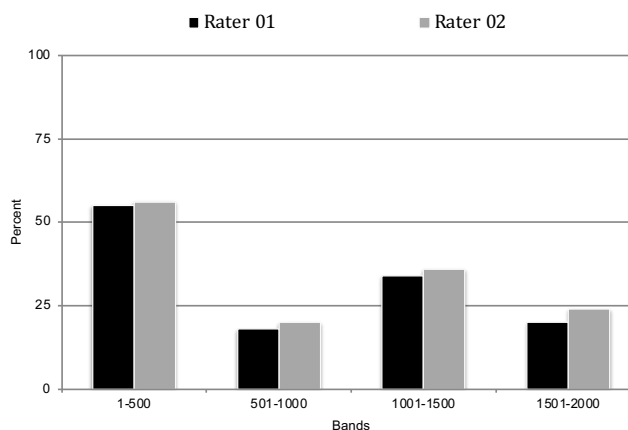

Figure 4

Post-Test Scores for 35 Participants with Two Raters

The results from the pre, mid and post-test (except for the 501–1000-word bands in the post-test) reflect the gains suggested to in the research done at the university level (Beglar & Hunt, 1999; Elgort, 2013; McLean et al., 2014). According to our findings, the students had an average of a 16% increase in vocabulary accuracy in the 1-500 words bands and was the largest gain throughout the course. This reflects the research results conduced at the university level (Beglar & Hunt, 1999; Elgort, 2013; McLean et al., 2014). These results show that a graded reader program conducted at the junior high school level can accomplish similar results with younger learners.

The exception that can be found in the post-test (the 501-1000 band declined by 17%) might have been formed from two factors. The first factor is that the words the website's algorithm chose to place in the test might be unknown to the students. If this is the case then, students may not have been exposed to these words either in their graded readers. In this situation, the teacher might need to pre-approve the words that are going to be tested as this is a feature the website allows the teachers to do. The second reason might be that the students were tired and skipped the questions and moved on to the next prompt. Looking at the students' results, many students skipped some questions as they either did not know the answer, were tired, or felt peer pressure, when others finished earlier, to complete the test and answer only the questions they knew.

The mid-test results show that the students had the largest increase from the pre-test to the mid-test. There was an average of 12% increase between the pretest and mid-test. These results suggest that within a short amount of time, their exposure to simplified text assisted in this increase.

The results show that even though the students had a shortened reading time schedule (One 50-minute class a week for 11 weeks instead of 16 weeks), their vocabulary knowledge still reflected results at the university level (Beglar & Hunt, 1999; Elgort, 2013; McLean et. al, 2014). The results between the post and mid test were not as dramatic as the between the pre and mid test, but students still showed an incremental increase of about 4% (removing the 501-1000 band) in vocabulary knowledge.

There were various complicated factors when implementing a graded reader program at the Green Valley Junior High School and many of these factors can be experienced by other Japanese English teachers if they choose to begin a graded reader program at their educational institutions. One example was the closure due to illness which shortened the original plan of having a 16-week ER program into 11 weeks. Therefore, teachers might need to establish a flexible mindset before they need to adopt, adapt, and develop if unexpected situations arise (Wajima & Luyten, 1997).

Discussion

Test validity

In terms of test validity, as we were measuring gains from reading and not writing, we should have opted for receptive form recall, as opposed to productive form recall. This was due to the emphasis and priority placed on the learner's understanding of vocabulary meaning and not form. The productive recall test was used in hopes of preventing students from guessing the answer (McLean et al., 2015; Nguyen & Nation, 2011).

Computer based testing

The provision of digital tests could have affected learners' vocabulary test scores as learners are not familiar with the test style and the use of computers, compared to tablets or phones. Most tests in junior high school are still paper based. Our test also had a time limit for each question which could have added unnecessary pressure to the learners (Ohata, 2005). This could have produced additional test anxiety or performance anxiety, affecting students' performance and test stamina. Students were confused and slightly frustrated during the pre-test as they had never experienced a productive recall test before on a digital platform. Even though the test used five example questions with instructions about how the test was to be conducted, many students had difficulty in using the software during the test.

Human Raters verses Computer Correction

We chose to use human raters instead of the computer software as the computer software marked answers based on spelling accuracy. The tests were computer software generated however we thought the students should not be penalized for incorrect spelling. Instead, we went through the individual answers to determine which answers fit our criteria for correct and incorrect answers.

Monitoring student's progress

As the ER program was done with physical books, and handouts to monitor their progress, there was no way of closely monitoring the learners to check if they had in fact done ER consistently or effectively. One possible solution to this is by using an online reading application and resources such as Xreading, Mreader or other ER services.

Future Research

For teachers willing to try this kind of ER research in their schools, we suggest increasing the time period from the suggested 16 weeks or more (Matsui & Noro, 2010). Teachers can implement a 10-minute reading period in the morning during the school day instead of reading during class time. If teachers can increase the time for reading, then they can also add more testing throughout the course to monitor students gains with more accuracy. This data can be valuable for other teachers and researchers monitoring student vocabulary gains during an ER program.

Word Frequency

We chose to measure word frequency over increasing test scores or increasing reading rates and speeds because increasing word frequency knowledge can have a ripple effect in student L2 acquisition. This ripple effect is similar to the "Matthew Effect" (Stanovich, 1986) where students who read more increase their vocabulary knowledge, which then allows them to understand more of their L2, which then motivates them to read more and increase their L2 vocabulary knowledge. With a direct-translation style learning method, the goal is more linear with little room for review or recycling of vocabulary or grammatical forms with the primary purpose of passing tests.

Functional words are required to create accurate written and spoken output. For Japanese students, their written output is prioritized over spoken output during testing as testing is required for entrance into higher levels of education. Therefore, students need exposure of functional words and their usage to create accurate output during testing. The yakudoku direct-translation style might not be sufficient to accomplish this objective. According to our results the ER program can help student gain knowledge in increasing their exposure to functional English words in order to create accurate output.

Conclusion

This study investigated the results of conducting a modified extensive reading program over the course of 11 weeks at a private Japanese junior high school. The results from the pre, mid, and pos-tests suggest that given the shortened time frame (11 weeks instead of 16 weeks), student's gains in vocabulary acquisition can reflect the results of extensive reading programs conducted at the university level (Beglar & Hunt, 1999; Elgort, 2013; McLean et al., 2014). The largest gains were in the 1–500-word band of the NGSL with an increase of an average of 16%. The results in this study adds to the limited research done in Asian countries with younger learners with extensive reading (Nakanishi, 2015).

If more schools begin implementing graded reader programs at earlier years rather than high school and university, students' gains in vocabulary knowledge and usage can exceed current trends in the Japanese English classroom (Sparks et al., 2013). By allowing students multiple exposures to old and new words, students will be able to build a stronger foundation of L2 knowledge than what the current methods of education are providing (Stanovich, 1986). However, more schools need to participate in this movement to a more student-centered way of teaching and they need to commit to this new course of action (Brown & Lee, 2015). Our research shows that an ER program can increase student vocabulary knowledge within a shortened time frame.

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Appendix A

Excerpt from Oxford Graded Reader book series

"By the Stream" (Stage 3) by Roderich Hunt and Alex Brychta 2003.

1. Mum and Dad sat on the rug.
2. The children played by the stream.
3. Biff went to the bridge.
4. They dropped sticks in the water.
5. Kipper couldn't see.
6. Kipper climbed up.