

# Can Extensive Reading Help Unmotivated Students of EFL Improve?

**Beniko Mason**

*International Buddhist University, Habikino-Shi (Japan)*

**Stephen Krashen**

*University of Southern California, Los Angeles (U.S.A.)*

## **Abstract**

University level students of English as a Foreign Language in Japan, enrolled in a special class for students who had failed English, did a semester of extensive reading in place of the traditional curriculum. Their gains in reading comprehension were significantly greater than a comparison group of traditionally taught regular students, and they clearly enjoyed the class.

Despite the growing amount of research supporting the use of extensive reading for improving second language competence (e.g. Elley and Mangubhai, 1983; Tudor and Hafiz, 1989; Hafiz and Tudor, 1989; Elley, 1991; Pilgreen and Krashen, 1993; Cho and Krashen, 1994; (1995a); (1995b); Constantino, 1994), many teachers are still uncertain about how effective it is. Some maintain that extensive reading will only benefit more successful and more motivated students, and will not help those who are unmotivated and who have not done well in language classes. These poor students, it is argued, lack the grammatical knowledge and vocabulary that is necessary for reading comprehension and enjoyment.

In this study, we investigate whether so called "bad students" or failures in EFL could improve with an extensive reading treatment.

## **Procedure**

**Subjects:** Subjects were members of two intact EFL/reading classes at a woman's university in Osaka, Japan. The comparison group consisted of second year students in the general education curriculum. The experimental class was designed for students who had failed EFL classes, termed a Sai Rishu (retakers) class. Students

in this class were second, third and fourth year students. Both classes were held once a week for 90 minutes and were taught by the same teacher (B.M.).

Treatment: For the first semester of the year, both classes followed a traditional curriculum, which included reading selections, comprehension questions, vocabulary and grammar exercises and translation exercises. Students in the comparison class adapted well to this method, turning in assignments on time and doing well on exams. Attendance was nearly perfect. The Sai Rishu class was different: Very few students turned in their homework, much of which was incomplete, and students were often late to class. Overall, attendance was poor, and one-third of the students dropped the class before the end of the semester. Test scores were very low. Because of this experience, a new approach was tried for the second semester with the Sai Rishu class.

While the comparison group continued with traditional instruction, the Sai Rishu class spent the second semester reading graded readers, both in class and as homework. About 100 books for students of EFL were purchased for the 30 students in the class. Students were required to read 50 books during the semester, and were also required to write short synopses and keep a diary in Japanese recording their feelings, opinions, and progress. Books ranged from the 600 to the 1600 word level (a 1600 word level book contains about 17,500 words). During class sessions, the teacher checked students' notebooks, discussed their reading with them, and encouraged them. The 50 book requirement proved to be too ambitious, but by the end of the semester, some students had read over 40 books, and the average number of books read was about 30.

Measure: A 100-item cloze test was given as a pre-test and post-test to both groups. The text was about a little girl's experience at the time of the atomic bomb in Hiroshima. Thus, subjects had some background knowledge related to the story. Test-retest reliability, calculated from separate administrations of the test two weeks apart with a sample different from the subjects of this study was .87.

Twenty subjects were randomly selected from each group for the study.

## **Results**

Table 1 presents means for the pre- and post-tests and gain scores. As expected, the comparison group outperformed the experimental group on the pre-test, but inspection of post-test scores shows that the experimental group nearly made up the gap between the groups.

Table 1 : Pre and posttest scores

	pretest		posttest		gain		adjusted posttest
	mean	sd	mean	sd	mean	sd	mean
experimental	22.55	11.54	31.40	11.43	8.90	6.22	34.16
comparison	29.70	8.23	33.05	8.24	4.35	6.47	30.29

The differences between the groups were analyzed in two ways. The gains made by the experimental group were significantly greater than the gains made by the comparison group ( $t = 2.269$ ,  $df = 38$ ,  $p < .025$ ). In addition, an analysis of covariance was performed in order to control for the difference in pretest scores. The adjusted means produced by the ANCOVA are also presented in table 1: the adjusted mean of the experimental groups is clearly higher than that of the comparison group ( $F = 3.264$ ,  $p = .076$ ). If a one-tail test is used, the differences between the groups are statistically significant.

Perhaps the most important and impressive find of this study is the clear improvement in attitude shown by the experimental students. Many of the once reluctant students of EFL became eager readers. Several wrote in their diaries that they were amazed at their improvement. Their diaries also indicated that they understood the stories. Also of interest is our observation that students did not progress linearly from easy to harder books. Some students read easier books after reading some intermediate level texts, and then returned later to harder books.

## Discussion

The clear gains made by the experimental group are quite consistent with previous reports of the positive effect of extensive reading on second language acquirers. Taken in isolation, however, these results of this study are, at best, suggestive. It is a study of only two classrooms, only one measure was used, and one of the experimenters taught both sections. One could also argue that this study should not be compared to studies of sustained silent reading, as several of the conditions of SSR were not met: In "classical" SSR, reading is voluntary and incentives, positive or negative, are not used. In addition, there is no accountability for what is read (Pilgreen, in press). Our subjects were required to read, and had incentives (course credit and grades). In addition, they were asked to report on what they read, and had

a fairly limited selection of texts to choose from. They had, however, some choice in what they read, choice in the order in which they read it, and accountability was minimal. Our results thus suggest that the positive effects of SSR can be maintained even when some of the conditions are slightly weakened.

There appears to be a limit on just how far one can go, however. Carver and Liebert (1995) reported no gain in vocabulary knowledge for elementary school students after a six week (24 hour) extensive reading program. Carver and Liebert clearly departed from SSR too much; there was heavy use of extrinsic motivators, their subjects were restricted to "easy" books, at or below their reading level, and had to take multiple choice tests on the books they read. In addition, reading time was heavily concentrated, with students reading in two hour blocks, with breaks, a procedure that also departs from usual SSR practice (Pilgreen, in press).

If our subjects had continued with the traditional class, it is doubtful that they would have made such impressive gains, and it is also doubtful that they would have expressed such positive feelings for reading at the end of the semester. On the basis on this study, as well as other research on free voluntary reading, it is reasonable to hypothesize that extensive reading for pleasure is effective for reluctant students of English as a foreign language.

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