Interactive Extensive Reading Using a Web Site

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Abstract

Extensive reading (ER) has been a powerful activity within EFL and ESL environments. Previous studies have looked at the effects of extensive reading on various skills and learning behavior. This paper is a report of an extensive reading activity using a Web site within the regular course syllabus. This Web site was created for posting the students' comments and summaries. Students also have access to the Web site to read their peers' comments and summaries. The aim of this activity is to enhance students' reading and writing via interactive and cooperative learning through an extensive reading program using the Web site. A trial comparison of Web postings and compositions was also included in this report. From the results of the initial analysis, it may be assumed that students learn to write composition with ease, while they practice reading extensively. Including extensive reading in a syllabus to activate students' reading and writing skills is suggested as a useful approach for EFL learners.

1. Introduction

Extensive reading (pleasure reading and free reading are other

terms for this) has been a powerful activity within EFL and ESL environments. "Good things happen when EFL students read extensively." (Day, 2004, p. 10). Previous studies have demonstrated the positive effects of extensive reading on vocabulary acquisition (Coady, 1997; Day, Omura & Hiramatsu, 1991), linguistic competence in writing (Constantino, 1995; Hafiz & Tudor, 1989; Janopoulos, 1986), reading (Lai, 1993; Robb & Susser, 1989), general comprehension (Cho & Krashen, 1994; Elly, 1991), and on positive affect and other areas (see Day & Bamford, 1998, p. 34). Extensive reading in English is believed to be one of the most useful activities for ESL/EFL learners. The above studies were examined in a variety of EFL and ESL situations from young Pakistani students and foreign graduate students in ESL contexts to Japanese college students in EFL contexts.

As its name indicates, extensive reading is expected to be an out-of-class activity that is dependent on the students fulfilling their responsibilities. The ten principles for teaching extensive reading (Day & Bamford, 2002) shown below imply students' autonomous behavior.

1. The reading material is easy.
2. A variety of reading material on a wide range of topics must be available.
3. Learners choose what they want to read.
4. Learners read as much as possible.
5. The purpose of reading is usually related to pleasure, information and general understanding.
6. Reading is its own reward.
7. Reading speed is usually faster rather than slower.
8. Reading is individual and silent.
9. Teachers orient and guide their students.
10. The teacher is a role model for the reader.

These principles are intended to lead readers to an ideal situation for

extensive reading, where students are encouraged to read easy and interesting books at their own pace when they feel like reading. Neither time limits nor credit should be given for reading. Teachers are not expected to teach but to facilitate students' learning behavior.

Robb, however, argues that these ten principles "undermine the primary intent of ER" in Japan and in other countries (Robb, 2002, p. 1). In a university setting of Japan, he explains, some of these principles can hardly be adopted in some pedagogical settings as Day and Bamford propose. Students are assigned books according to the syllabi and given grades for their work as their reward. In order to give grades, some teachers assign quizzes or summary writing after the reading. Teachers play more roles than that of a guide and a role model and occasionally supervise the class. Robb suggests that the ten principles need to be modified when applied to local educational settings. Even under some modified situations, effects of extensive reading have been reported on gaining skills or enhancing students' motivation.

The following sections will introduce an extensive reading program practiced as part of reading class activities for university students in Japan. Then a simple analysis of the comparison of the Web postings with the compositions will be presented to show different types of writings produced by the students.

2. Extensive reading using the Web site
2.1. Syllabus for English I to IV

The extensive reading program was included in the syllabus for non-English major students at a four-year college in Japan. The students enrolled in this course are offered four English classes in their first year and two in the second year. They are English I and III in the first semester and II and IV in the second semester of their first year and English V and VI in the following year (Table 1).

Table 1

English Classes

Title	Credit	Year	Aimed Skills
English I	2	1	Listening & Speaking
English II	2	1	Listening & Speaking
English III	2	1	Reading & Writing
English IV	2	1	Reading & Writing
English V	2	2	Content-Based
English VI	2	2	Content-Based

Each class (90minutes per class) meets twice a week through the academic year (26 weeks), which means students take English lessons four times a week for 26 weeks in the first year and twice a week in the second year. In the first year, English I and II are offered by teachers who are native speakers of English with the aim of enhancing oral communicative skills. On the other hand, English III and IV are reading and writing classes offered by the Japanese teachers although the classroom language is English only. The aim of the program for the first year is for the students to acquire holistic proficiency in listening, speaking, reading and writing. At the end of the first year, students are expected to be able to 1) read English passages utilizing schema, 2) get the overall idea of English passages without frequent use of a dictionary, 3) read critically, if necessary, 4) discuss related matters with their classmates, and 5) write well-structured summaries of the passages. Then in English V and VI for sophomores, content-based classes are offered, among which students choose two classes of their own choice and develop acquired skills for specific fields and interests. These classes require the students to engage in active and cooperative learning behavior because they are more learner-centered than other classes.

Most of the in-class activities are based on reading passages and tasks given in the textbook. Since almost all students have had little

exposure to activities such as paragraph reading and writing and schema building in their previous educational setting, instructors are required to commence the first semester with the explanation and practice of these skills.

2.2. Previous studies of extensive reading and writing skill

Skill gains positively related to extensive reading have been reported. In some studies, "gains were made in the students' writing abilities without any special instruction or focus on writing." (Day & Bamford, 1998, p. 37). Previous researchers have claimed improvement in writing after assigning extensive reading for the students. Janopoulos (1986) clarified the relationship of pleasure reading and second language writing proficiency in adult subjects. Seventy-nine students of various nationalities were asked to read extensively and then to write a composition from a choice of three topics. Janopoulos's conclusion was that those who read for pleasure in a foreign language tended to be more proficient in writing in that language. Hafiz and Tudor (1989) experimented with extensive reading and its effect on writing among sixteen 10-11 year-old school children in an ESL setting for three months. Their results included a marked improvement of their writing skills. In Constantino (1995), while doing pleasure reading, the number of participants who wrote optimal journal entries gradually increased and the amount written lengthened as well. Constantino's conclusion is that pleasure reading contributes to students' language development. Mason and Krashen (1997) conducted experiments with Japanese university students and found that there was a significant improvement in the experimental group's summary writing. Kitao (2005) reports gains in students' writing skills through the use of Web pages. Students who read books posted their summaries and comments on the Web for their peers and other people to read. The postings offer a great deal of information about each book. The students'

writing skills are reported to have improved through collaborative work with their peers. Moreover, Hayasaka & Saito (2005) tried quantitative analysis of the students' response writing on the web page and found that motivated extensive readers who read more words also wrote more in their written responses, compared to those who didn't read much. Thus, writing tests or summary and journal writings have explained positive results from an extensive reading program.

2.3. Extensive reading in Japanese situation

Extensive reading is adopted into the syllabus of English III and IV as an extra activity in the hope that students will acquire both reading and writing skills without tears. In these classes, reading and writing are the main skills to aim at. The textbook chosen for the course deals with bottom-up reading with summary writing of the passage and consists of only 70 pages. So a different type of reading, top-down reading is necessary to pay more attention to easy and enjoyable reading to enhance the proficiency in the area. Extensive reading is the answer.

As Robb (2002) argues, the ten principles for extensive reading mentioned on p. 46 are hard to adopt within a Japanese context. Following principles are the ones the authors would like to argue here. Principle 2, "a variety of reading material on a wide range of topics" is financially difficult in some situations when the budget is limited. Principle 3, "learners choose what they read" is only available when there is a variety of material. It is more likely that teachers assign some books of their choice. Principle 4, "to read as much as possible" can be equivalent to "to read as little as possible" for the students who have little interest in reading English books or who have little time to spare for reading. Principle 5, "reading for pleasure" does not come in first. Instead, students read to satisfy the requirement and get a credit. Reward of reading is passing the course, not "reading itself" (Principle 6).

Principle 8, "reading is individual and silent" may be possible only when students find appropriate place to be left alone and concentrate on reading. Reading for pleasure must be enhanced by collaborative work as Kitao (2005) demonstrates in his study. If these principles are modified to suit the Japanese pedagogical settings, extensive reading should be a very powerful activity for English learners.

2.3.1. Guidelines for extensive reading using the Web site.

In the institution where the authors teach in 2004, an extensive reading program using the web site was tested. In conducting the program, the ten principles mentioned above have been modified and named "ten guidelines" to suit the students for the experiment. (Modified principles are underlined).

Ten guidelines

1. The reading material is easy.
2. A variety of reading material on a wide range of topics must be available in the library.
3. Learners choose the material from the library.
4. Learners read at least n books per semester.
5. The purpose of reading is to gain a habit of reading English books.
6. Getting credits for the course is a reward.
7. Reading speed tends to be usually faster rather than slower.
8. Reading is an interactive and collaborative work.
9. Teachers orient and guide their students.
10. The teacher is a role model for the reader.

Reading material is limited to the one on the shelves of the library (Guideline 2 & 3). A total of approximately 2000 books are registered on the Web site for this reading program, and students' access is limited to these books. Since the program is part of the activities for the course, a minimum number of books is assigned for a passing grade (Guideline 4 &

6). Thus, reading is for establishing reading habit rather than pleasure (Guideline 5). Finally by using the Web site, students exchange information about the books among themselves. This activity can never be individual and silent; on the contrary, it is collaborative and active. The Web content of *Bookworm's Café* will be shown below, followed by the procedure of the extensive reading program that uses the Web site.

2.3.2. *Bookworm's Cafe*

The authors believe that Guideline 8 plays an important and major role in the success of the program. Using a Web site is one way to realize this guideline. Mizuno (2004) advocates an "Interactive Reading Community" on the Web site, where students exchange comments on the books they read. He explains that students learn which comments are good in writing and vice versa as they read their peers' comments and write their own. Different views on the same book stimulate students' motivation as well. Duputy (2004) also advocates an online book discussion forum, where students exchange comments and reactions of the books they read. These studies are aimed to make the link between reading and writing.

Bookworm's Café (Figures 1 & 2) is a Web site created for the program at the authors' institution. The aim of this Web site is to promote students' interactive posting exchanges, where they post and read their peers' postings. Eventually students learn how to read and write effectively, a goal of the English course they take. The Web site is designed to be used in the following ways.
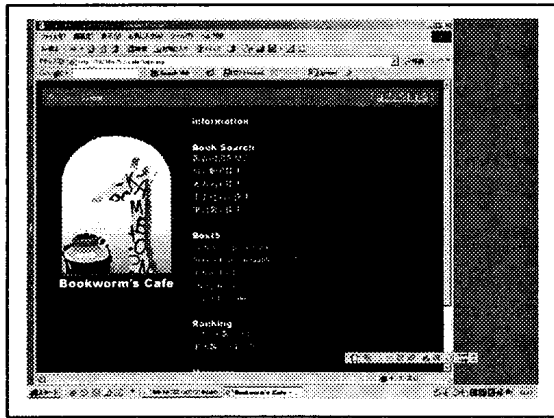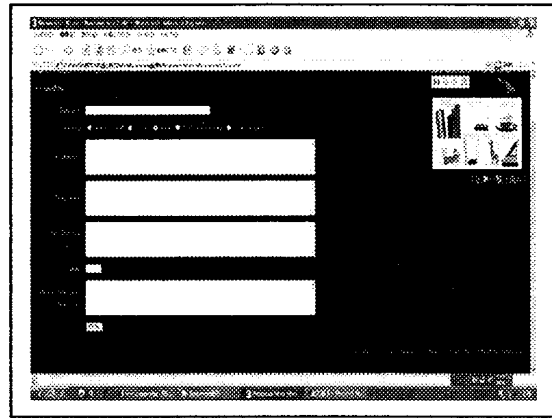
Figure 1. Top of *Bookworm's Café*   Figure 2.   Web posting

1.   The Web site is used   for selecting the book students' want to read .

The list of the books for extensive reading is shown in an alphabetical order.   The list tells if the book is on loan or available. Students check the list before they go to the library to check out the book.

2.   The Web site is used   for writing and reading summaries and comments.

First, students are required to post comments and summaries of the books they read.   Then students are encouraged to read their peers' comments before they select the book to read.   Students' postings give information about the book.   By reading their peers' postings, the students eventually develop an awareness of what is good writing. Students can also respond to the posted comments.   If this exchange is frequent, they can have active online discussion on the books they read.

3.   The Web site is used to enhance the reading attitude of the students

The Web site has pages that rank top five students in terms of number and pages of books read. Through these pages students might be highly encouraged to climb up the ladder to the top, or at least choose the next book easily.

4.   The Web site is used by teachers.

All the students' postings can be saved and retrieved in text files,

which offers teachers an opportunity for qualitative and quantitative analyses of the students' writing for the benefit of their future teaching. An example research using the text file of the students' postings in comparison with the composition of the same students are shown in 3.

2.3.3. Procedure of extensive reading as part of the course syllabus

Students are

1. assigned a book to read of their own choice from the library every two weeks. Reading itself is an out-of-class task. *Bookworm's Café* is recommended for selecting the book to choose.

2. told to bring the book to class for a small group discussion, in which they report on the book they read. Questions and answers are exchanged among the members of the group.

3. told to go to the CALL classroom in their free time and post their summaries and comments. They are encouraged to read the postings of their peers.

4. suggested that they reply to the postings they read.

Through the entire task, students are expected to read books extensively, write summaries and comments on the Web site, which enables their peers to read and reply. As Mizuno (2004) proposes this kind of activity creates an interactive reading community. Thus, the linkage of reading and writing and interactive communication is realized through extensive reading using the Web site. The following section reports an analysis of students' writings assigned in the program.

3. A trial study of the two types of writing: postings and compositions

Some effects of extensive reading on writing have been introduced in 2.2. In addition, the recent trend of using the Internet or Web site was also referred to regarding extensive reading and writing.

Most of the previous studies introduced in this paper, however, illustrated the results of writing by evaluating the writings on given titles and showed the positive results of extensive reading. The content of the writings on given titles have no relation with the reading. By contrast, Kitao (2005) dealt with the writing of the summaries of the reading and its improvement. It is assumed that the posted summary writings will be examined in relation to extensive reading.

At the end of the present program, the authors collected both the text data of the postings and assigned composition task. The two types of writing were compared to see the differences between the two types of writing, if there are any. The question the authors raised for this comparison is: Are the two types of writings different even if they are written by the same students in the same time span? If so, what unique features will each discourse present?

3.1. Method

3.1.1. Participants and assignments

142 non-English major freshmen (mostly 18-19 years old) from a four-year private university participated in this extensive reading program from April 2004 to December 2004. The program was conducted within a regular general English class (Kyotsu kamoku eigo), in which they met twice a week for 26 weeks. During that period, the participants also took a required conversation class from native English speaker teachers, meeting twice a week. Table 2 shows assignments included in the syllabus.

Table 2

Assignments

Type of activity	Activity	Time conducted	Note
In-class activity	1.Eight small-group discussions on books	26 weeks	
	2.Four compositions	May, July, September, December	45 minutes Hand-written No reference
Out-of-class activity	1.Reading 8 books	26 weeks	
	2.Web posting	26 weeks	No time limit Typed in References allowed

3.1.2. Procedure

3.1.2.1. Extensive reading

Participants were required to read one book every three weeks (eight books in 26 weeks). The choice of a book from a collection of about 2000 was their own. After each reading, they had a small group discussion in class, where they reported their reading verbally to the group.

3.1.2.2. Posting on *Bookworm's Café*

After a small group discussion, participants went to the CALL classroom to post the summary and comments of their reading on the Web site called *Bookworm's Café*. This site was created for the students to 1) see a list of the books and know which are more frequently read by their peers, 2) post and read summaries and comments of the participants on the Web, and 3) interact among themselves by sending responses to the postings.

Participants typed in the summary and comments. They were allowed to consult a dictionary and the book on which they wrote. They

could take as much time as they wanted. Moreover, the participants wrote the draft in *Microsoft Word* first, saved and then pasted it on the Web site. This eased any technical difficulties participants may have posting directly onto the Web site. They could check the spelling as well. All this was done by themselves out of class. No support was given by the teacher. Students' record of postings, a list of books they read, and the text of their summaries and comments were collected.

3.1.2.3. Composition writing

Participants wrote four compositions, in May, July, September and December respectively: being given 45 minutes for each. This time length comes from literature and previous studies. The students could choose from among three topics. This was conducted in class, and the use of a dictionary was not allowed. As the participants' typing skill varied and the time was limited, compositions were hand-written. For the analysis, however, all compositions were typed and saved in text files.

3.1.3. Data Analysis

Two different measurements were applied to the data analyses: Type-Token Ratio (TTR) and the keywords of each datum. All the data were analyzed with *WordSmith Tool 4.0.*

Participants' typed postings were saved in text files as they were and no corrections or changes were made by the authors.

In order to run *WordSmith*, participants' handwritten compositions were typed and saved in text files. When typed, the following adjustment was processed. Words written in Japanese orthography were replaced by <J> and excluded from the total number. Others were left as they were.

3.2. Results and Discussion

The data of 78 participants who fulfilled all the requirements (Table 2) were collected and analyzed. Other participants missed either one or more of the requirements and their data were excluded from the

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current study.

3.2.1. Composition Titles

For each writing assignment, students chose one topic out of three and wrote on the chosen topic for up to 45 minutes.   The variation of the topics is shown below.

Table 3

Composition Titles and Number of Compositions

Time		Title	N
May	Title 1	My favorite things	31
	Title 2	My hometown	15
	Title 3	My high school life	33
July	Title 4	Hokkaido	34
	Title 5	My best friend(s)	34
	Title 6	Hokusei	10
Sept.	Title 7	A mobile phone is/is not useful.	29
	Title 8	We need/do not need cars in our daily life.	24
	Title 9	College students should/should not have part-time jobs.	24
Dec.	Title 10	Environmental issues	21
	Title 11	TV commercials and consumers	11
	Title 12	Family relationships	46
TOTAL			312

Some personal topics were chosen for the first two assignments, then topics requiring more opinion and exposition for the rest.   Table 3 shows that "family relationships" was the most popular topic.   This title was originally designed as a social issue, as were the other two in the fourth writing assignment, but was favored by participants presumably because it was taken as a personal issue, being more familiar than others. As a matter of fact, the content was more about their own family than a social issue.   That contributed to the higher count than the others. "Hokusei" was the least favored.   Even three months after they entered

the university, students seem not to have much to write about it. Generally speaking, students chose topics related to their personal life (Titles 1, 3, 4, 5 and 12)

3.2.2. TTR/STTR

TTR is the calculation result of types (number of separate words) divided by the tokens (total number of words in the text). Generally it is believed that the higher the ratio, the more difficult the text is. However, it is affected by the length of the text. The longer the text, the smaller the ratio gets. To avoid this and make the data more reliable, *WordSmith* uses a different strategy, the standardised type-token ratio (STTR). For the current study, the STTR is counted every 500 words. The general assumption for the difference of STTR in postings and compositions is that postings have written features with higher STTR and compositions have spoken ones with lower STTR because the former is a book report, written with the help of a dictionary and with time to edit. The latter comes from the participants' productive vocabulary and phrases within a limited length of time. Here is the comparison of the two STTRs.

3.2.2.1. Postings

A total of 624 postings were automatically retrieved from the files, eight postings from 78 participants. Types and tokens are shown in Table 4. As TTR is affected by the length of the text, standardised TTR (STTR) is preferable to compare the characteristics of the texts.

Table 4

Tokens and Types of the Postings

		Tokens (running words)	Types (distinct words)	TTR type/token	STTR (std/500)
Postings	1	8,239	1,642	19.93	46.54
Postings	2	8,361	1,671	19.99	46.34
Postings	3	8,087	1,623	20.07	46.55
Postings	4	8,120	1,644	20.25	46.16
Postings	5	8,967	1,632	18.20	45.14
Postings	6	9,175	1,794	19.55	46.68
Postings	7	9,920	1,805	18.20	45.60
Postings	8	9,024	1,777	19.69	47.13
Total		69,893	5,402	7.73	46.26

Total of approximately 5,400 types seems to exceed the size of the participants' vocabulary. Consulting English-English, English-Japanese and Japanese-English dictionaries or other media, it is easily assumed that participants used even unfamiliar words when they thought they matched their Japanese equivalents. A wide range of topics of the books or direct quotes from the books also contributed to the large number of types. The STTR shows small ups and downs, but does not show a smooth rise or decline through the programme.

3.2.2.2. Compositions

In total, 312 compositions were collected and analyzed (Table 5).

Table 5

Tokens and Types of the Compositions

	Tokens (running words)	Types (distinct words)	TTR type/token	STTR (std/500)
Composition 1 (May)	11,320	1,436	12.69	41.43
Composition 2 (July)	12,603	1,466	11.63	40.80
Composition 3 (Sept)	11,420	1,045	9.15	35.22
Composition 4 (Dec)	12,642	1,373	10.86	39.52
Total	47,985	2,887	6.02	39.30

Total tokens and types from 312 compositions count 47,985 words and 2,887 words respectively. The move illustrates interesting features. Regarding tokens, they increase slightly except in Composition 3. Small variations are found: an increase between Composition 1 and 2, a decrease between 2 and 3, then an increase again between 3 and 4. Given the summer vacation affected students' proficiency, less exposure to English during the holiday could be the reason students wrote shorter compositions with less variation in word choice. If we compare the first one with the final one, however, tokens increased while types decreased. And the STTRs were lowered from 41.42 to 39.52. This implies that Composition 4 consists of more words in total with fewer distinct words. To conclude, the participants' compositions grew simpler.

When STTR in postings and compositions are compared, two distinctive features are found. First, composition STTR shows a lower rate than that of postings, which indicates that English in compositions tends toward spoken discourse. Second, through the program, the participants learned to write more with fewer words. In other words, their English has become easy.

3.2.3. Keywords

Keywords calculated by *WordSmith* are another measurement to

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compare the two text files. "Keywords are the most typical of the genre" (*Oxford WordSmith Tools* 4.0, p. 91) but they do not mean in importance. They are merely outstandingly frequent in comparison with the reference file.

Table 6

Keywords (highest on the top)

	Postings	Compositions
1	THE	WE
2	HE	MY
3	STORY	I
4	HIS	HOKKAIDO
5	THIS	MOBILE
6	BOOK	SCHOOL
7	MAN	PHONE
8	WAS	HIGH
9	A	HAVE
10	SHE	FAMILY
11	THEY	TIME
12	HER	PART
13	AN	OUR
14	HIM	SAPPORO
15	READ	MANY
16	ONE	CARS
17	DAY	USE
18	BOY	RELATIONSHIP
19	THEN	USEFUL
20	POOR	NOW

In Table 6, keywords, unique words of one group with reference to the other, illustrate a few things. Firstly, keywords in both groups show different personal pronouns: postings have third person pronouns

and compositions have first person pronouns. This is interpreted as that the former is mainly about the characters of the stories while the latter deals with the writer's personal experience and perspectives. Secondly, keywords in postings are utilized in the beginning of story-telling, such as *"This is a story of a man. One day he..."* On the other hand, many of the keywords in compositions are from the titles of the writing assignments (see p. 58). Finally, *then* and *now,* are unique to each group. *Then* in postings is used as a connective and in genre-related expressions to transit one happening to the next. *Now* is used as an adverb to express the writer's current situation.

So the answer to the question raised for this experiment "Are the two types of writings different even if they are written by the same students in the same time span?" will be answered in the affirmative. The results demonstrate two different features of writing: postings deal with the characters of the stories and maintain the generic style of a story-telling, while compositions deal with the writers' personal perspectives and topic related vocabulary.

4. Conclusion

In this paper, the authors have introduced an interactive extensive reading using the Web site under the modified principles proposed by Day & Bamford (2002). The objectives of introducing extensive reading to the course is twofold: to practice top-down type of reading to accompany the bottom-up type of reading already used in class and to experience reading and writing skills through the interactive extensive reading using the Web site. A writing task conducted as part of the syllabus and its results were reticently shown. The authors assume that interactive extensive reading using the Web site will gradually gain popularity in tandem with technological developments. The authors hope that this report shed light on the future syllabus

planning.

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