

Teaching Reading to EFL Learners in Japan Using an Extensive Reading Approach

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The Problems

Japanese EFL learners have a difficult time learning how to read in English for a number of reasons.

First of all, almost everything Japanese learners see is written in Japanese. Often advertisements and T-shirt logos are written in English, but they are written as designs to be looked at and not to be read. Clearly, visual input and exposure to English are very limited, and, as a result, students do not feel a need to read English in their everyday lives.

Secondly, in schools, traditional grammar-translation is the main method of class room instruction. What the students learn from these typical intensive reading classes are dictation and memorization skills in Japanese, and not the reading comprehension skills so vitally necessary to understanding English.

Since the learners are not interested in developing reading skills as much as other skills, English does not hold a high priority for them. Communicative competence in speaking and listening seem to be the main focus of both teaching and learning.

Although one of the reading objectives for the EFL learners in Japan is supposed to be the development of good readers, this objective is not usually achieved. I think this is due to the fact that the goal for most of the learners is simply to pass an English test. The students are more concerned about achieving good scores on the test than becoming good readers. The problem is further compounded by the fact that Japanese learners are very much discouraged from reading in English at all. The traditional way of learning has also led them to believe that reading is both difficult and unpleasant.

As a result of these problems, many Japanese EFL learners never get past the sentence level of reading.

A Solution to the Problems

What can we do to make these Japanese EFL learners become skilled enough to be able to read best-sellers in English and have positive attitudes toward reading in English generally? I have been experimenting with an extensive reading approach, and it seems to be providing a solution.

By reading easy materials such as guided readers extensively, the students receive a lot of comprehensible input. Their affective filter is relatively low as long as it is a self-access program. On the other hand, when the course is required, students may have some anxiety; but, at the same time, if it isn't required, they may not have the will power to read extensively. Since students are not required to look up all the unknown words and translate sentences word-by-word, they will concentrate more on meaning when they read. A lot of practice in reading what they can understand gives them confidence and a desire to go on to the next higher level. With an extensive reading approach, they begin to believe they may become good readers if they keep reading. This phenomenon rarely happens with the traditional intensive reading approach. The extensive reading class gives them confidence, a purpose to work for, and a sense of satisfaction due to their accomplishment. The following are short answers to some questions I usually receiving about my classes.

(1.) *What do they read?*

The students read guided readers to begin with, and then gradually they tackle more advanced authentic

materials.

(2.) *How much do they read?*

I require them to read 1,000 pages in an academic semester. This means two to four books per week. Depending on reading speed, this translates into two to four hours of reading per week in the first semester. For the second semester, the time spent on reading depends on the students' motivation and ability. It usually ranges, however, from two to six hours per week.

(3.) *How many books are there in your collection?*

There are about 3,500 books in the extensive reading class library. They serve the 500 students in my school.

(4.) *Which level do the students start with?*

The students start at a very easy level, such as Heinemann's 600 word-level books. I believe it is always best to start with the easiest type reading task.

(5.) *How fast do the students read?*

They read a Heinemann's beginning level (600 word-level) book in 20 to 30 minutes. Or they can read a Heinemann's elementary level (1100 word-level) book in 60-90 minutes. Their reading speed is between 100 to 150 words per minute. I have heard that average native high school students read 200 words per minute and that average college students read 300 words per minute.

(6.) *How do you evaluate their progress?*

I use three methods: (a.) subjective observation (b.) a reliable cloze test developed by the teacher and (c.) a reading comprehension test.

(7.) *What do teachers need to do for preparation?*

I think the most important thing is that the teachers themselves must become believers in the approach. Teachers cannot teach what they do not know or what they do not believe in. They need to learn about extensive reading and, then, experience for themselves, what extensive reading is like. They must be convinced that it is beneficial for both themselves (especially when the teachers are non-native speakers of English) and also for their students. This will help the teachers to inspire the students and to motivate them to start reading and to continue reading.

Conclusion

The extensive reading approach has helped my students become good readers. They no longer seem to think that reading is both difficult and unpleasant. They enjoy reading in English and they want to read more.