

A Study on the Ideal Amount of Extensive Reading for High Schools in Japan

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Abstract

This article reports a study that measured the ideal amount of extensive reading for Japanese high school students. A total of 33 students from a third-year science course English class conducted speed reading of twenty 300-word stories at the 500-word level, twice a week for a period of two semesters. A quantitative questionnaire was conducted using the price sensitivity meter method to measure the learners' ideal weekly reading amount. Results showed that the ideal amount of weekly extensive reading was 1200 words per week at the 500-word level. Considering the level of the students which was from A2 to B1 on the CEFR scale, this weekly reading amount is considerably less than regular extensive reading. This indicates that when starting extensive reading for high school science course students in Japan, it must be set at an I-1 level reader, before progressing gradually to higher levels. Further research is needed to measure the ideal reading amount of literature course students which may indicate different trends.

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Introduction

While there have been multiple studies that show the positive effects of Extensive Reading (ER) for high school students' English ability test scores in Japan (Aka 2019, author 2020, Fujimori 2007, Kanatani 1981), the author still had trouble convincing the majority of the students to read one book a week. In (author, 2020) 6 out of the 8 high school students stated that they liked reading in English more after doing ER, but some

people complained that the workload was too much or there wasn't enough good material. This is in line with Huang's paper, "Why don't they do it? A study on the implementation of extensive reading in Taiwan" (Huang 2015). The students in Taiwan, like the author's pilot test students in this study, felt the benefits of ER, but were always pressed for time because many felt that doing ER restricted their time to prepare for the university entrance exams.

Students' time outside of school was mostly devoted to doing assignments or attending cram school so they chose to do preferred activities in their spare time (Huang, 2015). Furthermore, similar to some comments made by some teachers in the Taiwan study, in the second year of the pilot test, one of the author's co-workers simply stated, "Please do not give too much extra work to third-year high school students" (teacher O). This put the author in a tough situation. The author knows that fluency development is necessary for his students to do well on the university entrance exams, but since ER is not a common practice in many

junior and senior high schools in Japan, he needed to find a way to get his students to read that is satisfactory for both students and teachers. Although it was more common for university students to be able to read one book per week, it is obviously too much for regular Japanese high school students. In this paper, the goal is to find the ideal amount of weekly reading for high school students in Japan. This amount of reading could be used as a starting point and the teacher could slowly increase the amount of reading after the students have become accustomed to reading extensively in English.

Literature Review

As mentioned previously, there has been much research regarding the positive effects of ER on English proficiency. Upon review of the literature regarding problems in implementing ER, some topics include genre, reading habits, being too busy, and difficulty with the material. Regarding genre, past research shows one of the factors that is important for ER is that there is a variety of English materials. Therefore, in the first year of the ER program, the author added *Oxford Classic Tales* to the library which already had books from level Starter to 5 of the *Oxford Bookworm* series. This came from the author's interest towards world literature and the fact that students in the second year of high school have a research trip to countries all over the world. Another reason came from "*Regarding student's interests towards ER*" by Fujiwara which showed that the most popular books among university students was, "a series of readers used in elementary school in the UK" (Fujiwara, 2016, p.58). Furthermore, Jacobs (2014) has provided a guide for students when choosing ER materials. These were some of the sample questions used by the author:

1. What types of books do you enjoy – fiction, nonfiction, comic books, encyclopedias, joke books? Look for that type of book.
2. What is a tv show, video game, or movie that you enjoy? Can you find books that are connected to them?

From the responses of the students, the author ordered over 30 graded readers from Pearson's Disney and Marvel series to make the total number of books to over 500 books.

Regarding reading habits in the L2, according to research by Takase (2007), she has shown that "parents actively influenced their daughters' reading habits" (Takase, 2007, p.10). However, this is something that an English teacher cannot change. According to the 2019 national library association survey, it was found that high school students in Japan only read 1.4 books a month and for junior high students, 4.7 books (School Library Association 2019). Furthermore the 2016 Ministry of education study on "Promoting Reading Among Children" showed that among high school students, the top reasons for not wanting to read were, "there are less opportunities to read at school and too busy with other activities." (MEXT 2016). As mentioned earlier, Huang (2015) showed that

students wanted to spend more time for preparing for the university entrance exam. This was also present in Nishino (2007) which followed two high school students doing extensive reading in high school. One of the participants, Fumi said, “that her experience with extensive reading improved her reading speed, but that she was afraid that her reading comprehension was not solid” (Nishino 2007, p.92). Nishino further comments that entrance exams may be one of the factors for Mako and Fumi to stop ER.

Regarding the amount of ER and level, Matsumura wrote that students read, “three pages an hour or one page per day and three pages per day during summer vacation” (for Japanese high school students) (Matsumura 1987 in Susser and Robb, 1990, p.165). If we factor that most students have six hours a week of English class (Communication English and English Expressions), they will have read eighteen pages per week. This amount may seem reasonable since many high school teachers are busy trying to finish the textbook and preparing students for university entrance exams. One group that has been pushing ER in Japan is the English Extensive Reading Research Society, SSS. Their motto is, “Start with Simple Stories” (Furukawa, 2021). Initially started by Sakai Kunihide, he suggested, “ER using picture books” in the late 1990’s (Furukawa, 2021). In connection with picture books, Takase (2009) suggested that students can also use leveled readers. Leveled readers as defined in this paper are books created for native speakers of English such as *Oxford Reading tree* or *I Can Read* by Harper Collins. The study showed, that “Contrary to

these expectations, however, the majority of high school and university students enjoy reading LR, because these picture books lower learners’ affective filter and encourage all the learners, even the students with a fear of English, to give reading a try.” (Takase, 2009, p.453).

This led to a gap in research in ER among Japanese high school students. What if we research the perceived ideal amount of reading in English among senior high school students? The significance of this study is that we are looking at the amount of extensive reading from the point of view of the learner. Using their responses, we can see how close or far it is from the actual reading amount that is necessary for better language acquisition? In the case of the students for the study, the target reading goal was 2000 words per week. This comes to the research questions which are:

RQ1. In the perception of the student, what is the ideal amount of weekly reading in English?
 RQ2. What are the feelings towards the reading amount necessary for L2 development?
 After finding the balance between the ideal amount of reading and what is necessary, teachers in Japanese high schools could use this as a starting point for ER. Once the students become avid readers, the amount of reading could be increased to the actual amount of reading necessary for developing better language competence. Using the results of a survey from a survey design that will be introduced later, the same questionnaire could be conducted in each country so that in each country or culture, the ER program could be tailored to prevent students from being demotivated in ER.

Method and Design

Participants

A quantitative survey was offered to N=33 students on a voluntary basis and after an explanation of the research goals and

implications, N=27 students consented to take part in the study. The students were third-year science course high school students that were being taught by the author.

Prior to the study, all of the students had done speed reading, twice a week using the 500-word level Speed Reading series created by Sonia Millet in the University of Wellington. They had finished 20 passages at the 500-word level and 10 passages at the 1000-word level.

When asked about their attitudes toward math, Japanese, and English classes, 70% of the students said that they like math. For Japanese and English, only 52% and 33% of the students said that they liked these classes. Therefore, one should note that the students in the survey have a negative attitude towards English.

Procedure

To answer RQ1, students were asked about their ideal amount of weekly reading based on Van Westendorp's Price Sensitivity Meter (Van Westendorp, 1997). This method is often used in market research to determine the pricing of products. The original questions are as follows:

1. At which price on this scale are you beginning to experience {test-product) as cheap?

2. At which price on this scale are you beginning to experience {test-product) as expensive?
3. At which price on this scale you are beginning to experience {test-product) as too expensive – so that you would never consider buying it yourself?
4. At which price on this scale you are beginning to experience {test-product) as too cheap – so that you say “at this price the quality cannot be good?”

For the purpose of the research, the questions were modified into,

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**?

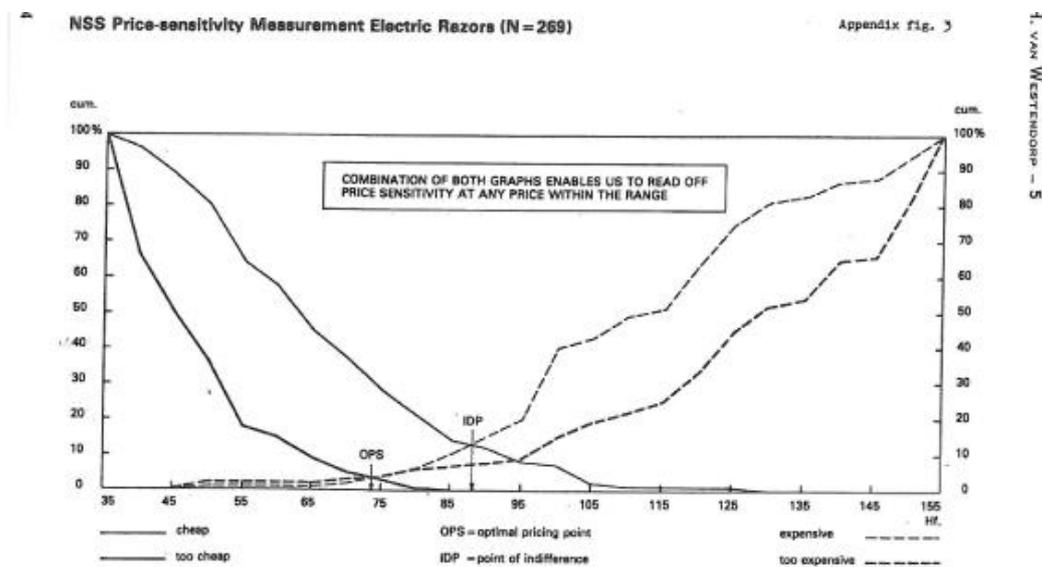


Figure 1 from (Van Westendorp, 1976)

The students' answers were plotted on a graph and the ideal amount of weekly reading was calculated where there was the same number of people who thought that the amount of weekly reason was **too much that they wouldn't want to do it** and **so little that it would have little effect**. (Where the lines intersect on the graph) Data, in this case, is found at the crossing point as per figure 1. Furthermore, the acceptable weekly reading range was calculated by finding the marginal low reading point (Where **so little that it would have little effect** and **a lot** intersect) and the marginal high reading point (Where **a lot** and **too much that you wouldn't want to do it** intersect).

Instead of directly asking for the amount of reading that each student prefers, this method of questioning was chosen because the PSM approach was originally created to measure the relationship between price and the value of a product. In the case

of extensive reading, to the regular high school student, this activity is something that is not necessary. In many regular classes, students only read 2-3 pages per class with an explanation of the grammar. Therefore, if we set the "value" as "reading to improve English", we can measure how much the student is willing to read in order to improve his or her English.

To answer RQ2, a 5-point Likert scale question was asked to see if students found that the required amount of weekly reading was too much or too little. The third-year science course high school students for the study were mostly at the CEFR A2-B1 level. The average Oxford classic tales word count at this level was between 1550-2650 (OupJapan, 2020). Therefore, the question was set as follows:

Q.10 In order to improve your English, you should read **2000** words a week in English.. How do you feel about this?

It is no problem.	It is not too much of a problem.	I can't say either.	It is a little difficult.	It is too difficult.
5	4	3	2	1

Top and bottom box scores were compared.

Results and Discussions

Research Question #1

Figure 2 shows that the ideal amount of reading for Japanese third-year science students is a little more than 1000 words a week and a little less than 1400 words a week. The optimum amount of reading was found to be 1200 words. Therefore, when implementing an ER program, it may be best to start by reading 1000 words a week. Also, these findings indicate that the optimum amount of reading is roughly 800 words a week less than their average number of words needed to improve

English using ER for the level of the students in this study. As a result, when implementing extensive reading, the teacher should not ask his or her students to read more than this amount. This came out to be four, 300-word speed reading articles per week. Looking for possible reasons for this low number, in a conversation with the author, one student indicated that he knew that he needs to read more in order to pass the university entrance exams, but his interests were in science and math, and he wanted to spend more time solving math

problems. Furthermore, when looking at the open-ended questions regarding how to improve the ER program, a student in the survey stated that she wanted to read shorter passages several times. This may come from the fact that in junior high school, it is common for students to memorize short 50-70 words passages and recite them in class. Related to what students are used to in an English class, several students indicated that they wanted to read less and do more intensive reading and receive explanations

of grammar points. These students felt that they did not learn if enough time was not spent on translating each sentence into Japanese. This is not surprising as many high school English classes in Japan still focus on intensive reading. Although the goals of speed reading were explained at the start of the class, a difference in students' expectations, could have negatively affected the amount of ideal reading in this study.

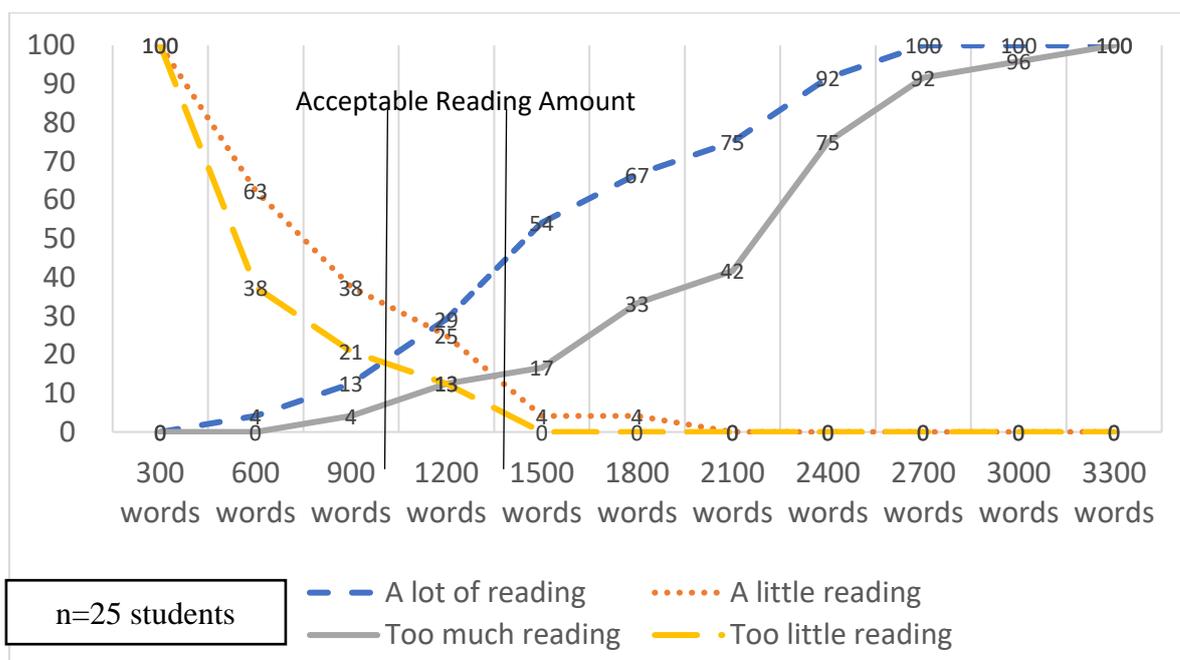


Figure 2: Ideal Reading Amount

Research Question #2

Figure 3 illustrates that 44% of the students felt that reading 2000 words a week was “No problem or not too much of a problem”. If we look at the bottom 2 box scores, for 33% of the students, reading 2000 words a week is “too much or slightly too much”. This shows that for 33% of the science course students, they need to work up to the amount of reading needed for their level of English. One possible approach to introducing extensive reading in this situation would be to tell the students that

in order to improve their English skills, they need to read at least 2000 words a week. Then the instructor would say, “Let’s start at reading 1000 words a week and aim for 2000, by the end of the first semester. This gradual increase would have less opposition among students, and by the end of the semester, students will be faster readers, so reading 2000 words a week would not be a burden. It is similar to the SSS principle of *start with simple stories* that was mentioned earlier. They won’t feel

that “it is taking time away from preparing for my university entrance exams”.

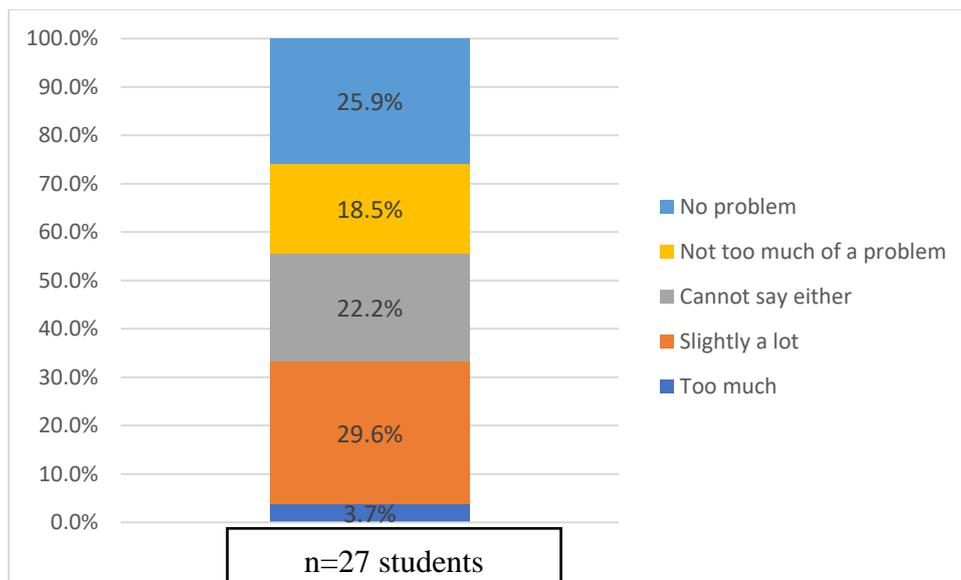


Figure 3: Feeling Towards Reading 2000 Words Per Week

Conclusion

The results of this study show that when implementing ER in Japan, we cannot set the volume of reading according to their actual English ability. The reading amount should be set below the I -1 level and students need to build up their weekly reading amount until they can comfortably read the volume of words each week that is appropriate to their level. By finding the ideal reading amount for students at the school, the instructor could use this as a starting point for future classes. Since students feel less pressure to read, students are more likely to develop intrinsic motivation to read in English. Students will receive the benefits of ER such as the training of sight vocabulary, vocabulary growth, and reading speed and this will help students in their university entrance exam preparation. They would less likely feel that they are wasting valuable class time on ER, if students develop their reading skills at an earlier stage in their English learning. The development of reading comprehension skills might also transfer towards listening

comprehension skills which is also being tested in the more recent entrance exams (Fujimori, 2007).

Also, one should note that this study was done with science course students in a high school with a deviation of 65, where 50 is the mean level of a regular high school. Therefore, it is not representative of the population of regular Japanese high school students. Further research is needed to see the ideal weekly reading amount for mid-level high schools, literature course students, and also university prep class (tokushinsenbatsu) students. It is most likely that the higher-level students are more likely to want to do ER. One example came from Asahi News. Kashiwagi reported that students at NishiNarutoGakuen high school have successfully launched an ER program (Kashiwagi, 2021). This school has a deviation of 72-76 which is much higher than the school where the study took place. Kaisei Academy, which was introduced as having a successful ER program in *Extensive Reading*

is another example of a school with a high deviation of 78.

Lastly, the results of RQ2 further showed that for science course high school students in Japan, there is a gap between the amount of reading needed to do ER and the student's level. For further studies, it would be interesting to see the reaction of literature course students towards the same study. The author is also experimenting with a mini version of extensive reading for regular junior high school students. If the ideal reading amount can be measured among junior high school students, ER could be implemented at an earlier stage in regular junior high schools throughout Japan. Implementation of an ER program at an earlier stage can possibly lead to even better results in students' English language development.

Students in Japan have a similar situation as students in Taiwan based on Huang's (2015) study. This situation might also be prevalent in other countries that have a strong focus on passing high-stakes university entrance exams. Changing the English curriculum of a school or country in this type of situation is less likely and is a difficult daunting task. The survey design of this study can help find the middle ground by asking the opinion of learners themselves. English language learners should have the opportunity to obtain the benefits of an ER program regardless of their location or academic environment. It is the authors hope that the results of this study will be a catalyst for similar research in other schools and countries so that each school or country can tailor how they implement ER in their school or country.

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Appendix: Questionnaire

Grade	1	2	3
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A Survey Regarding Speed and Extensive Reading



1. What is your gender?

Male	1
Female	2

2. What is your feeling toward the below subjects?

	Like it	Somewhat like it	Cannot say either	Somewhat dislike it	Dislike it
Japanese	5	4	3	2	1
Math	5	4	3	2	1
English	5	4	3	2	1

3. What is your feeling towards reading in these languages?

	Like it.	Somewhat like it	Cannot say either	Somewhat dislike it	Dislike it
Japanese	5	4	3	2	1
English	5	4	3	2	1

The following questions are regarding speed and extensive reading.

4. What is your feeling towards reading in English?

	Like it now	Somewhat like it now	Hasn't changed	Somewhat dislike it now	Dislike it a lot
	5	4	3	2	1

5. How has your English ability changed after doing speed and extensive reading?

	Improved a lot	Somewhat improved	Cannot say either	Didn't improve much	Didn't improve at all
vocabulary	5	4	3	2	1
reading	5	4	3	2	1
writing	5	4	3	2	1

The following question is regarding the weekly reading amount.

1. Peach Boy
<p>A long time ago in Japan, an old man and an old woman lived in a little house by a river. They were happy except for one thing. They didn't have any children.</p> <p>One day the old man said, "I'm going to cut down a tree for the fire". The old woman said, "I'm going to the river to wash the clothes".</p> <p>While the old woman was washing the clothes, she saw a big peach coming down the river. The old woman thought the peach would be very good to eat so she caught it and took it home. When the old people cut the peach open, a little boy jumped out of the middle.</p> <p>They were happy and they called him Peach Boy. Peach Boy was a happy child and the family lived together for many years. One day the old woman said, "Our boy is now a man". Some bad people lived a long way from the little town. Every year, they came and took all the money from the people. The people were very scared of them.</p> <p>Peach Boy thought to himself, "I'm going to kill the bad people". He left home with some food his mother made for him. On the way he saw a dog. The dog said, give me some food and I'll help you kill the bad people. So he did. Next he saw a monkey and the same thing happened. Then they saw a bird. Peach Boy gave the bird some food and they all started on their way to find the bad people.</p> <p>When they got there, the bad people fought hard, but the four friends were very smart and in the end, they killed them all. The friends took all the money back to the people and everyone was happy. (300 words)</p>

各当てはまるものに○をつけてください。

6. From how many words or stories do you think that weekly reading is too much ?	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 ?
300 words=1 story	300 words=1 story	300 words=1 story	300 words=1 story
600 words=2 stories	600 words=2 stories	600 words=2 stories	600 words=2 stories
900 words=3 stories	900 words=3 stories	900 words=3 stories	900 words=3 stories
1200 words=4 stories	1200 words=4 stories	1200 words=4 stories	1200 words=4 stories
1500 words=5 stories	1500 words=5 stories	1500 words=5 stories	1500 words=5 stories
1800 words=6 stories	1800 words=6 stories	1800 words=6 stories	1800 words=6 stories
2100 words=7 stories	2100 words=7 stories	2100 words=7 stories	2100 words=7 stories
2400 words=8 stories	2400 words=8 stories	2400 words=8 stories	2400 words=8 stories
2700 words=9 stories	2700 words=9 stories	2700 words=9 stories	2700 words=9 stories
3000 words=10 stories	3000 words=10 stories	3000 words=10 stories	3000 words=10 stories
3300 words=11 stories	3300 words=11 stories	3300 words=11 stories	3300 words=11 stories

10. In order to improve your English, you should read **2000** words a week in English. How do you feel about this?

It is no problem.	It is not too much of a problem.	I can't say either.	It is a little difficult.	It is too difficult.
5	4	3	2	1

11. For people that did not enjoy speed and extensive reading, please state your reasons.

12. Please state your opinion towards improving the speed and extensive reading activity.

Thank you for participating in the survey!