

研究論文

Semi-autonomous Language Learning Using a Hybrid Extensive Reading Model

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Abstract

After reviewing the progress made over the first 3 years of effort, the author briefly explains the use of both paper and digital reading material used for an English language program in the Faculty of Liberal Arts at Tezukayama Gakuin University. Positive trends in student “buy-in” as well as overall performance are identified, whilst issues with implementation and compliance amongst department colleagues are identified as possible barriers to successful program execution, and solutions to these are suggested in the conclusion. In addition, data on student preference of book format—digital or paper-based—are presented which provide some argument for the inclusion of both formats in an ER program, if such resources are available.

Keywords: extensive reading, learner autonomy, motivation, ER program design

Extensive Reading (ER) has been widely accepted by language educators as an effective and efficient approach to second or additional language acquisition (see Nation and Waring, 2020 for a comprehensive overview of the current state of the field). Here at Tezukayama Gakuin University (TGU), faculty members—both past and present—have made great efforts at assemble a large number of English language reading material to support this approach and provide sufficient material to students for successful participation in ER activities over the past many years. In 2019 the author of this paper joined the Tezukayama faculty and inherited a fledgling ER program and two library collections of graded readers in a general state of neglect. This paper reports on the challenges faced and progress made in the first three years of an ongoing effort to firmly establish ER as a vital component of our language education program.

In the beginning

In the autumn of 2019, the author joined the Career English Department at the Sayama campus of TGU and was tasked with developing a department-wide ER program for all freshmen and sophomore

students. Because of the immediacy of the situation, it was decided that all program students in the target years would be provided with subscriptions to a digital library and learner management system the author was familiar with, Xreading VL (www.xreading.com). While both the Sayama and Izumigaoka campus libraries contained collections of graded readers (the reading material generally used for ER programs), the lack of both organization and familiarity were deciding factors in choosing to administer our ER program via a strictly digital format.

As shown in Figure 1, the 72 students engaged in the 2019 fall semester ER program managed to read an average of just 14,479 words over the 15-week term. Approximately one third of these students were enrolled in classes led by the author, while the remaining students were under the direction of department colleagues. This average reading volume can best be described as paltry, given the fact that it is widely understood amongst ER practitioners that learners need to reach and exceed a threshold of 300,000 words (Nishizawa et al, 2010) in order to realize a measurable increase in ability in terms of standardized tests of English language proficiency such as The Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC). Further analysis of student reading data revealed a great disparity between the students taught directly by the author (average of 18,671 words) and students taught by colleagues (12,109 words). While neither average is impressive, the disparity suggests the possibility of some differences in teaching style and/or student “buy-in.” Discussion later in this paper will address these in more detail.

The pandemic challenge

As everyone is aware, the spring of 2020 was fraught with challenges across the world, and university administrators and instructors everywhere were forced to completely change their educational formats and provide remote lessons to students—many for the first time in their careers. Prior to the pandemic it was decided to feature ER as a significant component of the Career English program, and as part of the new Global English major program launched in 2020 under the newly formed Faculty of Liberal Arts. We were very fortunate to have required all students enrolled in our program to purchase a subscription to Xreading, and were able to make the switch to online teaching with no changes required to the planned reading program.

2020 was also the final year of TGU’s “One Campus” campaign to amalgamate our two campuses on the Izumigaoka site. As part of this amalgamation, the library collections of the 2 campuses were to be severely culled and brought under one roof. The author was tasked with managing the amalgamation of the two English Extensive Reading Library (EERL) collections. One might wonder about the need for paper-based readers at a time when the school’s reading program was entirely digital,

but based on experience with a prior ER program, I envisioned a future reading program that would offer students the freedom to choose between (or choose both) digital and paper-based books.

A careful analysis of the two collections revealed a number of interesting facts. Most significantly, a severe lack of lower-level reading material was identified. As the ER program at TGU progresses, this lack will be the target of future expenditures for the EERL. As it stood in 2020, there were 9,414 books in the Sayama EERL collection and a further 2,412 books in the Izumi collection. Many of the titles dated back as far as the 1980s when graded readers were enjoying their first wave of success. It was decided that all books included in the new collection must appear on the Mreader quiz database (www.mreader.org) which is also included in the expanded features of the Xreading platform. After careful cross-checking and analysis, of the 11,826 books on hand, 5,767 were identified as useful to our program, with 833 titles having two copies or more (some as many as 20 or more), while 530 titles had just a single copy. Making sense of the dozens of publishers, and hundreds of series and levels was a complex task, but in the end, we decided to keep no more than four copies of any one title, so we were left with a total of 3,494 books comprising of 1,362 titles in the new EERL collection—our new beginning.

Looking Backwards, Moving Forward

As a starting point for analysis, I looked at the data amassed over the six semesters this program has been running under my guidance. Figure 1 represents the first, third, and fifth semesters of the program, while Figure 2 the second, fourth, and sixth semesters.

One can clearly see that, as the program has developed over the past 3 years, student performance in terms of reading volume has increased. Naturally, as students become more proficient they are able to read more, thus I have isolated first semester data from second. Each first semester

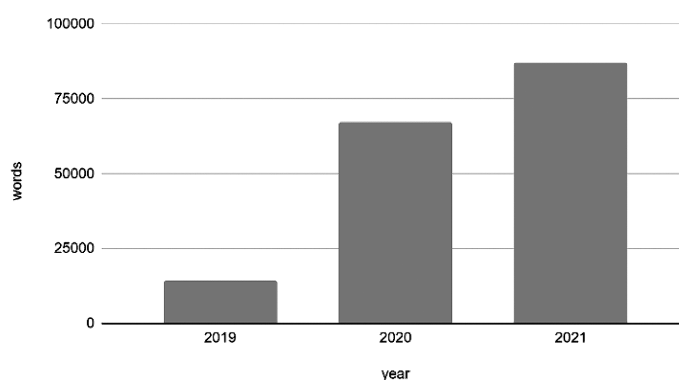


Figure 1 Semester 2 Average Reading Volume

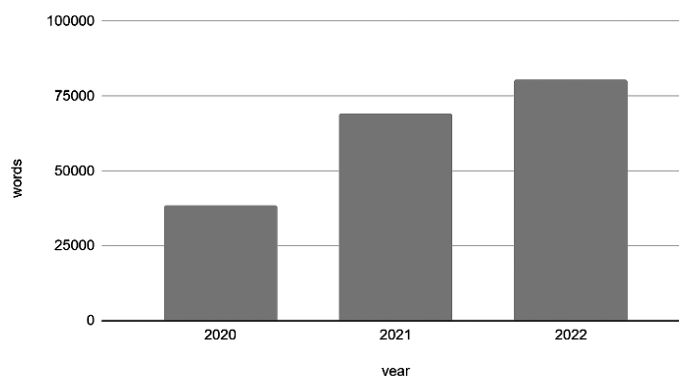


Figure 2 Semester 1 Average Reading Volume

includes freshmen completely new to ER, so their performance in their first semester is always lower than in the second.

Beginning in the autumn of 2021 (semester 2), when face-to-face classes resumed at TGU, freshmen were first introduced to the new EERL collection in our new library as a trial for a new hybrid style of ER in which students were free to choose whichever book format was best suited for each individual. And in the spring of 2022, new freshmen were also introduced to the paper books in the EERL as part of their course orientation. However, orientations were conducted by individual instructors rather than ensemble, thus creating disparities that were in need of more detailed analysis.

While the data presented in Figures 1 and 2 might suggest a positive trend in the ER program overall, a deeper analysis was needed to confirm the actual situation. Therefore, in July 2022 I conducted a short student survey in Japanese via a Google Form in order to better understand their reading practices and preferences.

As Figure 3 illustrates, of the 30 respondents, 14 were enrolled in the sophomore course

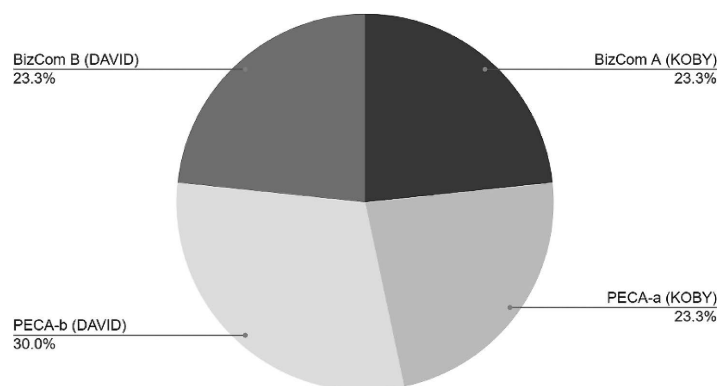


Figure 3 Respondent Class Distribution (n=30)

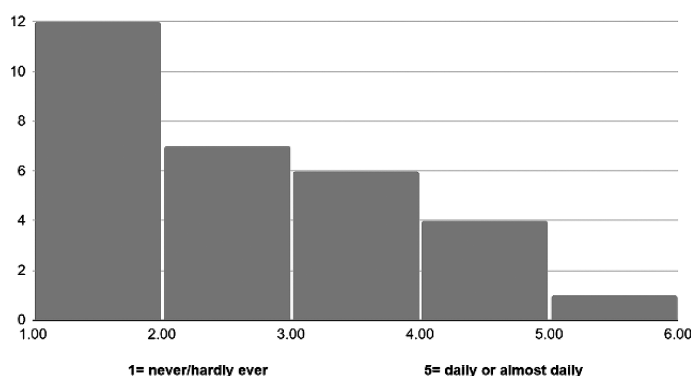


Figure 4 Reading Frequency in Japanese

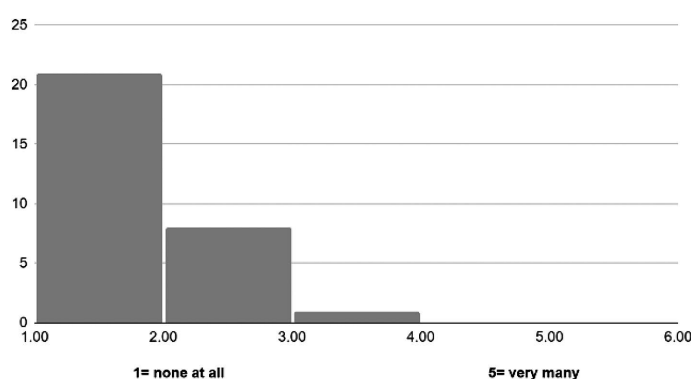


Figure 5 Number of English Books Read Prior to University

(Business communication) while 16 were in the freshmen course (PECA), and of these 14 were taught by Mr. Koby while 16 were taught by Mr. Burrows (David). The response rate for enrolled students was 100%, thus we have a complete representation of the population.

In order to understand a bit of the reading background of respondents they were asked how much reading they typically do in their native language (Figure 4) and how much exposure they have had to English language books prior to enrolling in TGU (Figure 5). 5-point Likert scales were employed to collect data for Figures 4 through 7. The data above reveal that our students are not avid readers in Japanese and have had very little exposure to reading in English before commencing their post secondary studies at TGU.

Respondents were then asked about their level of overall enjoyment of engaging in ER (Figure 6). While 10 of the 30 respondents indicated a negative impression of reading in English, it is encouraging that 20 of them offered a neutral to positive impression. Given the lack of reading engagement in Japanese, I interpret this particular finding in a positive light.

Finally, respondents were queried about their preference of book format (Figure 7). At first

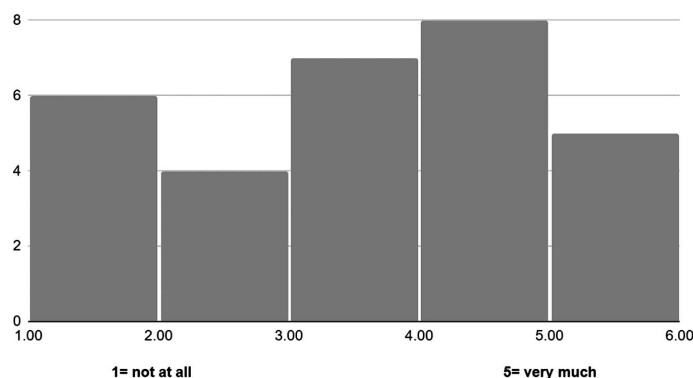


Figure 6 Level of reading enjoyment

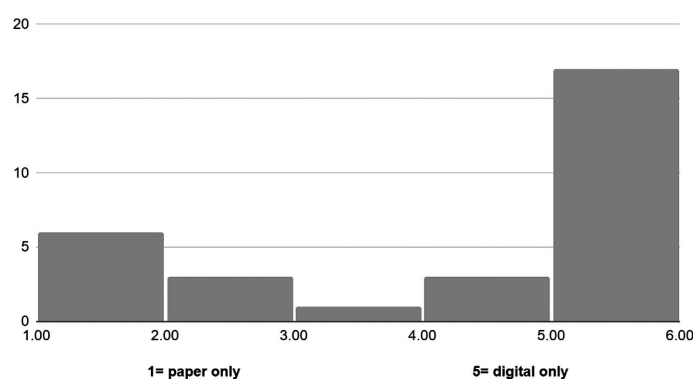


Figure 7 Book Format Preference

glance, these results suggest first that students might generally prefer reading digital material over paper based books. This was a surprising result as it was contrary to both my past experience and my discussions with current students.

Further analysis of the data, dividing the respondents by instructor (Figures 8 and 9), reveals a great disparity in the responses from the two groups. While Mr. Koby's students indicated nearly an even split in preferences, Mr. Burrows' (David) students indicated an overwhelming preference for e-books.

After looking into the data stored in Xreading, an explanation of this disparity became evident. As Figure 10 reveals, Mr. Burrows' students did not register a single paper book on their 2022 Semester 1 reading records. Interestingly, three of Mr. Burrows' students indicated a preference for paper books despite never using them for this class. This may be because these students misinterpreted the question and indicated a general preference for paper rather than a specific preference for ER material.

Finally, more careful analysis of Mr. Koby's students' data (Figure 11) shows a rather stark difference between freshmen and sophomore book format selection. While students in PECA recorded e-

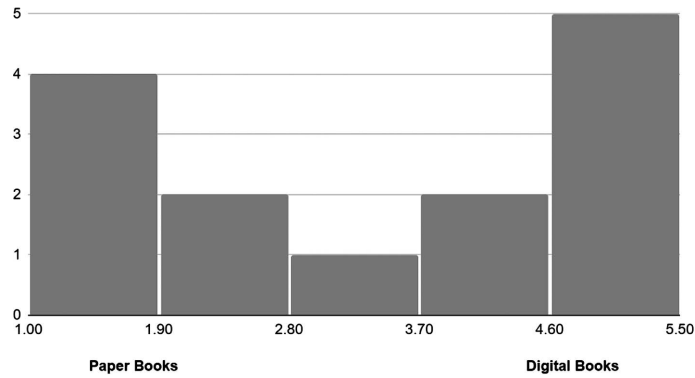


Figure 8 Book Format Preference (Koby)

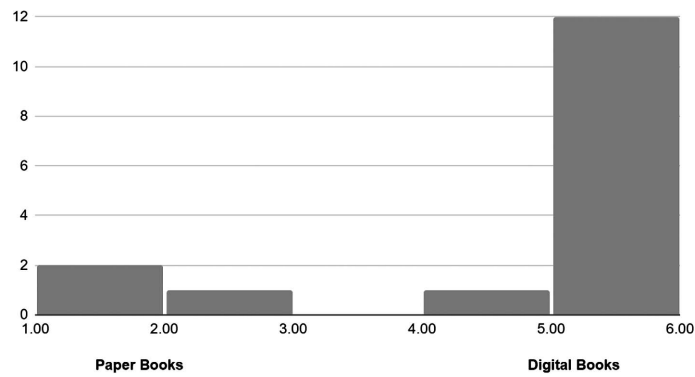


Figure 9 Book Format Preference (David)

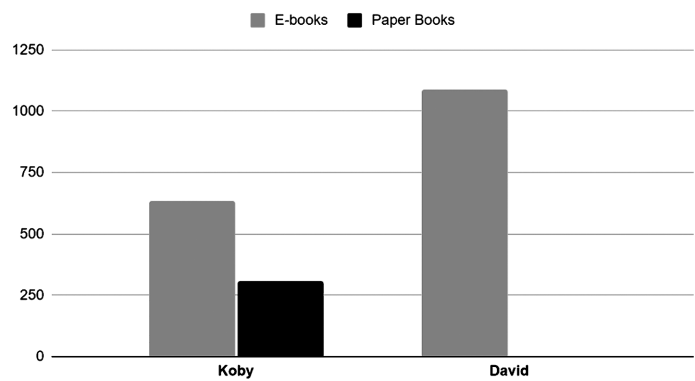


Figure 10 2022 Semester 1 E-books and Paper Books Read

books at a rate nearly five times higher than paper books, their seniors in the Business Communication class read paper books at a slightly higher rate than digital material. This result may be explained by the lack, mentioned above, of lower-level reading material within the library's EERL.

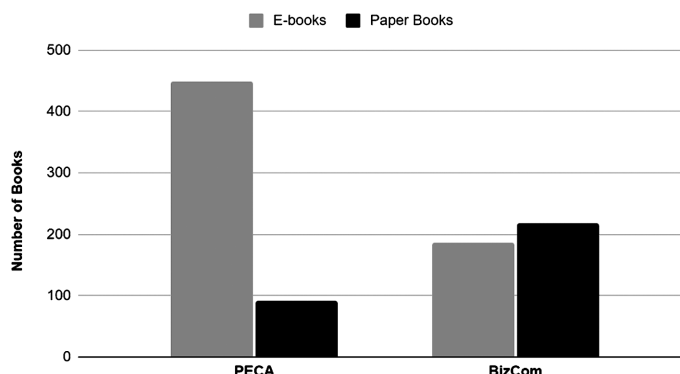


Figure 11 Koby's Students' 2022 Semester 1 Format Choices

Discussion

An overall evaluation of TGU's ER program might suggest a positive trend, with student reading volume increasing year-on-year, student enjoyment of reading somewhat high, and access to both a digital and tertiary library collection easing the reluctance of at least some of the program's participants. It is abundantly clear that more consistent program orientation is necessary in order to ensure that all participating students are provided with the information and skills necessary to make use of all the resources available to them.

Future plans for the program include augmenting the EERL collection with much more lower-level material to read, and ensuring that all students are able to make use of the resources both online and on campus. Students will be provided with consistent orientation to the program in order to ensure consistent information is disseminated across the program. Ideally, once the program is further refined within the Global English stream of the Liberal Arts Faculty, participation in the program may be expanded to include all students in Liberal Arts, or perhaps even university-wide in an effort to promote literacy and language acquisition amongst our students overall.

References

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