

How Practical Extensive Reading Experiences Changed the Perceptions of L2 Japanese Teachers

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Abstract

This study examines how the perceptions that twelve teachers of Japanese as a second language (L2) had of extensive reading (ER) changed following 10 months of online English ER. Interviews provided much of the study data, supported by pre-project and post-project questionnaires. The participants' pre-project and post-project vocabulary sizes and reading rates were measured to examine whether changes in their perceptions coincided with their linguistic change. The participants' usage of ER led to their discovering the power of ER in overcoming psychological barriers toward L2 reading, the difficulty of routinizing reading, the importance of facilitators' support, and the benefits of occasional dictionary use. While their reading rate gains corresponded with their unchanged high rating of ER's benefits for reading skills, their vocabulary growth did not correspond with their decreased rating of ER's benefits on vocabulary development. Furthermore, the participants agreed that teachers are learners' role models more after the project.

Keywords: Extensive Reading, L2 teachers' perceptions, L2 teachers as language learners, teacher learning, L2 reading facilitation, Xreading reading text platform, dictionary use, teachers as learning role models

Extensive Reading (ER) has been vigorously researched over the past four decades (Day & Bamford, 1998; Grabe, 2009; Nation & Waring, 2020). However, the foci of ER research have been somewhat fragmented, with many studies investigating particular learner groups with similar research themes (Nation & Waring, 2020). This overlap means many ER studies have used convenient samples consisting of tertiary institution students who tend to be at the elementary or intermediate level. They have also often been conducted in Asia and have primarily focused on investigating ER's effects on learners' L2 reading ability and motivation. The fragmented nature of ER research thus far has meant we cannot fully understand its benefits (Nation & Waring, 2020), as teachers' perceptions have not been well documented. The limited number of studies that have examined this under-researched theme (Arai, 2019; Huang, 2015;

Macalister, 2010a) have had limitations such as reliance on a single data collection method (i.e., questionnaires, short interviews), and small sample sizes. None of these studies looked into whether teachers' perceptions of ER were affected by experiencing it themselves, with the exception of Cho's (2012) study in which the participants undertook self-selected reading for two weeks. The aim of the current study is to fill this gap, with its primary aim being to investigate the effects of actual experiences of ER on twelve L2 Japanese teachers' perceptions of ER through individual interviews and pre- and post-project questionnaire surveys. Pre- and post-project vocabulary sizes and reading rates were also measured in order to investigate whether any changes in perceptions coincided with linguistic changes. While many L2 Japanese teachers (including the current participants) have neither studied theories nor received training specific to reading instruction, they are exposed to the ER principles put forward by NPO Tagengo Tadoku or TADOKU Supporters¹ (<https://tadoku.org/>) that have been influential in the L2 Japanese reading pedagogy. Therefore, engaging in ER themselves can be significant for the participants as it is hypothesized that such individual, practical experiences of ER can enable teachers to examine the influential ER discourse in their field, to acquire their own understanding of ER, and to personally encounter obstacles that learners may struggle with. Additionally, as the participants were post-tertiary adult advanced learners of English, the study's results add to the base of knowledge about the benefits of ER for under-researched learner populations. The study also makes a contribution to the newer area of online ER research, as the participants engaged in ER on Xreading, an online ER website (<https://xreading.com/>).

Literature Review

ER Research in the L2 Reading Pedagogy

In 1986, Ray Williams (Williams, 1986) asserted that “learners learn to read by reading: there is no other way” (p. 42) and proposed that “the primary activity of a reading lesson should be learners reading texts” (p. 42). This claim has been supported by many reading scholars (e.g., Day & Bamford, 1998; Grabe, 2009; Grabe & Stoller, 2019; Nation & Waring, 2020). Nation and Waring (2020) define ER as learners reading a lot of texts at the right level, with comprehension, independently and silently. The two scholars also advised that other activities should not reduce learners' actual reading time in ER programs. In alignment with William's suggestions, ER has been increasingly employed as an effective L2 reading instructional approach in various countries. The effects of ER have been widely documented both in terms of L2 reading ability, and affective dimensions. Previous research has reported on ER's effects on areas such as vocabulary development (Boutorwick et al., 2019; Liu & Zhang, 2018; Webb & Chang, 2015), reading fluency (Beglar et al., 2012; Iwahori, 2008; McLean & Rouault, 2017), comprehension (Bell, 2001; Robb & Kano, 2013), grammar knowledge (Aka, 2019; He, 2014; Ro & Kim, 2022; Tode & Otsuki, 2019), and writing skills (Mermelstein, 2015; Park, 2016; Sakurai, 2017). Two meta-analysis studies (Jeon & Day, 2016; Nakanishi, 2015) have also provided small-to-medium effect sizes to support ER's benefits ($d = 0.57$ and $d = 0.46$ for experimental-control group contrast, and $d = 0.79$ and $d = 0.71$ for pre-post contrast, respectively). Striking benefits of ER have been reported regarding L2 learners' affective dimensions. Numerous studies have suggested that ER beneficially affects learners' motivation and attitudes towards L2 reading (Birketveit et al., 2018; Leather & Uden, 2021; Mikami, 2017; Puripunyanich, 2021; Ro, 2013, 2018; Takase, 2009). Furthermore, due to learners selecting their own reading materials and engaging in reading individually, ER increases learner autonomy (Judge, 2011; Krulatz & Duggan, 2018; Lee & Ro, 2020).

Although there have only been a limited number of relevant studies conducted so far, those that have been done have highlighted the facilitative factors of newer online ER (Bui & Macalister, 2021; Puripunyanich, 2021; Sun, 2021; Zhou & Day, 2021). The reported findings thus far include increased reading rates, enhanced L2 reading motivation, and the benefits of easy access to digital comprehensible materials.

A Lack of Studies Regarding Teacher Perceptions Toward ER

While ER research has been actively conducted in relation to its effects on learners' L2 reading ability and affective dimensions as seen above, there is a paucity of studies regarding how teachers perceive ER. This is a crucial void, as teachers' perceptions are a determining factor when it comes to classroom practice. Regarding teachers' perceptions of general L2 reading instruction, there have been some empirical studies conducted. As part of investigating eight Lithuanian university teachers' beliefs, Kuzborska (2011) found that while the teachers' beliefs and practices were congruent, their skills-based approach did not align with the metacognitive approach supported by the research norms. In contrast, Farrell & Lim (2005) reported that according to their findings, teachers' beliefs and practices had only a limited congruence. In the L2 Japanese reading pedagogy, 22 teachers were interviewed and 60 teachers completed questionnaires in Tabata-Sandom's (2020) study that examined the participants' broader understanding of the role of reading instruction. The study revealed that the participants were apprehensive about reading instruction due to contextual factors such as a lack of formal teacher education and the time shortage caused by grammar-dominant curricula. Only a limited number of studies have investigated teachers' perceptions specifically related to ER. Macalister (2010a) telephone interviewed 36 university preparation course teachers in New Zealand in order to investigate their attitudes towards ER and their practices. While the teachers' holding favorable beliefs toward ER was a positive finding, he also found that they were not familiar with ER research and ER was not widely included in their practices due to contextual factors such as resource shortages and insufficient awareness among administrators. Huang (2015) also interviewed six English teachers in Taiwan individually. The study found that the interviewed teachers viewed ER as a good way to promote reading habits and English proficiency, but obstacles such as students' original reluctance to read and busy school curricula made the teachers think it inefficient to implement ER in their curricula. Arai (2019) investigated 34 trainee teachers' perceived ER definitions, benefits, and challenges via a questionnaire survey. He found that his participants held some misconceptions about ER and also had concerns about its implementation. Unlike in these studies, Cho (2012) reported that the 46 participating teachers experienced perceptual and attitudinal changes as a direct result of their two-week, self-selected reading experiences. These were all Korean L2 English teachers who were not dedicated pleasure readers in English originally, and who ultimately showed a strong interest in the books they read. When the study was completed, they stated that they would implement self-selected reading as part of their instruction. In the treatment, the teachers were also given information about reading based on current theory and research. Cho (2012) claimed that "potential adult readers of a second language profit from both the knowledge about reading as well as actual pleasurable reading experience" (p. 3).

The current study follows the trajectory of Cho (2012), but the participants engaged in ER for a longer period and did so online, i.e., 10 months on Xreading. Using mixed methods, the study delved into the changes in the participants' perceptions toward ER caused by their actual experiences. Additionally, this study adds findings to both previously under-researched areas and the newer online ER research area, looking at how the participants who were advanced adult L2

English learners benefited from online ER using Xreading. With all this context in mind, this study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1. What did the participants experience and discover during the 10-month online ER project? And how did their experiences and discoveries affect their perceptions of ER?

RQ2. How did the changes in their perceptions of ER and their linguistic changes interact?

Method

The Motivations of this Study and of its Participants

This study was inspired by the first author's previous project, which was conducted one year earlier (Tabata-Sandom, 2023). Four participants in this earlier study were L2 Japanese teachers and each of them gained valuable insights as a result of participating. One came to understand the value of having ER integrated into a curriculum, even though actual reading activities are individual acts. She recognized that a supportive ER community was crucial to learners continuing to read individually. Another of the four participants realized that learners reading very little might in fact still be enjoying ER equally to those who read large amounts. She herself was unable to find a lot of time to conduct ER due to her many work and family commitments; however, she commented that she thoroughly enjoyed Xreading and regretted that she had overlooked a possible love of reading in learners whose reading amounts were relatively small. She said that she would try to remember that she should not base her judgments solely on these kinds of metrics (i.e., reading amounts). The first author found these discoveries invaluable and decided she would like to further investigate the impact of actual experiences of ER on teachers' perceptions, ultimately deciding to focus solely on L2 Japanese teachers. The present study was carried out very similarly to the previous study based on the participants' positive responses to the previous project.

With this background in mind, the authors of this project recruited participants through Facebook groups made up of L2 Japanese teachers. Twelve candidates contacted the first author and they agreed to participate after being given detailed information about the project. They were all female teachers of Japanese whose L1 was Japanese. Initially, two were living in America, one in Russia, and the rest in Japan. Early on in the project, one of the two living in America and the one living in Russia returned to Japan. All the participants engaged in online ER using Xreading for 10 months. The participants will be referred to as P followed by their individual numbers in the following sections. Table 1 provides their background profiles and demonstrates that none of the participants had had any formal study or training specifically related to L2 reading instruction. This lack of theoretical grounding in ER is a phenomenon that has previously been reported by Macalister (2010a), Arai (2019), and Tabata-Sandom (2020). The average pre-project vocabulary size was 6,367 word families (hereafter, WF), categorizing the participants as upper-intermediate to advanced L2 learners within Uden et al. (2014)'s categorization². The average of the participants' pre-project reading rates was 91 standard words per minute (hereafter, SWPM, see Kramer & McLean, 2019), which is rather slow, especially when compared to Tran's (2011) Vietnamese students, whose reading rates were around 150 words per minute. The participants all commented that they lacked confidence in L2 English reading, even those who were living in America. Except for P2, they were not able to say they liked reading in English, and P1's metaphor to describe it, "an ascetic practice," was evocative of the group's shared feelings toward L2 reading before the project. Many participants highlighted difficulties in reading

unsimplified texts (including academic articles) and bad memories of their Japanese entrance-examination-oriented English instruction as sources of these adverse feelings. The participants could be described in the same way as those in Cho's (2012) study: "[R]eluctant readers who were nevertheless eager to improve their English" (p. 2).

Table 1. *Participants' Background Variables*

Participant	Country of residence	Formal training /study for L2 reading instruction	Teaching context	Experience of employing ER	Pre-project vocabulary size	Pre-project reading rate
P1	Japan	None	high school, language school	yes (high school)	8100	96
P2	Japan (lived in an English-speaking country)		private lesson	none	6700	103
P3	Japan		high school, language school	yes (high school)	3300	75
P4	Japan (lived in an English-speaking country)		university	yes (university)	5500	124
P5	Japan		language school, private lesson	none	5100	81
P6	Japan		volunteer	none	6200	74
P7	Japan		university, language school	none	5700	70
P8	Japan		university	none	5800	72
P9	Japan		language school, university	yes (university)	5600	61
P10	U.S.		high school	only once as a supplementary online module	10000	146

Participant	Country of residence	Formal training /study for L2 reading instruction	Teaching context	Experience of employing ER	Pre-project vocabulary size	Pre-project reading rate
P11	U.S. (came back to Japan in the early stages of the project)		primary school to secondary school	none	8000	120
P12	Russia (came back to Japan in the early stages of the project)		university, primary-secondary school	yes (university)	6400	87

Interviews

Four types of interviews were conducted in Japanese online via Microsoft Teams: pre-project interviews, two during-project interviews, and post-project interviews. The interviews were recorded, later transcribed verbatim, and then sent to the participants for checking. The two researchers discussed the questions they would ask prior to each interview stage (see Appendix A for all the interview questions). During the pre-project interviews, the researchers asked questions pertaining to the participants' L2 English reading, their reading instruction, and the study's aim, as well as research norms (e.g., "What effects do you think ER has?" a question based on Macalister's [2010a, p. 72] reflection). The questions that were asked during the second, third, and post-project interviews took into consideration the participants' previous ER habits as described in the earlier interviews. Some questions (e.g., "Have there been changes in your ER habits?"; "What is a motivation for you to keep reading") were repeatedly asked in order to see whether there were changes in their perceptions and ER experiences. During the post-project interviews, questions that tapped into the participants' online ER experiences and delved into changes in their perceptions toward ER were asked (e.g., "Did the degree to which you like reading in English change?"; "What effects do you think ER has? Are they different from your expectations?").

Pre- and Post-Project Questionnaire Surveys

The participants completed the same questionnaires twice at the pre- and post-project interview stages via Google Forms (See Appendix B for the questionnaire). The researchers constructed the questionnaire based on four factors. First, they included statements related to views on reading *per se*, ER specifically, and reading instructions. The importance of including these statements is supported partly by a finding by Tabata-Sandom (2020, with many L2 Japanese teachers believe reading is crucial for L2 acquisition), and also by an often-discussed assessment issue in ER, a contention of "the reward of success" claimed by Nation and Waring (2020), and so on. Secondly, they included Day and Bamford's (2002) "Top Ten Principles for Teaching Extensive

Reading.” These principles were included because it was of interest to see which principle would retain its importance to L2 teachers after they had experienced ER themselves. The Ten Principles have been widely acknowledged for over two decades, but as Macalister (2015) claimed, they “are best viewed as guidelines, not as commandments” (p. 123) and we need to know which principles are the most significant. Thirdly, they included the four principles that were influential in the L2 Japanese reading pedagogy: “1) start with easy books; 2) read without a dictionary; 3) skip over the words you don’t understand; and 4) get a different book if you feel the current one is too hard or boring to read” (Awano et al., cited in translation by Takahashi & Umino, 2020, p. 51). As mentioned in other places in this article, L2 Japanese teachers tend to uncritically accept these principles, but they need to critically assess each principle themselves. Finally, the last section asked the participants to rate statements about ER’s effects on various skill areas and affective dimensions. The statements ultimately included are based on research findings regarding the benefits of ER in each skill area. The participants rated all the statements and principles from ‘1. Strongly disagree’ to ‘5. Strongly agree.’

Measurements of Pre- and Post-Project Vocabulary Sizes and Reading Rates

The participants’ pre- and post-project vocabulary sizes and reading rates were measured in order to see their linguistic changes and also to see whether their linguistic changes coincided with any perceptual changes. *VocabularySize.com* (<https://my.vocabularysize.com>) was used to measure vocabulary sizes because the website uses Paul Nation’s Vocabulary Size Test, which is empirically supported by Beglar (2010). For reading rate measurements, two articles written with vocabulary and grammar control and the same word count were chosen from the Speed Reading materials constructed by Sonia Millett. A series of studies that have used these types of Speed Reading materials have been conducted (Chung & Nation, 2006; Macalister, 2008, 2010b; Tran, 2011) and they have confirmed their efficacy (These materials are available from Millett [2005], https://www.wgtn.ac.nz/_data/assets/pdf_file/0008/1068065/nz-book-one-2000-word-level.pdf). These two articles were accompanied by ten comprehension questions.

Online ER via Xreading

The participants engaged in ER using Xreading for 10 months. Xreading offers more than 1,800 digital books, most of which are digital graded readers³ (GRs). There are fifteen levels on Xreading and therefore users can easily choose an appropriate level for themselves. Users can self-monitor their ER as Xreading provides feedback on words read, books read, reading and listening time, quiz⁴ success rates, and so on. Only when users pass a quiz based on a book after reading it is the word count of the book added to words read. A big portion of Xreading’s GRs have audio files so that users can also listen while reading or just listen.

The researchers took turns sending the participants weekly newsletters that provided their own book recommendations (See Appendix C for an example of these weekly newsletters). Each researcher took care of six participants and sent a weekly newsletter individually with comments tailored to each participant. This structure was put in place because the first author had previously conducted a similar study (Tabata-Sandom, 2023) in which all the participants highly valued this kind of individual support. The researchers sent 41 weekly newsletters from January 26, 2022 to October 26, 2022.

Data analysis

Analysis of the Interview Comments

The researchers first independently analyzed all the interview transcripts, following Erlingsson & Brysiewicz's (2017) guide to doing content analysis. This involved detecting meaning units relevant to the research theme in the transcripts, condensing them, labeling the condensed meaning units with codes, and categorizing the codes into the themes. Only the themes that both researchers independently detected were treated as findings in this study.

Analyses of Questionnaire Responses, Vocabulary Sizes, and Reading Rates

Questionnaire responses, vocabulary sizes, and reading rates were quantitatively analyzed using a paired *t*-test to compare pre- and post-project vocabulary sizes, pre- and post-project reading rates, and pre- and post-project questionnaire responses. As previously mentioned, vocabulary sizes were measured in WF, and reading rates were measured in SWPM. For the vocabulary size and reading rate gains, effect sizes were also calculated. That is because *p*-values alone do not demonstrate the size of the effect, just its existence (Sullivan & Feinn, 2012). Furthermore, *p*-values are affected by the sample size (Wei et al., 2019) and taking into account the current small sample size, knowing effect sizes is important.

Findings

This section presents the findings in the order of the RQs. The participants' actual remarks are indicated in double quotation marks.

RQ1. What did the participants experience and discover during the 10-month online ER project? And how did their experiences and discoveries affect their perceptions of ER?

Findings from Xreading's Records

Table 2 below shows the participants' Xreading records. Because there were large discrepancies in books read, words read, and read time, both medium and median were calculated. P1, P4, and P6 read a large amount, as well as listening to audio files for a very long time. Comparatively, P3 and P5 did not read or listen as much, although P3 enjoyed reading quite a large number of short, easy books. As for P5, one reason why she did not fully engage in ER was that she felt stressed because she assumed she was not allowed to look up unknown words due to an influential principle mentioned above. However, it should be noted that the researchers did not tell the participants that they were not allowed to look up unknown words. Minor issues aside, it is safe to say that many of the participants experienced the most avid L2 English reading time of their lives during this project. They read 654,213 words on average (with a mean of 433,996), which is much larger than the mean reading amount (107,964.04 words) of the participants of McLean and Rouault's (2017) study, who conducted ER for one academic year.

Table 2. *The Participants' Xreading Records*

Participant	Books passed ^a	Words read	Average Xreading level ^b	Read time ^c	Listen time ^c	Quiz score average
P1	131	1,186,174	8	252 (252:16:20)	95 (95:23:50)	94.4
P2	61	362,619	9	55 (54:30:00)	39 (39:02:50)	80.3
P3	62	20,932	3	12 (11:37:10)	8 (07:39:50)	92.9
P4	906	2,358,082	5	335 (335:11:10)	249 (249:07:10)	78.5
P5	13	11,112	3	2 (02:17:50)	0 (00:24:50)	98.5
P6	248	1,545,824	7	185 (185:26:50)	57 (57:11:00)	98.8
P7	125	505,372	6	127 (126:47:56)	31 (31:10:50)	95.7
P8	22	214,217	6	108 (107:43:30)	8 (08:05:30)	79.1
P9	108	528,111	7	122 (122:18:30)	3 (03:19:40)	95.4
P10	58	502,096	8	51 (50:31:20)	0 (00:28:50)	94.9
P11	42	351,653	8	81 (80:54:20)	27 (26:39:20)	71.9
P12	164	112,249	3	38 (37:52:20)	23 (22:51:00)	92.3
Mean	161.67	654,213	6.08	114	45	89.39
Median	85	433,996	6.5	108	27	93.65

^a On Xreading, only when a user passes a quiz of a book read is that book included in books read and the word count of the book added to words read.

^b Average Xreading level is the average Xreading level of all the books a participant read.

^c For calculating the average of read time and listen time, actual numbers were rounded up or down.

Findings from the Interviews

This section reports on the themes independently detected by both researchers. The themes are presented according to their recurring frequencies.

Discovery of the Power of ER to Lower Psychological Barriers to Reading in English

All the participants discovered that ER lowered a psychological barrier to reading in English. P6's feelings toward reading in English changed just one week after the project started: "I have less resistance (to reading in English) even after this week, compared to the beginning. I can (now) start reading with a light heart, like 'I'm gonna read,' rather than 'I have to read. OK, let's do it.'" At the second, third, and post-project interviews, more than 50 comments about this

psychological change were given. The following example is a comment made by P9 (3rd interview):

“During the first couple of months, there was a somewhat high barrier when opening a book. I had to stimulate and talk to myself, “You can do it!” That disappeared around the third month. Reading naturally became a routine.”

Six participants offered one reason for this change: their motivational “shift to ‘content-focused reading’ from ‘obligatory reading’” (See 4.1.2.5). P8 implied that the large amount of reading was another reason for this change, saying “Since I’ve read a lot, I don’t feel ‘Yikes!’ when I see English” (post-project interview). While all the participants believed from the outset that ER would be beneficial in making L2 reading accessible, around half of them were still dubious about how much it would benefit them due to their perceptions of their own past failures to master L2 English. Experiencing the benefits of the current project shifted their self-perception. In P6’s case, ER’s benefit in terms of lowering a psychological barrier exceeded her expectations:

“I had some resistance to reading in English and found the barrier high. Therefore, I thought I would always feel obligation, like ‘I have to read,’ rather than enjoying it when it came to reading in English. Now I have the same feelings when I pick up an English book as I would choosing a Japanese book I want to read.” (post-project interview)

Discovery of the Importance of the Researchers’ Regular Support

As the next section covers, the participants found that routinizing short-time reading in their busy lives was easier said than done, although six of them had urged their students to do so in their ER programs. The participants unanimously agreed on the importance of the researchers’ regular support in keeping them reading, as the following comments demonstrate:

I am very grateful to have received emails regularly. It’s encouraging...I can see what the others have read, which makes me feel like I have to try hard. Therefore, it is a sort of inspiration (P4, 2nd interview).

I look forward to (the weekly emails), wondering what she (the first author) will write today. Connection. I mean that I can see the researchers’ faces (P10, 2nd interview).

I chuckle when I see her (the first author) email and then I remember, “oh, I need to read.” Being able to feel that way is the biggest factor (to support my ER) (P7, post-project interview).

This discovery made eleven participants realize that while ER seems like an individual activity, continuing reading alone without somebody’s encouragement was more difficult than they had imagined. P2 commented that “because the teachers (researchers) are here, I can come back (to ER). I felt deep down that it would be difficult to continue all on my own” (3rd interview). After the project, all the participants who thought it might be possible to implement ER in their curricula said that they would try to practice what the researchers did in their own ER programs.

Discovery of the Difficulty of Routinizing Short-Time Reading

The participants, who were all busy L2 teachers, found it very difficult to routinize ER in their

lives; however, some managed to do so successfully. P12 pointed out that the key to success in routinization was that: “(ER) should be tied to a part of an everyday routine... it had better be integrated in the flow of daily life” (2nd interview). In contrast, a few participants struggled with this until the end of the project. P3 said that “having an attitude to read is a key. I was unable to make reading a routine. I often noticed that one week or two weeks had passed. So, that (having an attitude to read) is the hardest part” (post-project interview). Similarly, the second author in P3’s 2nd interview used the phrase “psychological time,” which can be interpreted as “time when learners have a mental space to conduct ER.” The second author, who engaged in online ER along with the participants, explained “psychological time” as follows:

“Mental states matter. When we do have various things to think about, even if we have physical time, we don’t have psychological time (for engaging in ER).”

Having found that time-management was an obstacle to the routinization of ER, P10 asserted that “managing my own time was (the most difficult thing). Therefore, even if students want to read when they are busy, they won’t. Taking this into consideration, we must do (ER) in class” (post-project interview). This extreme difficulty with routinizing ER in daily life could not be fully appreciated without actual ER experiences. P6’s reflection on this particular factor is very meaningful: “When students come to a standstill in their reading routine, we can really understand their feelings (thanks to our experiences), can’t we? So, I would feel sympathy and share my experiences with them rather than nonchalantly urging them to read more and more”.

Discovery of the Benefits of Occasional Dictionary Use During ER

As mentioned above, one of the four principles that many Japanese teachers (including the participants) are familiar with is “read without a dictionary” (Awano et al., cited in Takahashi & Umino, 2020, p. 51). In the very early stages of the project, the participants engaged in ER following this principle, but they started feeling dissatisfaction and demotivation leaving unknown words unknown. Then eight of them started looking up unknown words occasionally or feeling more relaxed toward this principle. P9’s remark aptly represents the participants’ change:

“I had this idea that we mustn’t look up words during ER. However, if we notice a word that repeatedly appears and we want to look it up, doing so is definitely more conducive to learning and better for acquisition” (post-project interview).

P11 also claimed that “it is impossible for learners with only a few years’ experience to not use a dictionary. Being told not to look up a word in a dictionary is problematic. If learners want to look up a word, they can do so” (post-project interview). P5 lamented that “being unable to get used to leaving words that I cannot understand is quite stressful” (3rd interview). Unfortunately, this seemed to make her experience of ER as a whole quite unsuccessful. This change in the participants’ views regarding dictionary use during ER was statistically significant ($p < 0.5$, see 4.1.3. and Table 3).

Less Frequently Recurring Themes Detected by Both Researchers: Self-Perceived Reading Rate Increases; Shifts to ‘Content-Focused Reading’ from ‘Obligatory Reading’

In addition to the four most frequently recurring themes, other themes were also detected by both researchers. Seven participants commented that they felt their reading speed got faster right from the early stages of the project. P1 reported her increased reading rate in her 3rd interview by

saying that “when I took a TOEIC, I was able to read to the end. Also, I was first unable to keep up with the pace of the fast narrators’ (audio files on Xreading) and I made their speeds slower. But now I usually don’t need to do so.” The participants’ self-perceived reading rate gains were supported by their significant statistical reading rate gains ($p < .005$).

“Shifts to ‘content-focused reading’ from ‘obligatory reading’” means that the participants initially read as part of their obligations as participants in the project, but then they started enjoying the content of GRs on Xreading. In other words, they initially felt they had to read and later they felt they wanted to read. A big source of this change was clearly the engaging content of the GRs they read, as shown by the following comments:

P3: I don’t feel pressure to read. I am reading because I want to read books that I find interesting (3rd interview).

P8: When the content of a book is interesting, you will feel a desire to read more and more. In that respect, it is crucial what you read, I guess (3rd interview).

P9: I have a bit more motivation to find interesting books than before. I previously felt that I shouldn’t cause trouble for the researchers (3rd interview).

Findings from the Pre- and Post-Project Questionnaire Responses

The participants’ questionnaire responses indicated significant perceptual changes with four statements, as Table 3 below shows. After the project, the participants came to believe that teachers are learners’ role models ($p < .05$) and their ER experiences caused them to examine and ultimately disagree with one of the influential principles (“read without a dictionary” [Takahashi & Umino, 2020, p. 51]) in their field significantly more strongly ($p < .05$), which is supported by the findings from their interviews. Lastly, in the post-project questionnaire, they gave significantly lower ratings to ER’s benefits regarding vocabulary ($p = .009$) and grammar learning ($p = .008$). Regarding the significantly decreased ratings for ER’s effects on vocabulary learning, some interview comments indicated this trend (e.g., “I expected my vocabulary would dramatically increase, but it didn’t” [P6, post-project interview]). However, such comments were not as frequent as the positive comments about ER’s effects on reading rates. As for the significantly decreased ratings for ER’s effects on grammar learning, interview comments that revealed the participants’ self-observation of their stagnant general L2 proficiency predicted this questionnaire outcome (e.g., “Honestly speaking, I can only feel that my English proficiency is not increasing,” P7, 3rd interview).

Table 3. *The Participants’ Pre- and Post-Project Questionnaire Responses*

Direction	Statements	Average		<i>p</i> -value
		Pre	Post	
To agreement	Teachers are learners’ role models.	3.8	4.4	$p < .05$
To disagreement	Read without a dictionary.	4.0	3.5	$p < .05$
	ER is effective for vocabulary learning.	4.4	4.0	$p = .009$
	ER is effective for grammar learning.	3.8	3.4	$p = .008$

Note: 1 indicates “Strongly disagree” and 5 indicates “Strongly agree” in the questionnaire. Therefore, the larger the average is, the more strongly the participants agreed with a statement.

*RQ2. How did the Changes in Their Perceptions of ER and Their Linguistic Changes Interact?**The Participants' Vocabulary Gains and Their Perceptions*

The participants' vocabulary size gains were statistically significant ($t = -2.58, p < .05, df = 11, d = 0.87$, see Appendix D for the descriptive statistics for vocabulary sizes). This effect size ($d = 0.87$) is small-to-medium according to Plonsky & Oswald (2014). However, they occasionally commented that they did not feel that their vocabulary sizes were increasing and their ratings for the effects of ER on vocabulary acquisition significantly decreased ($p = .009$) in the post-project questionnaire. Therefore, the participants' actual vocabulary size gains did not coincide with their perceptions and resultant perceptions regarding ER's effects on vocabulary acquisition.

The Participants' Reading Rate Gains and Their Perceptions

Many participants commented during the project that they felt their reading rates were getting faster, which is supported by their significantly faster post-project reading rates ($t = -3.99, p < .005, df = 11, d = 0.65$, see Appendix E for the descriptive statistics of reading rates). This effect size ($d = 0.65$) is small-to-medium according to Plonsky and Oswald (2014). Unfortunately, there was no initial probing into their perceptions of ER's effects on reading rate specifically. Instead, they were asked to rate ER's effects on reading skills. Reading skills can be interpreted to include reading fluency. The participants' pre-project perceived effects of ER on reading skills were already high (Mean = 4.8) and they remained that same score. Their ratings of ER's effects on reading skills did not decrease due to the feeling that their reading rates were increasing.

Discussion

Cho (2012) examined the impact of two-week self-selected reading on 46 Korean L2 English teachers. Despite how short term their reading practice was, their actual reading experiences impacted her participants in multiple ways, and they became engaged readers and started being interested in implementing ER in their own practice. Corresponding with Cho's (2012) study, in the current study, their 10-month experience of online ER and the discoveries they made, as a result, affected the participants' perceptions of ER in three meaningful ways: reinforcing the participants' initial perceptions, enabling them to critically examine and disagree with an influential principle in their field, and making them realize that some factors had a bigger impact than they had imagined.

First, their ER experiences reinforced the participants' initial perceptions that ER would have effects on L2 reading affective dimensions. L2 Japanese ER discourse has been predominantly affective-oriented, and many L2 Japanese teachers are exposed to reports and anecdotes of ER's successes to motivate learners to read in Japanese (Banno & Kuroe, 2016; Takahashi et al., 2022). The current participants were not exceptions, and they initially held the view that ER would alleviate learners' aversion and reluctance toward L2 reading. It should be noted that some of them did not expect this positive effect to impact them, however. Their actual experiences of online ER then convinced them that ER indeed lowered a psychological barrier to L2 reading. This finding is consistent with that of Tabata-Sandom (2023). In her study, 11 adult Japanese learners of English, initially reluctant L2 readers, engaged in online ER via Xreading for one year. At the end of the project, her participants were able to read for pleasure in English and call

L2 reading a hobby. The findings of the study suggested that this change came largely from the comprehensible and intriguing GRs available on Xreading. The current participants experienced the same transformation because of engaging GRs, discovering that ER could change the nature of L2 reading from an obligatory activity to an enjoyable, content-focused activity.

Secondly, their 10-month ER experiences enabled the participants to critically examine and disagree with an influential principle in their field: to “read without a dictionary” (Awano et al., cited in Takahashi & Umino, 2020, p. 51). Many participants doubted this principle at the outset of the project. After they engaged in ER, their doubt changed to clear disapproval. They disagreed with this principle significantly more strongly in the post-project questionnaire ($p < 0.5$). Their disagreement is supported by empirical findings. Mondria (2003) reported that learners could verify the meanings of words they guessed by looking them up in a dictionary, which would lead to learning. Nation and Waring (2020) also suggest that occasional dictionary use during ER can be conducive to vocabulary learning through noticing. Dictionary use during ER, if it is not frequent, is also supported in terms of learner’s independence. By using the phrase, the “lure of autonomy” (p. 170), Judge (2011) stated that it was important for learners to feel in control of their ER because they get satisfaction from being able to decide what to do, and this includes dictionary use. In the discourse around both English and Japanese ER within Japan, ‘not using a dictionary’ has long been championed (e.g., <http://surl.li/mpqdt>). However, reflecting the empirical findings that support occasional dictionary use during ER, this principle—along the other influential principles in this field—may need reviewing, as Day and Bamford’s (2002) famous *Top Ten Principles for Teaching Extensive Reading* were reviewed (Macalister, 2015; Robb, 2015; Waring & McLean, 2015). Nation and Waring (2020) recommend that learners read the right level books so that they do not often need to use a dictionary, instead of proclaiming a principle. Their approach may be more appropriate to avoid confusion for practitioners who are not familiar with the research findings or have not experienced ER themselves.

Thirdly, after engaging in online ER for 10 months, the participants realized that some factors had a bigger impact than they had imagined. Specifically, they found that routinizing short-time reading was much more demanding than they had thought. As Robb (2002) reported, there were a lot of extra-curricular activities for learners to prioritize over ER, making conducting ER regularly no easy task for learners. The same thing can be said for busy L2 teachers. The participants realized routinizing daily short ER took more effort than they had envisaged. It also took not only physical free time, but also “psychological time” (a phrase used by the second author during P3’s 2nd interview), which can be interpreted as time when learners have the mental space to feel like starting reading. Although Nation and Waring (2020) imply that the more learners read, the more successful they are, this paper claims that those who read in small windows of time were equally successful if they managed to find “psychological time” regularly and read in the ER manner (Waring & McLean, 2015). P12 is a good example. While her reading amount was not large, the number of books she read was third among twelve participants. She seemed to genuinely enjoy her ER routine over the whole 10 months. The first realization led to the second realization: The facilitators’ support is crucial to successful ER. Most participants, like all the participants in Tabata-Sandom’s (2023) study, valued the researchers’ consistent individual support. Tabata-Sandom’s ninth participant explained: “ER itself is an individual act. However, in order to keep doing it every day, interactions with others is important” (p. 173). Realizing the importance of a facilitator’s input probably led to the participants agreeing that teachers are learners’ role models (Day & Bamford, 2002) significantly more ($p < .05$) in the post-project questionnaire.

Regarding the relationship between the participants' perceptual changes and their linguistic changes, their unchanged high rating of ER's effects on reading skills and their significant reading rate gains ($p < .005$) coincided. In contrast, their perceptions of ER's effects on vocabulary acquisition and their significant vocabulary size gains ($p < .05$) did not coincide. Consequently, the participants rated ER's effects on vocabulary learning significantly lower ($p = .009$) in the post-project questionnaire. One hypothesis for this phenomenon is that while the conditions for reading fluency development created by online ER were probably excellent, those same conditions were not as conducive to vocabulary acquisition. The average GR level read by them was level 6, which was fairly easy for them. Nation and Macalister (2021) call reading very easy GRs "Easy ER" (p. 78) and claim that it is an effective activity for reading fluency development. Therefore, how the participants read during the project was ideal to increase their reading rates. In contrast, the participants probably did not encounter high numbers of unknown words while reading such easy GRs. Moreover, learning a new word requires multiple encounters with it while reading, which requires a large amount of reading. Defining how 'a word is learned' depends on what knowledge of the word is in scope. Nation (2014) suggested that "(t)welve repetitions, however, are enough to allow the opportunity for several dictionary look-ups, several unassisted retrievals, and an opportunity to meet each word in a wide variety of contexts" (p. 3). Some of the participants' reading amount was probably not sufficient to encounter new words 12 times or more and thus for vocabulary learning to occur. Longer ER engagement or a larger amount of reading is necessary for L2 readers to notice that their vocabulary size is increasing. In keeping with this reasoning, Takase and Uozumi (2011) asserted that "teachers should read a great deal and be convinced themselves of the effectiveness of ER" (p. 6).

Conclusion

In this study, experiencing 10 months of online ER using Xreading with support enabled twelve L2 Japanese teachers to reinforce their initial perceptions of ER's effects on L2 reading affective dimensions, to examine and confidently disagree with an influential principle in their field, 'not to use a dictionary during ER,' and to discover the sheer difficulty of routinizing short-time reading and the significance of facilitator-support, both of which were beyond their initial comprehension. Having discovered numerous factors that they would not have discovered without actual experience, the twelve participants contended that ER teachers need to experience ER themselves. Due to these discoveries, along with the fact that their reading rates and vocabulary sizes increased significantly, the participants will more confidently practice ER when a chance to do so occurs.

Furthermore, the study revealed that a 10-month online ER project was effective in increasing the L2 abilities of the participants who were upper-intermediate to advanced L2 learners. That said, 10 months did not seem to be long enough for the participants to thoroughly examine whether ER has effects on vocabulary and grammar learning. The participants first need to learn exactly how ER can really benefit their learning in these two areas. That is, ER's strength lies in deepening and expanding existing vocabulary and grammar knowledge rather than learning unknown items, especially when learners are advanced. Recognizing this, it is hoped that the participants will continue reading in English with their increased reading rates and vocabulary sizes along with their enhanced motivation so as to find their own answers.

Implications, Future Studies, Limitations

As mentioned above, many of the participants were confused by and doubtful of the principle of not using a dictionary during ER. This is likely because the principle is often provided with a strong tone in relevant websites (e.g., <http://surl.li/mpqdt>) and publications. It is unfortunate that such a strong tone overshadows the well-thought reasonings behind the principle provided by its promoters. Reflecting this, some recent Japanese GRs provide rules with softer boundaries (i.e., *Genki Japanese Readers*, “Read easy stories that you can understand without a dictionary,” <https://bookclub.japantimes.co.jp/jp/book/b609121.html>). Nation and Waring (2020) take the same approach. In order to alleviate confusion in how L2 teachers apply these principles, vigorous discussion, and enlightenment via empirical findings are needed.

When L2 teachers want to experience ER in languages other than English, they may encounter difficulties finding enough reading material. The two authors engage in providing Japanese digital GRs online (*Yomimono Ippai*, <http://www17408ui.sakura.ne.jp/tatsum/project/Yomimono/Yomimono-ippai/index.html>) and hard copy GR publishing (*Genki Japanese Readers*, Banno et al., 2023) respectively. Also, excellent publications for Japanese ER are available from TADOKU supporters (<https://tadoku.org/japanese/graded-readers/>). Therefore, if their target language is Japanese, it is possible to try ER; however, it is true that the material available is still not comparable to English ER.

Assuming GRs are increasing in languages other than English, future studies can be conducted with L2 teachers who engage in ER in other target languages. Future studies could also examine the impact of experiences of ER on L2 teachers’ perceptions over a longer duration and with a bigger sample size.

Acknowledgements

The authors are truly grateful to the participants who played a vital role in this project’s success. Similarly, the authors would like to thank Paul Goldberg (Founder of Xreading) for his fantastic support. This study was supported by Massey University Research Funds (RM23841, RM24984).

Notes

1. NPO Tagengo Tadoku or TADOKU Supporters (<https://tadoku.org/>) is an NPO that recommends ER to people who want to acquire L2s as well as people who support such people. The organization has been proactively engaging in various events and publications related to ER. In terms of Japanese ER, the organization is a pioneer.
2. Uden et al. (2014) labelled their participants whose vocabulary sizes ranged from 4,700 WF to 6,000 WF as upper-intermediate.
3. Graded readers (GRs) are books specially written for language learners with vocabulary and grammar controls. With GRs, learners can proceed with scaffolded reading, while systematically increasing their reading levels.

4. Xreading's quizzes have five four-option, multiple-choice questions that assess not discrete information from books read, but one's general understanding of them.

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Appendix A

Interview Questions

Pre-project interview questions

1. How much English do you use in your daily life?
2. Do you like reading in English? If so, what do you read? Why?
3. Do you read English texts regularly? Why?
4. Have you engaged in ER before? If yes, how was it? If no, why haven't you?
5. Please tell me about the relation between your L2 learning and your interest in ER.
6. Have you received formal study or training related to reading instruction?
7. Why are you interested in ER?
8. Please define ER that is in your thought.
9. Have you practiced ER in your course? If yes, please tell me about your ER practice. If no, please tell me about a reason/reasons why you haven't been able to.
10. What effects do you think ER has?

Second interview (first during-project interview)

1. How was your first three-month ER?
When a participant gives a positive answer—What is a motivation for you to keep reading? What is a secret/strategy?
When a participant gives a negative answer—What do you think is a reason (for your failure)?
2. Are there changes in your ER habits?
3. Are there changes in how you read?
4. Do you use audio files? If yes, how do you use them? Please tell me your recommendation of how to use them.
5. Are there changes in your feelings toward reading (in English)?
6. Do you have a goal for the next three months?
7. To teachers who have practiced ER in their courses—Have you noticed anything related to ER guidance?
8. Are there any effects in weekly newsletters?
9. Are quizzes bothering you?
10. Are you conscious about your reading speed shown in Xreading?
11. Do you have any comments regarding Xreading's features?

Third interview (second during-project interview)

1. How was your six-month ER?
2. What do you think about your current feelings when comparing them to the first three months?
3. Do you feel a mid-project slump?
4. Reflecting on your half-year experience of ER, do you have a duration that you think is ideal when you practice ER for your students?
5. Are there changes in ER motivation?
6. Have you found effective strategies to continue reading?
7. Are there changes in your ER habits?
8. Are there changes in how you read?
9. Are there changes in your feelings toward reading (in English)?
10. Have you achieved the goal you mentioned in the last interview?
11. Do you have a goal for the post-project interview?

Post-project interview

1. Did the degree of how much you like reading in English change?
2. Are there changes in your feelings toward reading (in English)?
3. What effects do you think ER has? Are they different from your expectations?
4. You initially said that you would like to know about _____. Have you gained any knowledge about it?
5. What was the most difficult factor in your own 10-month ER?
6. How were the last few months? If that period was different from the previous period, please tell me.
7. You said _____ was your goal for the last three months. Have you achieved it?
8. Have you noticed anything from your experience of ER related to your ER practice?
9. What supported your ER most?
10. What benefits did weekly emails with newsletters have? Would you do the same when practicing ER in your course?
11. Do you think ER teachers should experience ER themselves? Why?
12. Please tell me what you thought about Xreading's features.

Appendix B

Pre- and Post-Project Questionnaire Statements

Part I. About L2 reading and ER

1. Reading is important when learning an L2.
2. The content of my current reading course is the best within my capacity.
3. I think that ER has positive effects in L2 acquisition.
4. I think that learners can learn L2 by reading for pleasure.
5. I advise my students to enjoy reading in Japanese.
6. I have methods to appropriately assess my students' reading.
7. It is important that learners feel 'I can read in Japanese.'
8. I have sufficient knowledge about ER's assessment methods.

Part II. Statements based on Day and Bamford's (2002) Top Ten Principles for Teaching Extensive Reading, etc.

1. Learners read 'texts at the right level, that is, easy texts.'
2. Teachers provide a variety of reading material on a wide range of topics.
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. (It is better to minimize the amount of post-reading tasks and activities.)
7. Reading speed is usually faster rather than slower.
8. Reading is individual.
9. Reading is silent.
10. Teachers orient and guide their students.
11. Teachers are learners' role models and good examples. (Teachers read in their L2s.)
12. Input and support from classmates and teachers increase motivation to read.

Part III. Principles from Awano et al. cited in Takahashi and Umino, 2019, p. 51

1. Start with easy books
2. Read without a dictionary
3. Skip over the words you don't understand
4. Get a different book if you feel the current one is too hard or boring to read

Part IV. Regarding ER's effects—Do you think that ER has effects on the following aspects?

1. Learning new vocabulary
2. Reinforcing existing vocabulary
3. Learning new grammar items
4. Reinforcing existing grammar items
5. Increasing reading skills
6. Increasing writing skills
7. Increasing speaking skills
8. Increasing listening skills
9. Learning about various cultures
10. Enhancing motivation to read in L2s

Appendix C

An Example of Weekly Newsletters

日本語教師多読プロジェクト 今週のおすすめ本ニュースレター33

2022年8月31日

みなさま いかがお過ごしでしょうか。

明日から9月、多くの学校では新学期が始まりますね。

今回はいつもの古典ではない作品から選びました。光恵先生が以前シリア難民の物語の紹介をされていましたが、今回比較的初期の移民のお話を紹介します。移民の国アメリカを知ることができるシリーズですね。

Old Ways, New Ways: Jewish-Americans

レベル 8

Words: 4692語

1990年初頭にアメリカに移住したユダヤ人家族の話です。その時代のヨーロッパの様子や、文化や伝統を引き継ぐことの難しさが描かれています。

Old Ways, New Ways



HOPES and DREAMS
Jewish-Americans

Hungry No More

A story based on
real history



HOPES and DREAMS
Irish-Americans

Hungry No More: Irish-Americans

レベル 8

Words: 4736語

1840年代にアメリカに移住したアイルランド人家族の物語です。「ジャガイモ飢饉」や南北戦争など一家を通して歴史を感じられる一冊です。

Appendix D

Descriptive Statistics for Vocabulary Sizes

Vocabulary sizes	Mean (<i>SD</i>)	Min	Max	Kurtosis	Skewness
Pre	6366.67 (1709.98)	3300	10000	1.19	0.55
Post	8916.67(4140.23)	5300	20700	6.52	2.36

Appendix E

Descriptive Statistics for Reading Rates

Reading rates	Mean (<i>SD</i>)	Min	Max	Kurtosis	Skewness
Pre	90.69 (27.17)	59	141.7	-0.34	0.92
Post	108.53 (27.48)	65.2	163	0.03	0.38

About the Authors

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