

A Case Study: Japanese Students' Reflective Comments on Their Extensive Reading Experiences

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Abstract

This paper reports Japanese university students' reflective comments on their extensive reading (ER) experiences. The majority of ER studies reports the impact of ER on learner's language competence and do not describe the detailed picture of individual student's experience as an active reader. To fill the gap, this study aims to depict the meanings of EFL (English as a foreign language) learners' ER experiences qualitatively.

In the present study fifteen Japanese university students' comments in their book reports from the ER course were considered as written narratives. They were coded and classified into two categories: reactions to (a) experiences in reading English books, and (b) the stories students read. Overall, students favored the ER instruction and their reading experiences. Their written narratives indicated their developmental process of reading in English toward the goals of ER. Moreover, the written narratives implied their personal development of how they personalized their thoughts and experiences as meaning making. These findings suggest that ER promotes not only English competence and reading habits, but also fosters learners to learn as whole individuals.

Introduction

In the previous papers, I reported one way of instructing extensive reading (ER) course called Pleasure Reading Course (PRC) (note the term pleasure reading and extensive reading are used interchangeably in this paper) at a private university in Japan and its evaluation (Kusanagi, 2004, 2005). The former class report described the goals of PRC, how I planned and organized the course through *the class library system*, which I introduced in the course, how the students' performance was evaluated, and what the teacher's roles were in the course.

In the course, the general goals were set for students to (a) enjoy reading in English,

(b) be more confident in reading in English, (c) develop fluency in reading, (d) form a habit for in-and-outside classroom reading, and (e) read at least ten books in total at the student's level in the semester. The emphasis was placed on students' affect, attitude, and motivation toward reading English in the course.

The results of the end-of-term questionnaire concluded that students achieved some goals successfully (enjoyment, development of reading fluency) and moderately (confidence in reading in English, a reading habit, reading more than 10 books) (Kusanagi, 2005). Among the positive results from the questionnaire, the students' reading fluency increase averaged 30 words per minute

through the semester of 14 weeks (130 words /per min. to 160 words/per min.).

The instruction also provided the students great amount of flexibility in choices and levels of reading materials and autonomy in learning English. In fact, they learned not only the English language, but also discovered something more meaningful to them as individual reader. They learned through what is called aesthetic experience, which promotes self-realization and self-development through knowing self and others.

By reading book reports, I learned their personal growth as active readers. In recent years, ER instruction and research have become popular in EFL settings and much research has been conducted on EFL readers' improvement in their English abilities (four skills, vocabulary, grammar) and psychological development (attitude, motivation) (Day & Bamford, 1998). Nevertheless, not much has been reported on the "by-products" of the ER instruction. The term by-product here refers to "any outcome of impact on aspects of students' lives other than their writing in English" (Pally, Katznelson, Perpignan, & Rubin, 2002, p. 91). By-products of ER instruction are under-investigated because the development of a person as a whole is not part of the goals in ER instruction or in English education in general.

To fill a gap, I will analyze students' inner voices as a reflection of their ER experiences in this paper. Many students expressed their thoughts utilizing the stories they read and their thinking development through reading books in their book reports. In this paper, I will call their voices written narratives. By introducing students' narratives, I present how they experienced ER and its educational value.

Review of Literature

Narrative Mode of Thinking

Narrative, or story telling is ubiquitous. It is one of everyday activities that people engage without their realization. However, people understand realities from stories that they tell, listen, or read. This universal human practice enables us to create meaning out of past events and experiences (Bruner, 1986, 1990, 1991; Polkinghorne, 1988; Riessman, 2002). In our lives, we encounter numerous events and experiences that seem to be disordered and unrelated to each other. In our daily life, we usually do not realize what they mean to us. In this fluid condition, we organize thoughts by finding the "plots" in talking and writing. By discovering the plot through our lenses, we find the connection between the scattered events in time and space, and create meaning or discover reality to the speaker. Polkinghorne (1988) summarizes:

Narrative is meaning structure that organizes events and human actions into a whole, thereby attributing significance to individual actions and events according to their effect on the whole. Thus, narratives are to be different from chronicles, which simply list events according to their place on a temporal dimension. Narrative provides a symbolized account of actions that includes a temporal dimension. (p. 18)

We acquire narrative knowledge and narrative understanding through meaning making. In this semiotic construction, we move beyond nature into the human sphere of value.

As stated, narrative enables us to discover meanings in our life experiences. We create meanings by telling a story or writing a story. Unlike academic reports, good book reports deliver writers' thoughts resulted from their search of the plots. In this sense, readers are active meaning-makers, not

passive recipients (Roseblatt, 1978/1994). There are active interactions between a reader, a text, and an author. In other words, readers observe and understand what characters have gone through in the stories and project their feelings onto the characters. By doing so, their act of reading becomes a significant experience.

Experience, Learning, and Personal Development

As introduced, narrative thinking enables us to move beyond everyday experience, thinking, and learning. Dewey (1934/1980) differentiated the whole of one's life as life composed of everyday experiences such as breathing from life composed of experiences which stand out from the everyday actions such as emotions, memories, and relationships. Dewey considers that certain events become *an* experience (emotions, memories, and relationships) through connecting them meaningfully and having a "pause" that is a moment of reflection. In the process of reflection, the person is aware of his/her engagement in the experience.

The latter type of experience Dewey (1934/1980) asked us to form a narrative. Siegesmund (1999) considered it "aesthetic experience" in which a person makes a connection between subject and object. In reading, Rosenblatt (1938/1995) referred to this experience as "literary experience." In this experience, "the reader's attention is centered directly on what he is living through during his relationship with that particular text" (Rosenblatt, 1938/1995, p. 26). Furthermore, literary experiences does not refer to reading only for the moment of pleasure, but reading from an aesthetic standpoint in which a reader extends thoughts from the reader's private sphere to the public sphere. Faust (2000) referred to

this area as a "third place" or a "zone of possibility."

From the viewpoint of psychology, Csikszentmihalyi, Rathunde, and Whalen (1993) explained experience using the term "flow." According to them, a "flow experience" is a "subjective state that people report when they are completely involved in something to the point of losing track of time and of being unaware of fatigue and of everything else but the activity itself" (Csikszentmihalyi, Rathunde, & Whalen, 1993, p. 14). It is a moment that one's body, mind, and emotion are fully embodied.

Augustine and Zoss (2006) adapted the philosophical and psychological concepts of experience reviewed and introduced the term "aesthetic flow experience" to describe the full-engaged literary experience. They defined the term, "aesthetic flow experiences are having qualities of flow, pause, emotional intensity, and meaningful relationships" (Augustine & Zoss, 2006, p. 77).

Corresponding to development of experience, Rawson (2000) saw learning in phases. Learning advances from a change in specificity of response (acquisition of new knowledge and skills), a change in the process of learning (learning to learn), and then onto learning as personal transformation. These learning phases correspond to Maslow's (1968) model of personal needs: survival, safety, esteem, knowing and understanding, and self-realization needs. The phases also correspond to Lievegoed and Lake's (1997) model of personal development that shows four stages: biological, intellectual, emotional, and spiritual development.

In the present paper, I will keep these conceptions of experience, learning, and personal development in mind in analysis of students' written narratives in order to understand their ER experiences. By analyz-

ing students' written narratives, I investigate how EFL students perceive their ER experiences and what EFL students' perceived ER experiences mean to them.

Methodology

Context and Participants

I taught the PRC class in the Fall 2003. The class consisted of 33 lower-intermediate level students (25 females, 8 males) who were majoring in Welfare at a large private university in Japan. The main classroom activity for the students was reading graded readers from the class library. Students tried to read more than 10 books from the class library during the semester. Some other activities were done in the lessons such as story-telling by the teacher, writing a short book report (the In-class Report), recommending books by publication (the Letter Exchange), introducing books and giving personal comments on the books they chose for the book reports (Book Spot) together with a sustained silent reading activity (see Kusanagi, 2004 for more details).

At the end of the semester, the students worked on a book report as a term project. They chose one of the books they read according to their abilities and interests through the semester and wrote a paper that consisted of a brief summary of the story, reactions to the story, and a list of book information. Some students included brief background information about the books such as authors, settings of the stories, and characters in the stories. A considerable number of students included short comments on the course or course project. The book report had to be typed and be 800 to 1000 words in length. Note that the Unified Syllabus of the English Program determined the inclusion of the book report assignment.

I assessed the reports by students' unders-

tanding of the stories and construction of ideas but not by grammatical accuracy or the structure of reports unless errors distressed my understanding. This decision was made because the course goal was not improving their writing abilities since the instruction did not aim how to write a structured essay in English although a basic guideline of writing a book report was given occasionally in the course.

Data Collection and Analysis

I did not have the idea of analyzing book reports for research when I taught the class. Two years passed and then my interest grew. I contacted the students for their consent of using their reports for analysis by postal mail. For this reason, I obtained written consent from fifteen students (13 females and 2 males) for citing their words for this research by postal correspondence in January 2006.

I read the participants' book reports, marked the areas representing the students' ideas in the commentary section and the conclusion. I coded them into two; one for stating their experiences of reading in English and another for expressing their thoughts on the stories. Then, in each category, I coded them into sub-classifications for analysis.

Findings

In this section, I will present students' original texts in order to maintain their own voices in believing that readers of this paper will understand them despite grammatical, spelling, and punctuation errors (correct words are inserted with square brackets in some cases for readers' convenience). A book title the student addressed is shown in a parenthesis at the end of student's narrative. Note that all the

names presented in the present paper are pseudonyms.

Reading Books in a Foreign Language

Several thematic words were drawn from students' comments: overcoming difficulty, pleasure in reading, confidence in reading, a habit of reading, a desire of reading, and appreciation/support of the ER instruction.

Eight students stated that they read books in English for the first time and felt it difficult at the beginning. However, they overcame the difficulty, enjoyed reading in English, and showed their desire to read more. Ayumi who read a popular children's book wrote:

Before I took this class, I thought that to read English book is hard for me. Though I like to read a book, I shrank [hesitated] from reading English books. Thanks to this class, I could notice that to read English books is joy thing. First I felt tired but it became pleasant gradually while an English book was read. Though I can read only the book of still easy English easily. I want to read English books from this as well. (The Dragons of Blue Land)

Thirteen other students also stressed their enjoyment in reading as Ayumi expressed. Koji, a student who read *Cirouque de Freak: Saga of Darren Shan*, a popular juvenile novel, had a flow experience. According to his words, he got "addicted" to the world of the story and he even could not sleep after reading.

Fourteen students wrote about their desire to read more books in English. Some of them said that they would like to read the continuations of the books written by the same authors (e.g., *Agatha Christie*, *Darren Shan*, *The Lord of the Rings*, and *Sherlock Homes*). Izumi, who read another *Darren Shan* story in the series, also expressed her excitement

and desire to read more.

Reading in English is more real than doing translated in Japanese I thought. . . . This story is very long. And still goes on. I have no idea where the story goes. But there is no doubt we are exciting and the story keep us in suspense. I want to read the continuations. You cannot experience this story's world without read the book! (The Vampire's Assistant: Saga of Darren Shan)

As stated above, students struggled to read in English at the beginning. However, their positive experiences in reading formed a reading habit, feelings of confidence and achievement through the semester. For instance, one student set a goal; reading *Flowers for Algernon*, an authentic novel for adult readers. Another student said that he would like to try different types of English texts; not only novels but also newspapers, magazines, and essays. Their comments indicate the beginning of autonomy in reading in English.

In addition to their awareness of overcoming difficulty, enjoyment, and a desire of reading, the students showed their appreciation of ER. Five students appreciated and supported the ER instruction for improving their English abilities. Mizuki's comment represents their idea. She wrote, "*Reading in English is more real than reading a translated book I thought.*" Ryoko, another student said,

In this lesson, Pleasure Reading Course, I could read ten English Books. Usually, a lot of people may think that they want to be able to read English books. But we don't have a chance. We apt to think "ok", I will read anytime. And we forget to read in busy daily life. So I think it is good to read English books in the lessons of collage [college]. Also to turn in the paper like

this plan is nice. It makes us practice. We were given a wonderful chance. (Rip van Winkle and Other Stories)

Ryoko also expressed the spirit of ER into words nicely as the next narrative shows; reading a book at her own level without using a dictionary, reading the story outside the classroom, and enjoying reading – a "flow" experience. Her use of the word "practice" implies that she appreciated ER for improving her English abilities as well as enjoying to read.

I enjoyed the complete reversal of this book! It was the first experience for me to go on reading even in the train. This was written in easy English. I could understand without a dictionary. It is not interesting to read books with dictionary. To read both book and dictionary is hard and makes us confuse. So I think that reading easy writing books like this is a good practice to us. (Rip van Winkle and Other Stories)

Nana, another student also thought she would not be able to read books because of her busy schedule at the beginning but managed to find some reading times on the train and in between lessons. She formed a habit of reading and indicated her intention of reading more books in the future.

Lastly, two students mentioned about developing their cross-cultural understanding through reading. Particularly one of them realized the difference between Japanese and English languages and cultures. She stated that learning different cultures was meaningful and stimulus to her.

Reading Books as Meaning-Making

As readers of fiction, students learned what other people have gone through in their lives and imagined being in the situation that the characters had. Some pondered over

it by reflecting their own experiences and recognized the meaning of their experiences. Some students encountered something new and asked themselves what they would do in the situation. Others questioned the meaning of values (e.g., What is courage? Do I have courage?). Another interesting tendency was that female students particularly saw role models in the characters or authors.

Several thematic words were found from students' comments. First of all, phrases, "I learned," "I noticed/realized," "the story told me" often appeared in their narratives. For instance, the majority of the students stated that they learned something important about life from reading as a guide into tomorrow. They were particularly concerned about "happiness" and "unhappiness."

One student, Mai remarked that she learned some lessons from the reading: People could never accomplish something without hardships. Typically people show a stronger interest in anti-canonical events in life. According to Bruner (1990), children produce more anti-canonical stories than canonical ones in a conversation. Anti-canonical events often happen in traditional narratives: fables and old tales. In such stories, people seek morals. Riessman said, "A teller in a conversation takes a listener into a past time or world and recapitulates what happened then to make a point, often a moral one" (Riessman, 2002, p. 219).

Chie also believed that every person must endure some difficulties in life and changing one's perspective would lighten his/her pain even when having difficult events. Her narrative suggested that (a) her anticipation of future life events, (b) the teachings she drew from the story, and (c) her intention of sharing her reading experience with others. She wrote:

Life has the happiness or fortune and the

unhappiness or misfortune. They may be large or small. You can consider it a happiness depending on the way you think. Anne who had been an orphan has experienced many things since she came to Green Gables. Those were [were] good and bad for her. But she can think [think] she'll be happy and it is because of the strength of herself and the being of person who support her [there is a person who supports her]. I think this story give many people the courage to make one's way if you are in misfortune. I want this book to be read by many people in future. (Anne of Green Gables)

As mentioned, students showed stronger interests in sad and unfortunate events in stories. Izumi is one of them. She reacted to anti-canonical events and described her emotional reaction to a very difficult decision the character made in *Darren Shan* (i.e., killing a best friend for the sake of saving his own life as a vampire).

The story is full of many elements. Adventure, friendship, horror, tragedy and so on. This story is not only exciting but moved us to teas [tears]. Reading in English more real than doing translated into Japanese, I thought. I can imagine exchange between Darren and Mr. Crepsley, or Sam and so on. This time, Darren suffered mental conflict where [whether he should] drink human blood or die. And experienced death of best friend. Usually, we rarely think about death. "I thought death comes only to old people." Darren said. There are something we can learn from this story. (The Vampire's Assistant: Saga of Darren Shan)

The quotation of Darren's words echo Izumi's voice. Thus it shows us the processes of Izumi's idea construction, internalization of Darren's experience and emotion.

In relation to misfortunes and pains in

life, a couple of students also mentioned the "imperfect" nature of human beings (e.g., people make mistakes). Kenya who read *Too Old to Rock and Roll*, whose themes were love and family, made an observation on this issue by saying that people could not see something very important when they were happy and they tended to make a wrong decision for a crucial life event – choosing a marriage partner in this story. Erika who read *Titanic* with also came up the idea that there was not one perfect thing that humans created.

Students also thought about the fundamental nature of being that is strongly related to our emotions, beliefs, and values such as solitude, love, and friendship. Takako referred to the nature of loneliness "the truth" and discussed invisible value, love and friendship in a hardship as a reaction to *The Little Prince*. Her narrative tells us how she connected her "inner-world" and the "inner worlds of other people" (the characters' and author's) (Carter, 1985) and built understanding in these abstract and spiritual concepts. Her interpretation of Saint-Exupéry's famous words, "all grown-ups were children first" also shows how she linked her "experiential knowledge" to "factual knowledge" (Carter, 1985) of the social and historical conditions at the time Saint-Exupery lived. Takako wrote:

There are many truth in this story. Reading this story, I understood that I was also alone in this word, it is the truth. And I am in sympathy with the prince because he might had been alone and felt loneliness. That is very sad, I think the truth always include sadness. I think why I can't help being attracted to him is that he know loneliness and sadness.

So, this story is very sad. But, he felt the warmth that being in the sunshine for the first

time in his life when he met a pretty, kind fox knows the truth. Without the encounter with the fox, I might not get to like this story. he noticed the rose was the very important being by the grace of the fox. And, to go to the rose he didn't mind his death. I think the relationship between the prince and the rose was so strong love and friendship. The fox also [also] told me that people couldn't live without friendship. When I feel the loneliness in my heart, I also feel the importance of friendship. This story taught me that the importance of friendship and love afresh.

And this story told me another important thing. That appeared the fox's word. "The important thing can't be seen in your eyes." This word sank into my heart. I noticed that I lost the important thing – joy with my family and my friends, beautiful, impression in my dairy [daily] life. I am sure really important things are in my daily life by reading this story.

The last I want to tell you about the author. When the War II broken out, he decided to go into exile from France to The United States of America. The dedication begin with "To Leon Welth". Maybe the book carried the means of encouraging the friend on its shoulder, I think. And I think the author felt the importance of friendship deeply from a great distance away. And he wrote, "All grown-ups were children first". For him, writing a children's book was writing for his childhood, and his pure part in his heart, I think. So I think this story is a message for his best friend, and al [all] children and all adults and himself during hard years." (The Little Prince)

Many of the participants read the stories they had read when they were young. Kanako came to realize her perceptual changes toward the same story at different temporal moments in life. Her realization

made her organized his thoughts and construct the plot through different lenses.

When I was child, I watch this movie once. Then I was simply interesting in that alien is hero and the bikes went up into the sky. But now I'm impressed with deep their friendship. If I became adult (more than 30 years old), I have different feeling. This movie gives us many kinds of beautiful feeling each year old. Because this reason, this is still loved by wide people. And ET is immortal hero for many people. (ET)

As presented above, the participants' written narratives indicate that they acquired some level of aesthetic knowing, perceiving a relationship between subject and object (Faust, 2000) through negotiating a text. Reading is often seen as a passive activity but it is not. From the analysis, I learned that reading is the activity that (a) a reader interacts with the author and characters, (b) negotiate meanings, and (c) create meanings. A reader makes "public linkages with private associations, feelings, and ideas" (Rosenblatt, 1938/1995, p. 292). A reader learns about the general from the particular from readings and gains multiple viewpoints. These processes facilitate a learner to form their inner world.

I also identified that some students also realized that people perceive the same event differently at different developmental stages of life. I believe this kind of learning promotes understanding of self and others, and possibly help them form their identities as a result.

Discussion

The analysis of students' narratives in book reports has revealed that EFL students' ER experience resulted in them "learning to

read" and "reading for life." Students achieved the goals of ER instruction (reading fluency, habit of reading, pleasure in reading, and desire of reading).

In terms of their reading habit, on one hand they experienced ER as everyday experience as Dewey (1934/1980) considered. At the beginning stage of ER, ER was a special experience to them because reading a book in English was new to them. At this stage, students felt difficulty in reading as they stated. However, it turned to be an everyday experience as they got into the habit of reading in English. As their written narratives showed, some students had the flow experience (Csikszentmihalyi, Rathunde, & Whalen, 1993) as they did in L1 (first language) reading.

On the other hand, students had *an* experience (Dewey, 1934/1980) or literacy experience (Rosenblatt, 1978/1994) that is distinct from the former type of experience at the same time. They had clear awareness of learning something meaningful to them (i.e., beliefs, values) and a deeper understanding of life. I believe that this type of experience led students to develop their intrapersonal and interpersonal growth that leads personal transformation (Rawson, 2000).

Thus ER in English can be genuine reading although they read simplified texts in English. There has been criticism on the use of simplified texts or books written for L1 children as EFL reading materials (see the review in Day & Bamford, 1998, Ch. 6). However, in the present study, students claimed that reading linguistically controlled materials was enjoyable and meaningful. The majority of participants read books at the 600-1200 word levels. As far as this group is concerned, I believe that they could not have shown deep understanding to stories with challenging materials such as novels

written for L1 adults because of students' limited command of English proficiency. The present study revealed that children's books and simplified materials are good reading resources for EFL learners' semiotic construction as well as improving English abilities.

Another issue is whether teachers should assign student readers to write summaries and reactions. In general, ER practitioners say that keeping a brief reading record is enough (for checking what a student read, how many books/words a student read). For example, in an ER seminar I attended, the speakers claimed that writing a book report was not necessary because students might feel it burdensome and this negative feeling might disincline students to read enjoyably. It is true that reading and writing a book report require different skills in nature, but students receive benefit from practicing writing and thinking if the course is carefully designed. Thus, they also receive benefit from developing themselves as a person.

Faust (2000) said that writing and reading both require us to produce the literary work of art. This is because writing a book report functioned as a "pause" or an opportunity to reflect their experiences in the past (Dewey, 1934/1980). In fact, some students appreciated the activity despite their struggle in writing a report as the following comments show.

I had never written such a large quality [quantity] of words in English, so this project was very hard for me. Nut [But] I think this was a good experience. I could enjoy reading books. Reading books gave me some chances to think so many things. (Nao)

This project was good because it was not reading only. I could become aware of what I felt

and thought from the book I read. (Kaoru, from the end-of-term questionnaire)

These comments tell us that ER was more than learning to read. As discussed, reading facilitated the intrapersonal and interpersonal growth of students. In their narrative thoughts, they went through multi-layered processes: reflecting their past experience, learning lessons from others, anticipating future life events, and thinking about solution to problems. Through the processes, they got to know others and self, and that might have enhanced the construction of their identities. These learning phases respond to Lievegoed and Lake's (1997) model of personal development. They developed emotionally and some of them also grew spiritually.

Lastly, it is challenging to provide intrinsic learning orientation in a required English course in the EFL setting. However, ER instruction can provide students with intrinsic learning together with extrinsic learning. ER can be a trigger for EFL learners to be autonomous.

Conclusion

ER can provide learners with a great amount of flexibility and autonomy in teaching and learning. Despite a large class size, the students are able to choose reading resources that suit their interests and language levels. Moreover, they can pursue their personal development as well as their language improvement.

There is another beneficial point. First, ER may change the negative image of Japanese learners—they tend to be quiet in the classroom and do not express what they think openly. Some teachers even feel that Japanese students are passive learners and do not have ideas or opinions. Unlike the

typical perceived image of Japanese learners, we get to understand that students make significant personal growth in the narrative mode of thinking. By analyzing students' written narratives, I have learned that this can be achieved by reading fiction. It is valuable for young adults to expand their views and share someone's experience through reading because they do not often contact people from other generations or in other social contexts (Koizumi, 2008). Kunugitomo (2008), a clinical psychologist who concerns the young's lack of social skills, also recommends that Japanese students should read because reading facilitates them to have multiple viewpoints and empathy.

In order to increase the impact of reading, Japanese students need ample time to enjoy reading. Some of my students told me that they did not have time to read books even in L1 although they wanted to do so. Japanese secondary education generally requires students to memorize information and learning skills as preparation for university entrance examinations. Thus giving opportunities of reading to Japanese university students is desirable.

Lastly, it was an eye-opening and rewarding experience for me to get to know the significant results from ER as a teacher researcher. The students were active readers, thinkers, and autonomous learners. They made progress in English abilities and found something meaningful in reading. Knowing these students' positive outcomes encourages me to search for meaningfulness in my personal experiences in teaching and research as an active subject.

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Appendix 1. Cited Books from the PRC Class Library

Books Written for L1 Children Aged 9 to 12

- de Saint-Exupéry, A. (1968). *The little prince*. San Diego, CA: A Harvest Book Hartcourt.
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