

# An Analysis of an Online Reading Task for Raising Global Awareness During Emergency Remedial Teaching

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## Abstract

This paper evaluates a reading task developed and implemented as Emergency Remedial Teaching, intended as a replacement for an extensive reading program. This online reading task, designed to develop learners' reading fluency, also aimed to enhance awareness of global current affairs. The implementation of the task, student self-selection and perspectives are analyzed and discussed. Suggestions are given on how to increase efficacy of this reading task and further align it with extensive reading principles.

## 1. Introduction

### Extensive Reading

Reading large volumes of text to increase reading fluency has been a learning tool used with ESL students in Japan for over 40 years, with many

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schools and universities implementing extensive reading programs. The ten principles of extensive reading (ER) as outlined by Day & Bamford (1998, 2002) are the most commonly cited tenets of successful extensive reading programs. In extensive reading, reading is for pleasure so should be easy yet interesting, of various topics, learners should read as much as possible of what they want to read, reading should be silent, individual and usually fast and unobstructed. The role of a teacher is to orient and guide their students towards a reading goal. Although a wealth of literature surrounding extensive reading exists, no clear rules or guidelines have been universally agreed upon and other equally valid forms and conceptualizations of ER, such as volume of material read, class reading, integrative ER, and class reading exist (Waring & McLean, 2015). 'Extended reading', however, is teacher-directed reading that supports and supplements areas of knowledge and offers some choice over reading selection. It lies between the intensive and extensive reading approaches. Waring & McLean (2015) argue that fluent, sustained comprehension of text as meaning-focused input, large volume of material of longer texts and reading over extended periods of time are necessary to be labeled as 'extensive reading'.

### ***Global Awareness Through Reading***

Learning about other cultures and societies through reading in English is a technique that is widely used in EFL. In addition to the linguistic competency benefits of extensive reading, learners are also likely to gain an increased knowledge of the world and other cultures (Hedgcock & Ferris, 2009). Knowledge attained through awareness of current affairs both domestic and internationally can better prepare students who travel abroad. The secondary function of this task was to engage students with global

themes and issues. This in turn can help foster awareness of global competence and enable students to gain knowledge and form perspectives on issues that may not be encountered in the student's home culture or through the student's L1.

### **Emergency Remedial Teaching**

The global COVID-19 pandemic since early 2020 became an obstacle to existing learning methods, effecting change in how education was delivered at universities worldwide. As the scale and effect of the pandemic was unclear initially, institutions applied ERT (Emergency Remedial Teaching) to maintain instruction while protecting students from the spread of the virus. Synchronous (Zoom, Teams, etc), and asynchronous (pre-recorded classes, etc.) were primarily used, intended as temporary admittance to maintain instruction (Yoon, 2020). Physical resources such as graded readers suddenly became inaccessible, with implementation of the existing ER programs being cancelled until further notice. The availability of materials is important for students to have a vast array of reading material at their disposal. "Financial or logistical problems are the main obstacles to implementing the extensive reading procedure" (Susser & Robb, 1990). An ideal alternative would be a collection of online graded readers which students can access freely. In lieu of this, one source of readily accessible material in English on the internet is news articles. SNS providers use platforms known as 'feeds' where news and media are provided based on algorithms specific to the user. Online news articles could be used as an alternative reading resource for an extensive reading program if it adheres specifically to extensive reading principles.

### *Learner Autonomy*

Extensive reading relies on student autonomy for both selection of content and level for difficulty for the reader, and ER promotes further learner autonomy (Deci & Ryan, 1985). A range of resources at various reading levels needs to be offered as each student has a different reading level. The global pandemic and proceeding move to ERT further pressured university students to learn both autonomously and unsupervised. “Challenges and difficulties were found in learner motivation and engagement, learning effectiveness, technical issues, course planning, and increased pressure and anxiety among students” (Petillion & McNeil, 2020). Likewise, ESL reading courses had these expectations, including managing one’s own reading time, content, and environment. Monitoring of reading by the instructor is necessary to evaluate student progress and outcomes, and in the case of ERT this can be done via email, online portal, or other methods.

## 2. Evaluation Questions

As the circumstances leading to the introduction of ERT were exceptional, the question of appropriateness arose, namely did students respond positively to the task and find it useful for increasing their English proficiency? This and other identified reading habits of students will contribute to better student reading fluency outcomes. This ERT task was to replace an extensive reading program, so the author wanted to confirm it followed some but not necessarily all principles of ER, primarily interest to the reader, and whether the self-selected topics were actually of interest to them. The secondary goal was increasing global awareness, so were topics relating to

domestic current affairs selected or were they global current affairs?

### **3. Design and Implementation of Reading Task**

The development and implementation of this online ERT reading task was during an unspecified period of national State of Emergency, where students were effectively confined to their homes and relied exclusively on online resources. 99.1% of students aged 20 to 29 in Japan have internet access (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, 2020), so it was expected that all students could access news resources. Students were required to select and read online English news articles, evaluate their interest level in them, and then write a brief summary. The instructor provided a sample of source material, but left it to the students to decide what they wanted to read based on their individual interests. Sample sources included English news sites in simplified English for non-native speakers, and native-level English language websites from a variety of countries in Asia, North America and Europe. Ultimately all news sources would be accepted, however students were encouraged to consider the reliability of the source they chose. No limitations to word length were given, and summaries were to be typed into an online form.

Instructions for the task were provided in an instructional video during the first class of semester, with follow up and oral reminders in subsequent synchronous online classes. Although regular reading was encouraged, with one article to be submitted per week, only a minimum of 3 articles during the semester was set as a requirement to getting a grade. Written summaries were not marked but were read by the instructor and feedback was

given to the student when required. Students demonstrated their general understanding of the article by producing a written summary. Fluent comprehension of the meaning and ideas in the texts was not required. Student submission progress was conducted regularly and sent to all students 3 times during the semester showing the number of articles read (summarized) and some comments on their submissions. “Oral or written summaries give students an opportunity to demonstrate that they are, in fact, doing their reading. They also allow the teacher to determine if the students are understanding their books [content] at an acceptable level” (Susser & Robb, 1990). This task was designed and trialed during a 15 week semester, with implementation to a total of 65 students in three ESL classes during the fall semester. English proficiency varied, with average GTEC scores measured at time of university admission showing the majority of students were in CEFR Bands A2 and B1, with the range being upper A1 to upper B2.

#### 4. Method

Analysis of the written summaries and a post-task questionnaire were conducted at the end of the semester.

##### *1. Written summaries*

Students were required to record the title of their chosen article, indicate their interest level, and write a simple summary. These were analyzed at the end of the semester for student interest, topics used and other relevant information.

##### *2. Post-task evaluation*

An online survey consisting thirty-four individual items was conducted

at the end of a 15 week semester. This was conducted in Japanese to accommodate to provide more accurate comprehension of the evaluation questions. One question asked the number of articles students read and summarized; one question about the number of articles students read but did not summarize; sixteen 6-point Likert scale questions were employed to gauge student opinions of enjoyability, usefulness and implementation of the reading material chosen; five semantic differential items to gauge the difficulty of their self-selected articles; eight criteria used in self-selection; two qualitative questions regarding students preferences of the submission method and suggestions for improvement. A final qualitative question asked students who did not submit any summaries to explain their reasons why.

## 5. Results

### Written Summaries

During the course of one semester 202 written summaries were submitted, 134 (66.3%) related to domestic topics (within Japan) and 68 related to global topics. The most commonly selected sources were Japanese news outlets publishing in English, the top two being Mainichi Shimbun (81) and Asahi Shimbun (34). Self-reported interest in selected articles had a mean of 1.93 on a scale of 1 (Very interesting) to 5 (Not interesting at all). The written summaries averaged 53 words each. Selected articles were categorized into general topics (Table 1). Unless directly relating to health effects or the virus itself, COVID-19 related articles on the impact of COVID-19 infection in general society were categorized as 'Society'.

Table 1

*Self-selected Articles Categorized by General Topic*

General Topic	No. of articles
Society (including COVID-19)	78
Sports (including the 2020 Olympics)	29
Politics	22
Entertainment	19
Health	10
Food	9
Animals & pets	9

**Post-task Evaluation**

Questions about behavior and habits relating to obtaining news showed that television is still the dominant media source for news in the Japanese language. For news and information in English it is the internet, albeit through apps operated by Japanese media outlets, with Mainichi and Asahi being the two most popular. English language newspapers were the least used source for news in English. Responses given by students for selection and their reflections (Tables 2 & 3) demonstrated interest in the topic was paramount to them, and what they chose was of appropriate level of difficulty for them.

Table 2

*Student Selection Criteria for English News Articles*

Criteria	No.
A topic that interested me	41
How easy it is to read	21



Length of the article	15
How easy it is to summarize	11
Difficulty of vocabulary in the article	10
Trustworthiness of the news source	9
Pictures and images to support the text	6
Difficulty of grammar in the article	1

14 students stated that there were articles they had read but not submitted a summary for. Reasons stated for this were related to the student’s ability to understanding the task instructions, forgetting to submit, not knowing how to submit, or and thinking that their summary would be shared with the class. Two students said they did not know how to write a summary, so they did not submit anything at all.

Table 3

*Student Reflection on Reading Selection*

	Mean	SD	
too easy in content	0.92	0.98	too difficult in content
contained only familiar words	0.94	1.36	contained too many unfamiliar words
not at all difficult to read	0.82	1.42	extremely difficult to read
easy to finish reading	0.71	1.54	difficult to finish reading
easy to write a summary about	0.84	1.57	difficult to write a summary

$Scale = (-3 \ -2 \ -1 \ \quad \quad 1 \ 2 \ 3)$

The mean and standard deviation of enjoyability, usefulness and implementation of the reading material chosen are displayed in Table 4.

Table 4

*Student Evaluation of Reading Task by Enjoyability, Usefulness, and Implementation*

Item	Mean	SD
<b>i) Enjoyability</b>		
fun reading materials for learning English	4.61	0.80
interesting to learn new information	4.92	0.97
fun to read regularly	3.66	1.29
materials that I want to keep reading, even after class	4.17	1.14
<b>ii) Usefulness</b>		
useful for increasing my vocabulary	5.14	0.90
useful for improving my reading comprehension	5.16	0.88
useful for improving my reading speed	5.10	0.92
useful for improving my overall English ability	4.98	0.96
useful for learning about what is happening in the world	5.00	0.93
useful for learning about what is happening in Japan	4.52	1.16
<b>iii) Implementation</b>		
the Google summary form was easy to access	4.57	1.28
the Google summary form was easy to use	4.57	1.27
the recommended reading goal was helpful	4.00	1.18
seeing the pace of other students in regular updates was helpful	4.21	1.28

*(6 ~ Strongly Agree, 1= Strongly Disagree)***6. Discussion**

98% of students enrolled in the course completed this reading task. The

mean scores for enjoyability (Table 4, i) are high, especially ‘interesting to learn new information’. This result is consistent with students having the flexibility to choose their own material. One student commented on a positive effect of this task; “It gave me the chance to read about news and events, and I am pleased about that”. Data in Table 2 confirms this and indicates topics of interest to be of the greatest importance to students, legitimizing task design. The data clearly shows that difficulty of grammar was of no importance to students and they were reading for general understanding, not accuracy. One important finding was that students actually read more material than that they had summarized and submitted, indicating that enjoyment was experienced and interest in reading was fostered. Three students wrote comments to the effect that it was easy to read but writing a summary (and submitting it) was bothersome, so they did not submit anything. 14 students responded that there were over 4 articles that they had read but not summarized (submitted), proving students were reading more than they reported through summaries.

### News Sources

The types of sources selected were a surprise to the author as the majority were Japanese media sources publishing in English, and these tended to have more domestic topics on offer. Although the instructor suggested several non-Japanese media sources, students selected 128 articles from Japanese media sources, 45 from foreign media, and 26 were unknown or unstated. Exposure to global topics and global current affairs was a secondary aim of this task, but student self-selection of domestic topics (in English) countered this. Conversely, the COVID-19 pandemic and 2020 American Presidential election were the main international current events

from September 2020 to January 2021 and dominated most news sources as these had a strong bearing on Japan-US relations. This gave the advantage of increased exposure to international politics and having students gain higher awareness of them. Requiring students to use specifically non-Japanese news sources not related to Japan could increase the potential for more exposure to international current affairs.

### Implementation

The use of an online medium for news sources and online form submission method proved to be effective and easy to follow, and no technical issues were identified. Student's views on the recommended reading target (Table 4, iii) showed a comparatively low mean indicating that very few agreed it was helpful. In contrast to this, the regular communication of student reading progress to each class was found to be more helpful.

The author did set the reading target too low and created anxiety and pressure to write; students *did not read for the pleasure of reading*. Although a set word count was not used, the average number of articles and submission dates showed sporadic, possibly intensive reading in order to write a summary. A requirement to read a larger volume of text, such as several thousands of words per week over a longer period (Waring & McLean, 2015) would be required to confidently label this an 'extensive' reading task. In addition, a shorter summary, or general overview in which students can achieve reading fluency without breaking their attention to understand and reproduce facts would better align to an extensive reading task.

### Written Summaries

Monitoring progress of the reading target by having students produce written summaries produced mixed results. Writing a brief summary was

a hurdle for many students, despite it being made clear that summaries would not be marked or evaluated. Some students did ask by email if the quality of their summary was sufficient, and whether the topic was acceptable to the teacher. Anxiety and lack of confidence in ability to summarize and mistakenly thinking it will be seen by peers was a factor in the low number of summaries submitted. One was submitted in Japanese, and four were clearly not in the student's own words and found to be copy-pasted directly from the article. Re-evaluation of methods to measure student progress is required. One solution may be dedicating class time to practicing simple summarization techniques. Highlighting key words and phrases from the article, reading aloud, being quizzed on what they read, or writing some main points from the reading article could also be implemented. Student suggestions for alternatives were gathered, but "read news in Japanese, and summarize in English", "read picture books", and "write opinions" did not adhere to ER theory.

## 7. Conclusion

This task designed to promote reading extensively through reading online news articles was found to be successfully completed by almost all students. Students were able to successfully and enjoyably read, select what was truly of interest to them, and report their reading progress at their own pace, which adhered to extensive reading principles. Online implementation posed no logistical issues. While habits that promote reading fluency were promoted and extensive reading was achieved by some students, the volume of required reading text needs to be increased, along with reconsid-

eration of how to gauge reading progress without hindering reading enjoyability. This would transform it from an extended reading task to a true extensive reading task.

This task did give increased exposure to international issues and current affairs, demonstrated by positive student reviews. However self-selection showed the risk of students remaining in their comfort zone and selecting domestic topics, so further encouragement of students to read about unknown topics is necessary. Data from this investigation showed students read more than they actually reported, and have become more motivated to learn about international current events through this ERT reading task.

While this task may be suitable during periods of ERT, the problems and expectations students face in selection of material, and reading autonomously are a barrier, especially for freshmen students. The method of evaluating reading progress does need to be carefully adjusted according to the abilities of students. Written summarization is not suitable as a blanket task for all students. Those not confident with writing or summarizing their reading were dissuaded by this task, and will need alternative methods of reporting reading progress.

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