

[研究ノート]

Learning From Our Learners: What Makes a Successful Reader?

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学習者から学ぶ：読解力を高めるには？

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要旨

読解力は言語習得のために必須の技能の一つである。読解力の高い学習者は、それが低い学習者と比べ語彙の習得が早いほか、定着度も高いとされる (Nation)。また、高い読解力があれば、学生は自信と学習過程への興味を持ちながら言語学習を進めることができる (Grabe)。学生の中には母国語、英語を問わず極めて読解力の高い者もいれば、読解力が乏しい者や読解力の向上に興味がない者もいる。本研究論文の目的は、読解力の高い学習者の原動力は何かを理解するとともに、かかる学習者の読書習慣や好みについて知ることにある。これらを理解することは、伸び悩む学習者の読解力向上の一助となる可能性がある。

Introduction

What does it mean to be a good reader? How can we teach good reading skills? Is it possible to create a good reader in a class, or are good readers naturally inclined that way? These are important questions for reading teachers to consider in the pursuit of best results. As a reading teacher, I am interested in learning how I can help weaker readers to improve. To this end, I conducted a survey of my strongest readers to learn about their reading habits and preferences with the hope of finding patterns of behavior that could be shared with, and taught to, their less proficient classmates.

Background

As part of my 4-skills English classes, my students participate in an extensive reading program. They are required to read 100,000 words in graded readers per semester. Every decision beyond the number of words they must read in graded readers is left up to the students to decide. This means which books they choose to read, the themes, the reading level, the genre, the publisher, the time of day, the place they read, and the minutes spent per reading session are all freely decided by the students. To confirm that the students are actually doing the reading, I utilize an internet-based quiz website called Mreader.org (Weinberg).

In a typical semester, nearly all of my students reach the reading goal. In addition to that, 1 or 2 students in every class will far exceed the target I set. I have had students who read double, triple or even quadruple the number of words I asked them to read. Over the course of several semesters, I have been surveying these outstanding readers to learn more about what makes them such successful readers. Twentyfour students' answers to my survey questions are written below, along with my commentary.

Survey Questions and Answers

1. Do you like reading in your native language? Yes / A little bit / No

Yes	A little bit	No
8	8	6

If you answered yes, what kinds of material do you like to read?

(The alphabetical answers correspond to those in the section below)

- A. Novels, self-help books, and mystery novels
- B. Books
- C. Recently I like Japanese history, especially at the end of the Edo era
- D. I like non-fiction stories
- E. Novels
- F. Mostly fantasy novels or science fiction

If you answered yes, how many hours do you read for fun per week?

- A. 1-2 hours of pleasure reading because she is too busy with other assignments
- B. 5 hours
- C. 8-10 hours on the train
- D. Less than 1 hour per week
- E. 5 hours per week if I have time
- F. At least 20 hours per week

Analysis:

Considering that this survey was given to highly proficient readers, I expected far more students to enjoy reading in their native language. The fact that only 38% of respondents answered unequivocally in the affirmative was surprising. Additionally, I expected that these strong readers would spend far more time reading each week than they indicated. Again, this was a surprising result, however, several students said that although they like reading in their own language, they couldn't find the time in between their assignments to read for pleasure.

2. Do you like reading in English? Yes / A little bit / No

Yes	A little bit	No
9	9	4

If you answered yes, what kinds of material do you like to read?

(The alphabetical answers correspond to those in the section below)

- A. I usually read romantic stories because the the plot is usually easy to understand and there are not so many characters. That helps me continue to read books.
- B. Books or interview articles
- C. I like reading material which is involved in M-reader
- D. Fiction
- E. Mostly fantasy novels or science fiction

If you answered yes, how many hours do you read for fun per week?

- A. At the beginning of the semester I read in English for more than five hours every week to get as many words as possible (on Mreader). However, now I just spend one or two hours extensive reading per week.
- B. 5 hours
- C. About 4-7 hours per week
- D. At least 20 hours per week

Analysis:

The results of this question were nearly the same as question 1, and that is to be expected. Students who like to read in their own language also like to read in English. It is a little surprising that the number of students who don't like to read in their native language is slightly higher than those who don't like to read in English. My guess is that the materials they read in English are simpler than those in their own language, and therefore more relaxing and non-demanding. The question did not ask if the English they were reading was for pleasure or for my extensive reading assignment. I would assume it is for the latter, and therefore the texts were always graded readers.

3. What kind of books did you most like to read for extensive reading? Why?

- A. Cinderella, Wizard of Oz, Romeo and Juliet, and other famous books
- B. Adventure stories (3 students) where I could feel the atmosphere of overseas and nature
- C. Detective stories (2 students) and love stories because I can see the reasoning and the stories are easy to understand characters' feelings
- D. Biographies because I can learn about the people and horror books because I can read them quickly
- E. Novels are fun to read
- F. Fantasy and Sci-fi (2 students)
- G. Culture travel and foreign countries
- H. Classics because they are famous and interesting

- I. Romantic stories (they are easy) and books that explain nature and culture (for the vocabulary)
- J. Mystery
- K. Culture and history
- L. Family stories and love stories
- M. Adventure, family, animal stories
- N. Romantic love stories are easy to understand
- O. Short stories with few character because they are easy to understand (2 students)
- P. Movies because they are easy to understand and watch the movie later
- Q. Survival and adventure stories are easy and exciting
- R. Mystery and adventure
- S. Classics are really famous and I felt I had to read them because it would make me look highly educated

Analysis:

Nearly all of the students' responses showed that they read strategically, regardless of the genre. This means they chose books in which they knew they could pass the quiz and receive credit for their effort. This is a smart idea and one that less savvy readers don't understand very well. If a student feels she is not understanding a book, she should feel comfortable putting it down and choosing a more appropriate book. Too often students try to read books that are too difficult for them and then get frustrated because they cannot understand the book well enough to pass the quiz. Such students quickly give up reading and don't reach the heights of their more successful classmates. I was interested to see there was such a diversity in the type of books the students chose. There was no one overwhelming favorite among these 24 students, although detective, adventure, and romantic stories were chosen by several students.

4. Did you notice any difference in the books depending on the publishing company (Penguin, MacMillen, Cambridge, Oxford, etc.)?

Difference Noticed	Number of Students
No difference	14
Penguin is more academic	1
Penguin vocab is easier	1
Penguin vocab is more difficult	1
MacMillen had more pictures	1
MacMillen had no word count	1
Oxford because he liked horror stories and Oxford published more of those	1

Analysis:

The answers to this question were varied, however, the vast majority found no difference among the different publishing companies. Those students who did mention differences disagreed about what was different (was Penguin easier or more academic?). The take away from these answers is there is generally no difference between the publishing companies.

5. What things did you look for when you were choosing a book to read? (Level, genre, length, publisher, cover art, number of characters, etc.)?

Point of Interest	Number of Students
Length	12
Level	7
Genre	7
Cover Art	6
Interesting Introduction	3
Publisher	1
Title	1
Short Stories	1

Analysis:

Students were allowed to choose as many answers to this question as they wanted. The most common answer was length, followed by level, and (surprisingly) cover art. I mentioned before about these students being strategic readers, and that means they made good choices when deciding which books to read. They based their decision on the length of the book which closely correlates to the level of the book too. If the book was too long, they would not be able to remember all the events and would not be able to pass the quiz. If the book was too short, it was likely too easy for them and somewhat boring. This shows the importance of reading the appropriate level of book to being a successful reader.

6. Which level best describes the books that you read? Above my level / At my level / Below my level / Much below my level

Above my level	At my level	Below my level	Much below my level
0	13	10	0

Analysis:

Successful readers are aware of their level and choose to read books that are at or below their level in order to pass the reading quizzes. This is a predictable result, but also an informative result that is worth sharing with students at the beginning of the semester. The choice of which book to read can determine success or failure with reading.

7. Why did you choose to read those books (in question 6) ?

Reason	Number of Students
Could enjoy reading it without stress	5
Did not want to fail the quiz	4
Could read it quickly and pass the test and I didn't get bored	4
Too easy would be boring / too difficult would be too hard	3
Easy books didn't require dictionaries and I didn't get bored	2
At my level could help me improve my reading skills	1
Interesting	1
Comfortable	1
By chance	1
Chose the book depending on how much time she had available to read it	1
Easy books help me increase my reading speed	1

Analysis:

The results of this question clearly show the priorities for the students. Their primary concern was reading quickly and enjoyably without any stress. They also placed a premium on passing the book quiz so that they could get credit for their effort. This is completely predictable and expected of successful readers. The lesson to learn here is that even though the students are successful readers, that does not mean they choose books that are above their level for extensive reading. Instead they recognize the importance of finding a level that they are comfortable with so that they can read smoothly and continuously until they finish it.

8. Did you enjoy using Mreader.org? Why / Why not?

Yes	No
18	3
A. I could read many books and see the difference between Japanese and English B. Collecting words is good motivation (2 students) C. Provided motivation to keep studying (2 students) D. Enjoyed reading during commute time E. Motivated by classmates' success F. Easy to use G. Enjoyed watching the word count increase H. Felt satisfaction passing quizzes I. Could confirm her understanding J. Could see classmates' word count and that was motivating K. Can see exactly how many words I read (4 students) L. The books were easy M. If not for Mreader I would not read any English books N. Good opportunity to read famous books O. Collecting covers was fun and exciting	A. Didn't like the deadlines B. Reading is hard C. Questions are too detailed D. Minor details were hard to remember

Analysis:

The overwhelming majority of students enjoyed using the Internet-based quiz site Mreader. This answer is hugely reassuring because Mreader is an essential component of my extensive reading program. Certainly it is possible to use other means to assess the students' performance but Mreader is without question the simplest for students and teachers to use. If the students do not approve of the system, they would likely not try as hard to reach their reading goals and the whole program would be less successful. The reasons why the students enjoyed the program are listed in the table, with the most common answer being that they can see exactly how many words they have read. This answer shows that the students are

goal-oriented and keenly aware of what they need to do reach their reading targets. Students who did not like using Mreader were less enthusiastic about reading in general. On the other hand, the most common answer among students who liked using Mreader was that it allowed them to monitor their progress book-by-book. This is why Mreader is a key part in promoting positive outcomes in extensive reading.

9. Do you think you would have read as much if I had asked you to write a book report about each book that you read? If yes, please explain.

Yes	No
3	18
A. Because I would have to know about a book deeply B. I could get more experience in writing English, not just reading it C. Because I want to write precisely	A. I have to know the story more to write a book report B. It would take time and destroy the fun in reading C. It is more troublesome than Mreader D. A book report would feel like homework E. I would write about books that I like but wouldn't read as much F. It would be hard to write so many book reports G. I would choose shorter and easier books

Analysis:

The results of this question symmetrically mirror the previous question. Again a majority of students concurred that writing book reports for each book they read would be impractical and would not lead to better (or even equal) results. Successful readers like reading, but not always writing about what they read. There were a few students who said they would have read as much even if they were asked to write a book report, but I am skeptical given what I know about my students' attitudes towards writing homework.

10. Did you enjoy collecting the book covers every time you passed a quiz? Yes/ Didn't matter

Yes	It didn't matter
16	6

Analysis:

This feature of Mreader was added a few years ago specifically to motivate the students. The idea is that the students gain a sense of accomplishment and progress by seeing the book covers of the books they have read. The students have told me that they really like seeing the book covers represented on their pages because it feels like a badge of merit, and something that they could feel proud about. The answers to my survey question reflect that feeling, and the only surprise is the students who said that it didn't matter to them either way.

11. Did the idea of receiving extra credit in my class motivate you to read more? Yes/ Didn't matter

Yes	It didn't matter
18	6

Analysis:

I expected the answer to this question to be unanimous. The only surprise here is that 100% of the students were not motivated by the idea of receiving extra credit. A little bit of investigating reveals that some students answered both yes and no to the question. That means that at the beginning of the semester they felt one way, but as the semester progressed they changed their minds about the issue. It is natural to expect extra credit to be appealing and motivational for students, especially for an activity that they enjoy doing anyway. The lesson to be learned from this question is for teachers: providing extra credit encourages students to try harder.

12. Did you ever stop reading a book before you reached the end?
 If yes, why did you stop reading it?

Yes	No
12	12
a. I didn't like the contents b. The book was too difficult (2 students) c. It was boring (4 students) d. Many times. It was too difficult and wasted my time e. I didn't have much time to finish reading and I forgot the whole story f. Some books have too many characters and I could not remember all of them g. I had too much other homework h. I didn't finish reading it before I had to return it to the library	

Analysis:

The answer to this question were divided exactly evenly between yes and no. Strategic readers understand that continuing to read a book that they don't enjoy or understand serves no purpose and wastes time. That accounts for most of the "yes" answers. However, strategic readers also make good choices about which books to begin reading, so it makes sense that if the students choose their books well at the start they wouldn't need to stop reading them halfway through.

13. Did you ever fail a Mreader quiz even though you thought you completely understood the book? Yes / No. (If yes, please tell me the book title and maybe I can fix the quiz).

Yes	No
8	12

Analysis:

The quizzes for each book are written by volunteer contributors from around the world. Efforts are made to ensure that the quiz questions are accurate and reasonable. Occasionally a poorly written quiz slips through which causes confusion and distrust of the whole program. When these quizzes are discovered they are quickly edited to fall in line with the standards of the website. It is unfortunate that mistakes do occur, but in every human endeavor there is that possibility. I always inform my students that there is a small possibility that the quiz is wrong and that if they notice any mistakes to let me know. Over the last 6 years, I have been told about three quizzes and those quizzes have been fixed. On the whole, the vast majority of the quizzes are correct. The majority of my students did not fail any quizzes when they thought they completely understood the book.

14. Do you think you will continue to read books in English even after our class is finished?

Yes	No	Maybe
13	7	2

Analysis:

The main purpose of my extensive reading program is to encourage the students to read. An additional purpose is to create an interest in reading which the students will take with them after the semester ends. If the students continue reading in English, they will continue to improve their ability and their confidence. Therefore, of all the questions on my survey, this was among the most important. While I am pleased to see that a large majority of the students answered “yes” or “maybe,” I am a slightly discouraged to see that seven students said they would not continue reading in English after the semester ended. This result shows that being a good reader does not automatically equal enjoying the process of reading. I tried to encourage reading by allowing the students to choose their own reading materials, provided they chose graded reading books. I restricted

the students' reading material to graded readers for several reasons. Firstly, the website Mreader.org only has quizzes for graded readers. Without the quizzes, I would not be able to measure how much the students understood the books they read, or how many words they read. There are many more good points of graded readers: they help readers focus on vocabulary and grammar that are within the students' comprehension; the stories in graded readers are accessible to the students because they are easily understandable; they improve students' confidence in reading (Pesce). It is possible that these students would have answered differently if they were allowed to read materials other than graded readers. This seems unlikely, however, because the question was very open and asked generally if the students would continue to read books in English. Therefore, it seems that those reluctant readers simply do not enjoy reading, in spite of the fact that they are good at it. There were (and perhaps will always be) students who do not enjoy reading and that cannot be changed over a 15-week reading program. Perhaps if reluctant readers were pushed to read for the entire year they would start to love reading, but that question must be left for another research project.

Feel free to write any other comments you have about reading. Thank you!

1. At first, I did not like reading books. However, M-reader was a good opportunity for me to read books. Therefore, I will keep reading books after class is ended.
2. I have felt that my reading speed is absolutely faster than before I started this extensive reading. I really appreciate you because this reading task has made my English ability improve
3. I really enjoyed reading this year
4. I got interested in Sherlock Holmes because of M-reader!
5. I think extensive reading is a very good way to improve reading skills. A library in this campus should have more books for it.
6. I didn't have enough time to study English due to studying a second foreign language and activities of seminar. However, my TOEIC

score was higher than it was last year (my score increased by 100 points!) I was really surprised at the result. It was absolutely thanks to reading. I felt reading books is more fun than just studying English with textbooks. I just started reading instead of using my cellphone on the train. There were no difficulties for me, so I want to keep this good habit.

Analysis:

The importance of extensive reading (and the Mreader website) comes through clearly in the comments above. The first student speaks to the ability of the website to motivate uninterested students into reading more books. This is an unambiguous virtue that all teachers should be made aware of. The second student asserts that the more reading she does, the faster she becomes at reading. Again, this is a good thing. The inference that can be made from the third student's comment is that this year was more enjoyable than previous years because of Mreader. When students enjoy the process it becomes intrinsically rewarding and that helps propel the virtuous circle of learning. The student who wrote the fourth comment has developed an interest in the Sherlock Holmes series, which is likely to lead to more reading in the future. The fifth student will hopefully ask the library to order more books to further his opportunities to read. The sixth student credits all the reading she did for Mreader for improving her TOEIC score by 100 points. I can not help but feel satisfied by all this positive feedback.

Conclusion

Reading has been shown to improve language acquisition. Reading helps students learn vocabulary, build confidence, improve reading fluency, and maintain interest in the learning process. Some students are better readers than others, so the intention of this research paper was to understand what motivated successful readers so that I could better assist my less proficient students. In the process of analyzing this data, I learned that using the website Mreader.org significantly encourages more reading. Compared to asking students to write book reports after they finished

reading a book, my students overwhelmingly preferred the website option. Additionally, awarding extra credit for reading beyond the target goals was (unsurprisingly) motivational for a majority of my students. It is interesting to note that only 8 out of 24 respondents said that they liked reading in their native language, and 9 students said they enjoyed reading in English. The majority of the students who answered my questionnaire either did not enjoy reading or only enjoyed it a little bit. In spite of that, these students read an exceptional amount of words during the course. It would appear that their desire for extra credit, combined with the website motivated them to read even more than was required. Additionally, these students were very tactical with their reading choices. The decision about which book to read is completely left up to the students, but they need to have proper guidance so that they don't attempt to read books that are too difficult. It does not take a "natural" reader to be successful with extensive reading. Instead, it takes a strategic reader. My successful students chose books that they could easily read and that would keep their interest. They were aware of their level and successfully chose books that were within their comprehension. If they did not enjoy a particular book, they knew they could freely put it down and start a new one. These reading decisions led to superior results and should be shared with other students. These are the lessons that can be learned from my research and can help future students read more books in my classes.

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