

OUT-OF-CLASS EXTENSIVE READING IN JAPANESE AS A SECOND LANGUAGE: ENHANCING LEARNER AUTONOMY BEYOND THE CLASSROOM

Wataru Takahashi

(takahashi.wataru.o0@tufs.ac.jp)

Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, Japan

Tae Umino

(uminotae@tufs.ac.jp)

Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, Japan

Abstract

As extensive reading (ER) gains popularity in Japanese language teaching, three types of ER have been identified, namely, classroom-based ER (instigated by the teacher), out-of-class ER (optionally organized by the teacher/facilitator out of class), and autonomous out-of-class ER (instigated by the learner). Although ER encourages learners to read in the L2 extensively in and out of class, it is unknown whether engagement in out-of-class ER leads learners to become more autonomous in ER. The authors implemented out-of-class Japanese ER sessions for international students at a Japanese university. A group of around ten students gathered voluntarily for the weekly sessions led by a facilitator and using selected books. At the end of eight months, six of the participants who were then leaving the sessions were interviewed. Seven months later, three of the six were interviewed again on whether they had continued out-of-class ER autonomously. Based on the analysis, we discuss whether out-of-class ER may serve as a step towards autonomous ER and, if so, what aspects of it may contribute to the process. Pedagogical implications, including suggestions for enhancing learner autonomy beyond the classroom, are discussed as well as issues for future research.

1 Introduction

Extensive Reading (ER) has increasingly been recognized as effective activity in the field of L2 teaching, including Japan (Day & Bamford, 1998; Awano, Kawamoto, & Matsuda, 2012). Day and Bamford (1998) reviewed empirical research examining the effectiveness of ER in L2, and noted that it was effective in enhancing reading ability, motivation, vocabulary, language competence, writing ability and spelling. Moreover, recently in Japanese language teaching, there have been studies on incidental vocabulary learning (Mikami & Harada, 2011) and intrinsic motivation (Ninomiya, 2013, 2014) in ER in addition to practical reports in various contexts (Awano et al., 2012; Kumada & Suzuki, 2015; Okada & Takahashi, 2012). Takahashi (2016) identified three types of ER, namely, 1) classroom-based ER, 2) out-of-class ER, and 3) autonomous out-of-class ER. To clarify, classroom-based ER is instigated by teacher in the classroom, out-of-class ER is optionally organized by the teacher/facilitator out of class, autonomous out-of-class ER is instigated by learner out of class. Takahashi also pointed out that most studies have focused on classroom-based ER and there have been few studies on out-of-class ER and autonomous out-of-class ER especially in Japanese language

teaching. However, as environments surrounding L2 learners have changed, it is necessary to examine and categorise the diverse learning opportunities that exist beyond the classroom in order to help learners exploit them (Benson, 2011). In this context, therefore, out-of-class ER is expected to develop as a bridge from classroom-based ER to autonomous out-of-class ER.

In this paper, we first review the definitions of ER, and characterize three types of ER: classroom-based ER, out-of-class ER and autonomous out-of-class ER in terms of learner autonomy. We next describe our out-of-class ER project “Extensive Reading Sessions in Japanese (ERSJ)” at Tokyo University of Foreign Studies (TUFS), and report on two longitudinal interviews with participants of the ER sessions. In the first stage of our research (Research I), which focused on learning during the ER sessions, we conducted interviews with six participants who were then leaving the ERSJ after having participated in the sessions for 4-8 months. Four of the six participants participated in the sessions continuously and all six of them read autonomously out of class. In the second stage of the study (Research II), 7 months after Research I, we conducted follow-up interviews with three of the six participants interviewed in Research I. The interviews focused on whether they had continued autonomous out-of-class ER on their own even after leaving the ERSJ. The data revealed that two of the ex-participants had continued autonomous out-of-class ER. Based on the analysis of these two studies, we discuss whether out-of-class ER may serve as a step towards autonomous ER and, if so, what aspects of it may contribute to the process. Pedagogical implications, including suggestions for enhancing learner autonomy beyond the classroom are discussed as well as issues for future research.

2 Literature review

2.1 Extensive reading

The definition of ER as an educational/learning activity varies depending on the purposes of the ER sessions and how they are conducted (Takahashi, 2016). In this study, ER is defined as “Learners reading extensively and with enjoyment, choosing books according to their language abilities and with the aim of using a dictionary as little as possible”.

ER for learners of Japanese has been based on the insights from research into ER in English (e.g., Day & Bamford, 1998; Krashen, 2004; Sakai & Kanda, 2005). Awano (2012) proposed four fundamental rules for ER in Japanese: 1) start from 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. These rules, which are used in the ER Sessions at TUFS as well, were created on the assumption that learners will naturally read a lot of books if they find the process enjoyable and not too difficult. That is, they are based on educational considerations in order to enable learners to be autonomous readers.

2.2 Learner autonomy and three types of ER activities

As mentioned above, ER is deeply relevant to learner autonomy since it inherently has the purpose of having learners read extensively in and out of classroom. Several recent studies have dealt with fostering learner autonomy through ER programs (e.g., Channuan & Wasanasomsithi, 2012; Imrie, 2007; Mede, İnceçay, & İnceçay, 2013). Learner autonomy is

defined as “the ability to take charge of one’s own learning” (Holec, 1981, p. 3). Benson (2011) characterized learner autonomy as comprising of three dimensions: learning management¹, cognitive processes², and learning content³. To use Benson’s (2011) categorization, this may be paraphrased in the context of ER as follows: learning management is involved in participation in the ER sessions, setting learning goals, evaluation, and continuing ER. Cognitive processes are involved in carrying out reading activities in ER. Learning content is involved in learners’ selections of books. In this study, an autonomous learner is defined as one who can take charge of one’s own learning in these three dimensions.

The extent to which learners exercise autonomy in ER is also influenced by the types of ER. As Table 1 shows, three types of ER activities (Takahashi, 2016) are characterized in terms of degrees to which learners can exercise autonomy with reference to various frameworks of reference about assessment of learner autonomy (Benson, 2011; Dickinson, 1987; Holec, 2009; Umino, 2005). “TF” means teacher/facilitator, and “P” means participant/learner in the ER sessions. Different character size represents the extent to which the teacher/facilitator and the participant have control over decision-making concerning the corresponding areas. In 1) classroom-based ER, the teacher/facilitator basically decides learning objectives, participation in the ER activity, environmental arrangement, evaluation and management. Although the learner sometimes makes a decision about the way they read books and select books for the ER sessions, the teacher/facilitator often prepares them for it. In 3) autonomous out-of-class ER, on the other hand, the learner essentially decides all the items while the teacher/facilitator occasionally may recommend books for them to select. 2) Out-of-class ER, which is the focus of this paper, is located between these two levels. The teacher/facilitator mainly plans and manages the activities, and also prepares and provides books to the participants. On the one hand, because this activity is implemented out of class, learners can voluntarily decide to participate in the sessions and define the learning objectives by themselves. The teacher/facilitator decides how to read books, and provides learners with appropriate advice. However, learners are still free to choose the way of reading to some extent if they don’t want to observe the rules of ER. In addition, the teacher/facilitator basically respects learners’ choice of books and reading pace. Based on the above considerations, we regard out-of-class ER as a form of out-of-class learning (Benson 2007), which can possibly lead learners to become more autonomous extensive readers.

¹ Activities related to metacognitive aspects such as deciding the objectives of a task on one’s own, selecting the way of completing the task, monitoring pace and time to work on the task, evaluating after the task.

² Activities related to mechanisms of information processing system such as learning strategies (e.g., analyzing and integrating language materials and guessing the rules).

³ Activities related to the control of the learning content through selecting learning materials and so on.

Table 1. Three types of ER activity in terms of learner autonomy

Items/activities	Dimensions	Decision maker	1) Classroom-based ER	2) Out-of-class ER	3) Autonomous out-of-class ER
Definition and selection of learning objectives		TF/P	TF	TF/P	P
Flexibility to participate		TF/P	TF	P	P
Environmental arrangement	Learning management	TF/P	TF	TF	P
Evaluation		TF/P	TF	P	P
Management		TF/P	TF	TF/P	P
How to read books	Cognitive processes	TF/P	TF/P	TF/TF/P	TF/P
Book selection	Learning content	TF/P	TF/P	TF/P	TF/P

(F: Teacher/Facilitator P: Participant/Learner)

3 Method

3.1 Out-of-class ER “Extensive Reading Sessions in Japanese”

“Extensive Reading Sessions in Japanese” (ERSJ) were started as an educational support for students learning at the Japanese Language Center for International Students at TUFS in November 2014. They took place once a week as an optional out-of-class activity⁴. Each session lasted for 90 minutes. The participants were international students learning at the JLCIS.

The purposes of these sessions were: 1) to develop reading skills such as reading speed and guessing strategies; 2) to allow participants the opportunity to interact with each other; 3) to support participants make the transition to autonomous out-of-class ER. The students got together in a classroom and at a time arranged by the facilitator, and selected books they wanted to read from books provided by the facilitator.

⁴ The ERSJs were implemented in the following terms: the first term: November 2014-February 2015 (11 times), Second term: April-July 2015 (12 times), the third term: July-September 2015 (6 times), the fourth term: October 2015-January 2016 (13 times), the fifth term: February-March 2016 (3 times).

Over 250 books were provided for each session which consist of Japanese Graded Readers, picture books, magazines, mangas, novels and so on. In each session, the participants choose a book and start to read while observing the ER rules as much as possible. After reading the book, they filled in a book record which ask them to write information of the book they read (e.g. title, number of pages, level of difficulty) and their impressions of them. Book talk sessions were also held for about 30 minutes at the end, in which participants introduced the book they have read to each other. The first author was present in the classroom as facilitator for each session, preparing the books, helping learners to select the appropriate books and to continue reading, and facilitating the book talk sessions.

Even though the ER sessions were conducted as optional activity (that is, students cannot earn any credits by attendance), about 10 students of beginner to expert level came regularly to the weekly session. They continued to join the sessions for 4 to 15 months from the first term to the second term.

3.2 Research method

This study is composed of two longitudinal interviews. In Research I, we conducted first interviews with the participants of ERSJ at the end of the second period of ERSJ in July 2014. The aim of the study was to understand learners' perceptions of the ERSJ and their autonomous out-of-class ER activities during the period. Interviewees were six participants (A, B, C, D, E, F) who attended the ERSJ from April to July 2015. Interviewees D, E, and F continued to participate in the sessions after the first period. Research II was conducted seven months after Research I. We interviewed the same informants of Research II with the aim of understanding whether or not they continued autonomous out-of-class ER after leaving the ERSJ. Four of the six former participants who had participated regularly (A, B, D, E) took part in the second round of interviews. However, interviewee D was still participating in the ERSJ when Research II interviews were conducted. Therefore, we focus only on the three participants who had stopped attending the ERSJ (A, B, E) in this paper to see whether or not they had continued out-of-class ER after leaving the ERSJ and whether their perceptions of ER in general had changed. Table 2 shows the background of the interviewees. Interviewees A and B belonged to other domestic universities and were preparing for the examination of graduate school at the time of the second interview. On the other hand, interviewee E had already finished his study abroad in Japan and had returned to his country, where he was attending university and doing several part-time jobs. His second interview was, therefore, conducted in his home country. The two rounds of interviews were conducted in a semi-structured fashion. Semi-structured interview is an exploratory method in which, as Dörnyei (2007) notes, "although there is a set of pre-prepared guiding questions and prompts, the format is open-ended and the interviewee is encouraged to elaborate on the issues raised in an exploratory manner" (p. 136). Interviewees A and B, whose Japanese was at the beginner level responded in their L1 (Spanish) through an interpreter, and E, whose Japanese was at the expert level responded in Japanese.

Interview items were prepared, based on Benson's (2011) three dimensions of autonomy with the aim of exploring the interviewees' perceptions in these three domains. The items on learning management covered the following areas: reasons for participating in the ERSJ, what they learned from participating in them (Research I), whether they continued

autonomous out-of-class ER, whether there were changes in the amount of books they read, and the environment of reading (such as whether they read alone or with other people after leaving the ERSJs) (Research II). The items on cognitive processes covered the following areas: learners' perceptions of the four rules employed in ER (Research I), whether they still employed these rules in out-of-class ER, and any difficulties they found in autonomous out-of-class ER after leaving the sessions (Research II). Finally, the items on learning content covered how they selected the books (Research I), whether they had access to enough reading resources, and whether there were any changes in the ways they selected books in autonomous out-of-class ER (Research II). The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed in accordance with the three dimensions described above.

Table 2. Background of the interviewees

	<i>A</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>C</i>	<i>D</i>	<i>E</i>	<i>F</i>
Gender	<i>female</i>	<i>female</i>	male	female	<i>male</i>	female
Age	<i>20's</i>	<i>20's</i>	20's	30's	<i>20's</i>	20's
First language	<i>Spanish</i>	<i>Spanish</i>	Spanish	Indonesian	<i>Serbian</i>	Russian
Japanese proficiency at Research I	<i>elementary</i>	<i>elementary</i>	elementary	expert	<i>expert</i>	expert
Total participation time	<i>4 months</i>	<i>4 months</i>	1 months	15 months	<i>5 months</i>	8 months
Affiliation at Research II	<i>research student in Japan</i>	<i>research student in Japan</i>	research student in Japan	research student in TUFS	<i>student in the home country</i>	student in the home country

Italic: interviewees in both Research I and Research II

4 Results

The analysis of the data demonstrates that two of the three former participants in ERSJ (Participant B and E) continued autonomous out-of-class ER even after leaving the ERSJ (Figure 1). What aspects of the out-of-class ER may have contributed to their continuing the ER autonomously? In this section we report on the analysis of the two longitudinal interviews focusing on the learners' perceptions on learning management, cognitive processes, and learning content. By describing and comparing the analysis in Research I and II, we aim to understand learners' perceptions in these domains and their longitudinal changes and then to discuss what aspects of out-of-class ER may contribute to autonomous out-of-class ER.

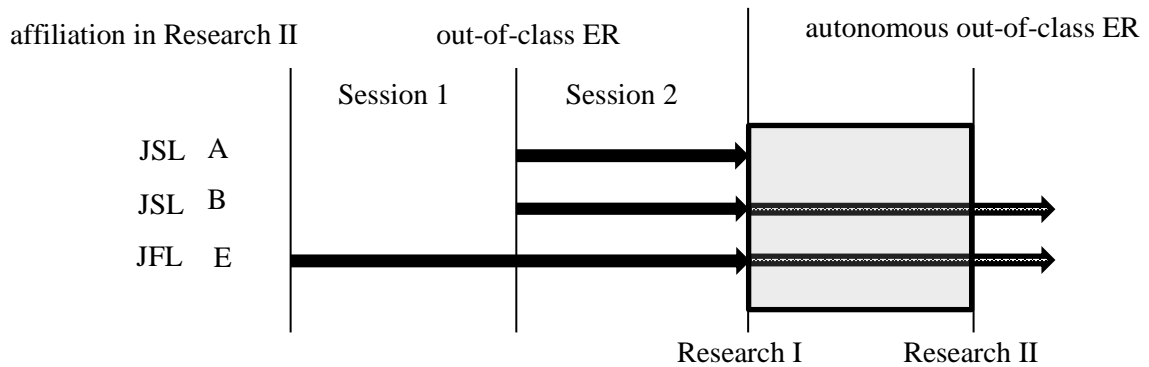


Fig. 1. Continuation of autonomous out-of-class ER

4.1 Learning management

4.1.1 Research I

(i) Participants' objectives in the sessions

In Research I, the six interviewees were first asked the reason why they had participated in the ERSJ. Their responses fall under four categories:

Firstly, the interviewees had specific purposes such as preparation for graduate school, development of vocabulary, or knowledge about Japanese culture. As mentioned earlier in Section 3, the ERSJs were basically designed to develop the reading skill and learner autonomy. It seems, however, that the participants in the ERSJ defined their own objectives, depending on their needs.

The second reason relates to the ease of learning management. For example, one interviewee aimed to participate in the ERSJ every week, while another came to the sessions in order to make an opportunity to read the books in Japanese. In other words, it would have been difficult for them to read books continuously if they had not participated in the ERSJ. Coming to the sessions made it easier for learners to select books and to find time to read. It appears that out-of-class ER promoted long-term reading more than full autonomous out-of-class reading because participants could manage their learning easily during the ER sessions.

The third reason relates to benefits in the affective domains, namely, that they could enjoy the book content and relax during the ERSJ. Because they could easily select the appropriate books matching their current linguistic levels, they could enjoy the content. Therefore, the role of the facilitator, who helped participants to select books, cannot be overlooked. In addition, it seems that being able to relax is due to the ER sessions' high degree of freedom, and to the presence of peers.

Finally, the responses highlighted the importance of socio-interactive aspects of the ERSJ. Meeting with the facilitator and other participants each week, they were able to share their impressions of the books. This also helped them to continue coming to the sessions. This is a characteristic different from autonomous out-of-class ER, where learners basically read alone. Though some previous research has touched on the socio-interactive effects of ER

activity (Awano et al., 2012; Sakai & Nishizawa, 2014), there has been little attempt to investigate this aspect in any depth. Since the socio-interactive aspect is also related to the ease of learning management and affective benefits, this is also an important factor in promoting the continuous ER.

(ii) Participants' learning in the ER sessions in Japanese

Participants were next asked to self-evaluate their learning during the ERSJ. Three interviewees with elementary level Japanese answered that ER had a positive effect on their grammar and vocabulary, for instance, "Having exposure to natural Japanese, I could understand how to use grammar I have learnt", and "I could talk with friends using the vocabulary in the books I have already read". In the Japanese language, difficulties with Kanji (Chinese characters) can become a barrier particularly for learners from non-Kanji-using regions. One interviewee replied, "ERSJ helped me to lose my fear of learning Kanji". It seems that the ER had the effect of decreasing learners' resistance in Japanese learning. In this ERSJ, the facilitator had selected only books with Kana superscript for the ERSJ. Such a practice of ER is effective in decreasing learners' feel of fear or resistance towards Kanji and Japanese language overall. Based on the above responses, rules 1) ("start from easy books") and 4) ("get a different book if you feel the current one is too hard or boring to read") seem to have been more important for the elementary-level participants.

On the other hand, the expert-level interviewees answered that they developed abilities of guessing from the context, identifying the keyword in the book, and reading faster. For the expert-level learners, therefore, the other two rules ("read without using dictionary, and "skip over the words you don't understand") seemed to be more important.

These results suggest that not only did the participants feel certain benefits, but they also started reading books using the rules of ER.

(iii) Autonomous out-of-class ER during the ER sessions

Lastly, we asked the interviewees whether they read books autonomously out of the ER sessions. They all answered that they had read books outside of the ERSJ. Apart from borrowing books from the Japanese Graded Readers series provided in the ERSJ, they also acquired mangas (B, C, F) and novels (D, E) by themselves. Additionally, we asked them about their general reading experiences in L1 and L2. All the interviewees originally liked to read books in L1 and this reading habit may have influenced their autonomous reading out of class. However, regarding the fact that they had borrowed the books from the ERSJ to engage in autonomous ER on their own, we can assume that their participation in out-of-class ER had some influence in fostering their simultaneous autonomous out-of-class ER.

4.1.2 Research II

(i) Continuation of autonomous out-of-class ER

In this section, we report on the analysis of Research II from the perspective of learning management. Interviews were conducted seven months after Research I, which was at the end

of the ER sessions. We first asked three ex-participants whether they continued to read books autonomously on their own. Two of the three (B, E) answered that they had continued autonomous out-of-class ER. In other words, these two interviewees read autonomously by themselves without any ER sessions. We could say that these are cases in which transfer from out-of-class ER to autonomous out-of-class ER was successful.

Interviewee A who did not continue out-of-class ER was mainly learning her specialized field as a research student though she still took Japanese lessons. She told us that she had her hands full with her current study and research in the new university. She also communicated mainly in English in class. Therefore, the opportunity to use Japanese had decreased dramatically. For these reasons, she could not continue out-of-class ER autonomously. Interviewee B was also in a new university as a research student. Like interviewee A, she was very busy with her research, but she continued to read extensively out of class. She read mangas on her way to her part-time job on the train. Interviewee E also continued to read extensively after going back to his country. He read young-adult fiction and novels when going to his university and his company. He also read them before going to sleep at night.

(ii) Change in the amount of reading

We next asked the three participants how the amount they read had changed compared to Research I. All the interviewees replied that they read more books than before.

B said that her reading amount had increased since she had gotten used to reading, and could read more easily. She also told us that another reason she could read much more was that her Japanese had improved through her study during the course of the past seven months. E answered that he had continued to read books in order to improve the competence of Japanese, and to make good use of his free time.

As mentioned above, it seems that various factors contributed to their continuing autonomous out-of-class ER. Habituation of reading was helped by the improvement of their Japanese skills and positive attitudes toward reading in Japanese, despite the fact they had changed their Japanese learning environment and had become busier than before.

4.2 Cognitive processes: perceptions of the rules of ER

4.2.1 Research I

We next turn to the second dimension of learner autonomy, that is, the cognitive processes. In particular, how the learners perceived the four fundamental rules of ER employed was one of our greatest concerns.

In Research I, most interviewees showed a positive attitude towards rule 1) “Start from easy books” and rule 4) “Get a different book if you feel the current one is too hard or boring to read”. However, there were controversies over rule 2) “Read without using a dictionary” and rule 3) “Skip over the words you don’t understand”. There were some positive opinions about rule 2), such as “It is good for me not to use a dictionary because I cannot concentrate on the content of the book with it”. However, there were several negative opinions, such as, “There are really important words among those I don’t understand”. Regarding rule 3), they showed some positive responses, such as “I often understand the words when I read the next page”.

At the same time, they also gave negative opinions such as “there are important parts to really understand the context”.

In their autonomous out-of-class ER while participating in the ERSJs, participants mostly observed rules 1), 3), and 4). Thus, by following these rules, they acquired a new way of reading when reading extensively. However, they showed more resistance to rule 2 (“read without a dictionary”); five out of the six participants reported they did not observe rule 2). One participant (Interviewee A) reported she did not use a dictionary while reading the book, but in fact she did refer to it afterwards.

In summary, the interviewees maintained the ER rules to some extent during both in-class and out-of-class ER and in autonomous out-of-class ER, although they resisted using some rules (rules 2 and 3) partially.

4.2.2 Research II

Table 3 summarizes learners’ perceptions of the four rules in Research I and II. (Note that only B and E who continued the out-of-class ER responded to this question in Research II.) Compared with Research I, the participants had not changed their opinions in general and followed the rules of ERSJ in autonomous ER.

Nevertheless, interviewee B made an interesting point that these rules may be contradictory at times. As B was a great fan of manga, she did not mind the linguistic difficulty of the books when reading them. She could also generally infer the meanings of the unknown words from the pictures and could easily skip them (following rule 3). For these reasons, she did not feel the need to follow rule 1) (“Start from easy books”).

As with Research I, attitudes towards rule 2 were still negative overall. However, both B and E reported that they found it troublesome to use the dictionary especially on public transportation and so tended to use it after having finished reading the whole or some part of a book, inferring from context or illustrations.

We next asked them whether they had any difficulties when reading extensively out of class on their own. Interviewee B answered that she found difficulties in reading and understanding Kanji, but she could guess the meaning because of kana annotations beside Kanji. However, she did use the dictionary to confirm them after reading the whole book when she had the keywords she really wanted to look up. On the other hand, interviewee E said that it was difficult to understand the specific expressions such as idioms in Japanese. When he found these idioms, he made it a rule to confirm how to read Kanji and the meanings with his electronic dictionary or smartphone after reading some paragraphs. The interesting point is that they both avoided looking up every unknown word while reading and used the dictionary only after having finished reading the book. Consequently, they followed rule 2, a recommended way of reading in the ERSJ.

Nonetheless, all the interviewees pointed out that these rules of ER could not be applied in all learning situations. For example, B said that her supervisor always suggests reading textbooks for the specific field above her level of Japanese which she cannot refuse. She

continued that she could not skip over the content or stop reading the textbooks, or avoid using a dictionary in this context.

Table 3: The perceptions of the four rules of ER

Rule of the ER (R1→R2)	A	B	C	D	E	F
1) Start from easy books	5	5→5	5	5	3→3	4
2) Read without using dictionary	5	5→4	2	4	4→4	2
3) Skip over the words you don't understand	4	5→5	4	4	4→3	2
4) Get a different book if you feel the current one is too hard or boring to read.	5	5→5	5	5	5→5	5

1: very much disagree 2: disagree 3: neither 4: agree 5: very much agree

4.3 Learning content: selection of books

4.3.1 Research I

All the interviewees participated in the ERSJ when the authors conducted Research I. Therefore, they basically chose their books from the books prepared by the facilitator. Further, they all reported that they also read autonomously outside of the ERSJ. In such a case, they borrowed books from the books prepared by the facilitator or acquired books in bookstores or from second-hand booksellers. Since they were in Japanese as a Second Language (JSL) environment, they did not find difficulty in accessing the reading resources.

4.3.2 Research II

In Research II, we asked the three interviewees whether they had access to any reading resources after leaving the ERSJ. Despite the fact that their learning environments had been changed, they all managed to access reading materials in one way or another. Interviewee B found some low-cost second-hand bookstores near her house and had no problems getting reading resources. However, interviewee E, who had gone back to his country and was placed in a Japanese as a Foreign Language (JFL) environment, had difficulties in finding appropriate books to read. He had bought over a hundred books in Japan to send back home but these books had not arrived yet. He found it very hard to buy books on the Internet in his current situation or to find attractive Japanese books in the library. He had been making do with some novels which he received from a friend as a present.

Interviewee A, who did not continue the autonomous ER, replied that she also had difficulties in finding the appropriate books even though she was still in the JSL environment. She attempted to read some mangas for children but struggled to do so and eventually stopped autonomous ER.

We discuss what support may be provided for such learners in the next section.

5 Discussion

We described the results of two interviews in the previous sections. In Research I, four of the six informants participated in the ERSJ continuously despite the fact that they were voluntary. Furthermore, they all read books extensively and autonomously outside of the out-of-class ER. In Research II, two-thirds of the interviewees continued autonomous out-of-class ER after leaving the ERSJs. Previous studies often discuss the difficulty of continuing learning in out-of-class learning and self-instruction (Jones, 1998; Umino, 2005). In spite of these indications, the two ex-participants in Research II had been continuing out-of-class ER for 11-15 months and continued to read books extensively on their own for seven months.

Based on the above analysis, we discuss whether out-of-class ER may serve as a step towards autonomous ER, in particular in relation to the three dimensions of learning management, cognitive processes, and learning content. Moreover, if this is the case, we consider what aspects of out-of-class ER may contribute to the process, and what roles the out-of-class ER and the facilitator may play.

5.1 *The dimension of learning management*

Out-of-class ER is a voluntary activity and it has fewer constraints than classroom-based ER. Such characteristics are advantageous in the following respects. Participants can set their own objectives through the sessions with ease. For example, they might be advised as to appropriate books if the participants tell the facilitator that they have some specific purpose for attending the sessions, such as preparation for graduate school or learning culture in Japan. In addition, out-of-class ER gives them less stress than classroom-based ER, hence participants can read in a more relaxed atmosphere. Since there are plenty of books in the room for ER, there are higher possibilities that participants can find books which meet their interests. In these senses, out-of-class ER is a “learner-friendly” framework, which provides each learner with a customized way to read extensively.

At the same time, out-of-class ER has more structure as compared to complete autonomous out-of-class ER. This is also helpful in the domain of learning management. The facilitator of the sessions arranged the time and the place to read, and prepared books for the participants in the ERSJs. This made it easier for the participants to read regularly at a fixed time, place and pace of reading and to select books of appropriate level compared to being on their own. In fact, after leaving the ERSJ, Interviewee A did not manage to find the time to read in her free time. On the other hand, interviewees B and F managed to do so by setting a fixed time or occasion to read in their daily routines: on their way to the work/university and before going to bed. In the autonomous out-of-class ER, learners need to be aware of the scheme provided in the out-of-class ER so that they can apply them to their autonomous ER activities in their own daily lives.

From the perspective of fostering learner autonomy, then, it would be helpful if the facilitator can devise some ways to encourage the participants to reflect more on their own ways of managing their learning. In other words, if the facilitator not only facilitates the sessions, but

also partly plays a role as a “language adviser” (Murray, 2009), it seems that the possibility can increase for learners to reflect on their learning in terms of all three dimensions.

5.2 The dimension of cognitive processes

Next we discuss what aspects of out-of-class ER may contribute to autonomous ER in relation to the cognitive processes, in particular, the role of the facilitator. First, applying the ER rules in learner’s own reading activities is one way of helping learners to continue their autonomous ER activities. Most of the interviewees had positive attitudes towards the ER rules and applied them in reading in their own ways even after they left the ERSJ.

One area in which learners showed the most resistance was the use of the dictionary. Since in the context of the ER sessions the overuse of dictionary is considered to prevent readers from reading extensively, the facilitator recommends them not to refer to it as much as possible. Recently, however, due to the development of various dictionary tools, such as web dictionary, electronic dictionary, and smartphone, the dictionary has become an easier tool to use. Therefore, some learners initially had negative opinions on the ER rule concerning the use of dictionaries. Day and Bamford (1998) indicate that prior experience of second language reading, in which it was necessary for learners to understand every word of a text, might predispose learners against ER rules (p. 119). Whether learners use a dictionary or not when they face unknown words is closely related to personality factors such as learners’ beliefs about language learning (Horwitz, 1987) and tolerance of ambiguity (Naiman, Frölich, Stern, & Todesco, 1978). Due to these personality factors, learners may not be able to change their reading practices easily.

On the other hand, having experienced reading without a dictionary, some participants who had taken part in the ER for a prolonged period, observed that they realized it is not always necessary to look up every unknown word (“I often understood unknown vocabulary if I read the next page”, “I tried to understand what the keyword of the book was”). By experiencing reading by the ER rules, learners may gradually learn to apply the new way of reading in ER in the long term.

Furthermore, the facilitator may help participants to solve problems with assistance⁵ when the reader faces a word he/she does not understand. Learners who have just started ER may have stronger resistance to the ER rules. The facilitator may provide assistance to such learners in the following ways: (1) by explaining concretely how to read based on the four rules of ER, (2) by observing carefully how the participants are reading, and (3) by adjusting the rules in order to fit their beliefs (such as by allowing them to refer to the dictionary after having finished a section or a chapter). Thus, the role of the facilitator as a mediator becomes highly important for the out-of-class ER to serve as a bridge to autonomous out-of-class ER.

5.3 The dimension of learning content

Finally, we discuss the dimension of learning content. The two interviewees (B and E) who continued autonomous out-of-class ER after leaving the ERSJ, by the time of Research II,

⁵ For example, the facilitator can teach learners several reading ways such as how to guess from the context and the pictures, how to identify the keyword, how to read without a dictionary, and how to select easy books.

had realized what books were suited for them, and had learned to select appropriate books for themselves; mangas for B and young-adult fiction and novels for E. By being able to select appropriate books for themselves, they also had more control over the learning content.

In the ERSJs, as the facilitator prepared a wide selection of books for learners to choose from, the learners could easily enjoy a wide range of books by simply coming to the sessions. Being exposed to and trying out books of different genres, they eventually came to find their favourite genres of books. Thus, providing access to and introducing a wide range of books is one role the facilitator can play in fostering autonomous out-of-class ER.

On the other hand, some learners may not come to find their favourite genres through simply attending the sessions such as the case of Interviewee A. A found difficulty in finding the appropriate books after leaving the ERSJ and eventually stopped autonomous out-of-class ER.

If we consider such cases, simply providing a wide range of books during the sessions may not be sufficient to all learners for fostering autonomous out-of-class ER. One way of providing support in this area may be creating an online system for participants and ex-participants of ERSJ, which provides a range of reading resources on the web. The first author (Takahashi) has been running a trial website for extensive readers on the SNS, posting easy news articles, reading materials and information of useful websites for autonomous ER readers. This site also has a bulletin board where extensive readers can post their impressions of the Graded Readers. Introducing learners to using such a website during the ERSJ may help them in making use of such a website and continue autonomous ER in the long term.

6 Conclusion

This study is subject to the usual caveats on the limitations of case studies, especially the difficulty of knowing whether these learners' experiences are typical of students who share the same broad experience of out-of-class ER in a second language. We would argue, however, that this case study has value in highlighting some of the factors which may enhance autonomous ER. We would like to point out that the socio-interactive aspects of the out-of-class ER sessions need to be investigated further in order to understand this issue more fully as well as further research that examines ER over the longer term.

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