

## **Extensive Reading in the EFL Classroom: Benefits of a Face-to-Face Collaboration Activity**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Extensive reading is an approach to language education that has shown great promise for foreign language learners to acquire language; however, implementation reveals difficulty in maintaining student motivation to read over long periods of time. This study investigates students' experience of face-to-face talk about books in an extensive reading class. Qualitative analysis of survey results suggests that collaboration assists and stimulates extensive reading for Japanese university students. Talking about the books can change extensive reading from being a solitary act into one that meets students' academic and social needs and may be the emergence of intrinsic motivation to read. These findings suggest that collaboration tasks may be a motivational strategy for extensive reading instructors and it also lends support to socio-dynamic views of motivation (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011).*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Extensive reading (ER) is an approach to language education that has shown great promise for foreign language learners to acquire language (Elley & Mangubhai, 1983; Day & Bamford, 1998; Krashen, 2011). Acknowledging that learners need to process very large amounts of the target language, extensive reading uses reading material that learners can understand independently and read at their own pace. Reading large amounts has been shown to improve general reading ability, reading speed and reinforce understanding of vocabulary and grammar along with exposing the learner to new vocabulary and usage (Tanaka & Stapleton, 2007; Waring, 2006; Yamashita, 2008). Other advantages of extensive reading include improving learners' attitudes toward the target language, increasing confidence in using the target language, and reducing fear of reading text (Karlin & Romanko, 2010; Yamashita, 2013).

Despite many envisioned and founded benefits of extensive reading, while learners usually begin with great enthusiasm, it naturally subsides and reading decreases. Yet, in order for extensive reading to be truly extensive, learners must continue to read large amounts for long periods of time, usually exceeding several months. Reading in an L2 can quickly frustrate a learner and decrease motivation to read, leading Komiyama (2009) to write, "Nurturing students' motivation to read, therefore, should be an essential part of L2 reading instruction" (p. 32). Specifically relating to extensive reading, Grabe (2009) also emphasizes the importance of the educator's role in motivating learners to read, "Extensive reading, to be reasonably successful, generally requires a significant effort to motivate students" (p. 326).

Grabe (2009), drawing on L1 reading research, suggests that teachers can promote motivation to read in an L2 by including opportunities for (a) students to succeed on a consistent basis, (b) student autonomy, and (c) student collaboration. Extensive reading programs commonly fulfill the first two elements by providing reading materials that learners can read

successfully and by allowing students to choose their own reading materials. These two elements are central to most ER programs and are included in the “10 Principles of Extensive Reading” (Day & Bamford, 2002). Although classroom activities in which students talk about their books are not rare, extensive reading is mainly viewed as a solitary task. Grabe’s third element of L2 reading motivation, *collaboration*, has not been the focus of extensive reading research.

Collaboration is students working together on a task which they cannot do individually. Collaboration, also called social sharing, can involve students combining their knowledge and skill, learning from one another, and constructing new meanings (Komiyama, 2013; McRae & Guthrie, 2009). Might the view that extensive reading is an individual activity be a reason that motivating learners to read extensively is a challenge?

In my efforts to increase and maintain students’ motivation during an extensive reading program at a Japanese university I have tried many things. Learning from the Process Model of motivation I have included various ways of maintaining motivation over a 15-week school term (Dörnyei, 2001). However, even when students become absorbed in books, as in a flow experience, I have found they do not show greater motivation to read (name removed, 2013). Thus, the purpose of this exploratory study was to include student-to-student collaboration time and learn from the students’ evaluation of it. How will students in an extensive reading class view time for talking about the books, and what influence will this have on their motivation to read?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Second language learners’ motivation to participate in extensive reading is volatile and influenced by multiple factors. Learner’s motivation is influenced by reading material that is interesting and easy for learners, by family attitudes toward reading and other academic pressures (Nishino, 2007; Robb, 2002; Takase, 2004, 2007). The motivation of avid readers in a Japanese high school English extensive reading program was described as “multi-faceted and in a near-constant state of change” (Judge, 2011, p. 178) with the two most common elements of motivation being a love for reading and enjoyment of autonomous learning. Similarly, motivation of New Zealand high school students doing voluntary Japanese extensive reading was found to be fragile, increasing and decreasing in relation to 10 factors (de Burgh-Hirabe & Feryok, 2013).

L1 reading motivation research has distilled a framework of five dimensions to students’ reading motivation: interest (intrinsic motivation), ownership, self-efficacy, social interaction with peers, and mastery (McRae & Guthrie, 2009). Social interaction that occurs during collaboration between peers strengthens learner motivation to read whereas isolation undermines motivation. McRae and Guthrie (2009) write, “When teachers support this need for collaboration by allowing students to share ideas and build knowledge together, a sense of belongingness to the classroom community is established, and the extension and elaboration of existing knowledge is facilitated” (p. 66). Collaborative activities in L1 reading classes have been shown to enhance motivation and engagement in reading (Cho, Xu, & Rhodes, 2010).

The significance of collaboration was revealed in a study of Taiwanese university students doing L2 extensive reading that explored factors that produced success and enjoyment in reading (Shen, 2008). Students attributed success and enjoyment to reading material that was plentiful, of various genres and at their level, followed by peer cooperation which included group

work, discussion, and presentations. A program designed to include social sharing in extensive reading is the Interactive Reading Community Project (IRC), which applies principles of the sociocultural approach to language learning (Mizuno, 2013). The aim of IRC is for a website to be a Zone of Proximal Development in which students and teachers share information about books and therefore reap benefits in motivation and reading quality.

In the cooperative learning tradition, which is distinguished by students working on a structured task in groups, face-to-face in the classroom, Jacobs and Farrell (2012) promote combining cooperative learning principles with extensive reading. They describe the benefits of adding a group task with extensive reading as students increase each other's motivation to read, students suggest good reading materials, and groups provide an audience for talking about books (Jacobs & Gallo, 2002). A study in Lebanese high school L2 reading classrooms compared students reading in a classroom using cooperative learning principles with students in a whole-class instruction classroom and found that reading achievement increased among the students in the cooperative learning class (Ghaith, 2003).

Due to the consistency in which collaboration or social sharing is included in L1 reading motivation research, and the lack of L2 extensive reading studies that include collaborative tasks, I set out to learn how young adults in an L2 extensive reading program viewed a small-group talk about books. Thus, my research question was: How will face-to-face student collaboration influence young adults doing L2 extensive reading?

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to gather data on second language learners' experience of a collaboration activity in an extensive reading class and their evaluation of it. Given that collaboration is one dimension of L1 reading motivation research that has been found to improve students' motivation to read, it should be experimented within L2 reading contexts.

For this study, small group talk about the books being read was added to an extensive reading class for university students. The aim of the group talk was to add a social element to an otherwise individual activity of reading, and to cause students to use a broad range of communication skills in L1 and L2. Data was collected from the students with a questionnaire at the end of the academic term in order to learn their experience in the groups and their evaluation of this collaborative task with extensive reading.

### Research Stance

The process of this qualitative study was influenced by the post-positivist paradigm view of research in its aim to collect data on second language learners' experience of collaborative classroom activities with extensive reading, and, therefore, understand more about students' motivation to read. Extensive reading motivation studies in L2 contexts have primarily viewed reading as an individual act. Likewise, I had viewed extensive reading and motivation on an individual level and did not have high expectations for five minutes of book talk to influence participants' reading experience. However, due to the L1 reading motivation literature that includes collaboration activities with elementary students, I felt that collaboration should be explored with L2 young adults.

## Participants and Context

The participants in this study were Japanese junior college students in an English extensive reading class. This class was in the first term of their first year. All participants are majoring in English language and literature. The 41 participants (39 women and two men) were between 18 and 20 years old. The students' reading speed ranged from 76 to 260 words per minute; average is 134. For the majority of students this was their first experience of extensive reading in English.

In the class, I explained that extensive reading is an important compliment to their studies because it could help them overcome a fear of reading English, increase enjoyment in reading, and improve their reading ability. Students self-selected reading material from a wide variety of fiction and non-fiction graded readers at various levels. Several hundred books were brought into the classroom and more were available in the library. The class met for 90 minutes for 15 consecutive weeks. Every class included 30 minutes of silent reading, and beginning in class 4, book talk was added to allow students time to talk about their books with classmates.

Book talk was a simplified literature circle in which groups of three students talked about the books (Rodrigo et al., 2007). Students were told to introduce a book and include their opinion, yet withhold the end of the story. The listeners were told to ask one question about the book being introduced. The teacher modeled introducing a book, and wrote some useful phrases on the blackboard. Book talk groups met for three consecutive weeks before changing members, which allowed for four rounds. The first and fourth round groups were decided by the students themselves and therefore consisted of friends. The second and third round groups were decided randomly and thus combined students who were not necessarily friends. The language of book talk changed also; in the first week of a new group students spoke in L1 (Japanese), the second week varied, and in the third week students spoke in L2 (English). When book talk was in L1, it was placed at the beginning of the 90-minute class period, and when book talk was in L2, it was at the end of class following the silent reading time. Book talk in L1 continued for five minutes or more, although when using L2 some groups ended within five minutes.

## Data Collection and Analysis

Data on participants' experience and evaluation of book talk was collected with a questionnaire administered in the last class (see Appendix). The anonymous questionnaire had five multiple-choice questions and was written in the students' L1. The first four items asked for an evaluation of book talk group size, the 3-week duration, the influence of book talk on finding books of interest, and the influence on their desire to read. The final item asked for an overall opinion of book talk (liked, liked somewhat, neither liked nor disliked, and disliked), followed by space to clarify the reasons for this opinion.

The responses to the first five questions were tabulated. Question five and the reasons for the opinion were analyzed in the following way. The questionnaires were first grouped according to their opinion of book talk, either "liked," "liked somewhat," "neither liked nor disliked," or "disliked." The responses were typed into a file and translated into English. A Japanese researcher with Japanese and English publications checked the translation and alterations were made. Many responses included multiple reasons which were divided into short phrases that described one reason. For example, "I could learn from others about books, / and found several books that I wanted to read. / I could introduce a book in English and I worked hard to express

myself.”

The data was re-read and the short phrases were generalized into concepts as outlined by Ellis and Barkhuizen (2005). It became apparent that grouping the data by opinion of book talk was unnecessary; the reasons for all opinions could be summarized by the same seven concepts. Negative opinions of book talk were marked as a negative point of a concept. The concepts were abbreviated to codes and written on the data in order to observe their frequency. The Japanese researcher read the original Japanese data and independently made common themes. These Japanese themes agreed with the seven English concepts: learned about books (LB), interest in books increased (IB), easier to select new books (ESB), speaking practice (SP), communication ability (CA), talk to classmates (TC), and enjoyable (EN).

Lastly, observing the natural groupings of the concepts and the frequency in which the concepts were used, I considered patterns and relationships among the concepts.

## FINDINGS

The questionnaire was answered by 41 students present in the last class. Question 1 and 2 dealt with classroom administration aspects of book talk, group size, and frequency of changing groups.

The first question asked for the participants’ evaluation of the three-person size of the book talk groups. The choices were, ‘prefer 2 people,’ ‘3 people is good,’ and ‘prefer 4 people or more.’ The three-person group size was agreeable to 34 of the respondents with the remaining seven preferring two-person size groups showing that small groups were preferred to large groups of four or more people.

The second question asked for the participants’ evaluation of changing group members every three weeks. The choices were, ‘prefer changing every week,’ ‘3 weeks is good,’ and ‘prefer less changing.’ Changing group members every three weeks was agreeable for 28 of the respondents, 10 chose changing every week, and three chose changing less often.

Questions 3 and 4 dealt with the influence of book talk on the practice of extensive reading. The third question asked if participants found a book that they wanted to read in the book talk groups. The choices were, ‘yes, several times,’ ‘yes, one time,’ and ‘no, didn’t find any.’ Book talk did help students find books to read, 33 responded several times, six responded one time, and two responded not finding a book of interest in book talk. This function of helping students find books of interest was mentioned by many students later in the free answer section.

Question 4 asked participants if book talk influenced them to think they want to read more. Book talk was perceived by 38 of the participants to have influenced them to want to read and only three participants felt it had no influence.

The fifth question asked for participants’ overall evaluation of book talk with answers being ‘liked,’ ‘liked somewhat,’ ‘neither liked nor disliked,’ and ‘didn’t like it very much.’ Following the multiple choice question there was a place for participants to write why they evaluated book talk in this way. Most of the students liked book talk, 20 indicating they liked it and 18 marking that they liked it somewhat. The students who chose ‘liked it somewhat’ usually wrote in the free answer space about their inability to express their ideas in English. Two students neither liked nor disliked it and one student did not like it very much.

The free-answer space that followed question 5 provided a view of the participants’ reasons for their evaluation of book talk. The reasons were summarized in concepts and the frequency was tabulated in the table below.

**Table 1.** Reasons for Evaluation of Book Talk and Frequency

<b>Reason</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
1. Learned about books	13
2. Interest in books increased	17
3. Easier to select new books	5
4. English speaking practice	11
5. Communication ability	9
6. Talk to classmates	11
7. Enjoyable	10

Participants' reasons for their opinion of book talk were primarily related to the books and communication. Learning about the content of the books (1) was given as support for liking book talk because, "I could hear about books in genres that I don't normally read." Also, "I often decide on a book by looking at the cover and title, but through book talk I could learn about books that hadn't caught my eye. And because of that I thought I wanted to read the book."

The most frequent reason given to support their opinion of book talk was that it increased their interest in books (2) expressed as, "Through my friends' thoughts I gained an interest in books." Similarly, "Many times a friend in the group explained a book in an interesting way, so that I wanted to read that book."

Learning about books beyond the cover and becoming interested in new books resulted in greater ease in selecting the next book to read (3). Participants described this aspect of book talk in the following, "It became less work to find a book that looked interesting" and "because I could also hear friends' recommendations of books, it was easier to choose books."

Communication was another theme found in reasons students gave to support their opinion of book talk. Introducing a book in English was viewed as speaking practice (4). Participants who 'liked' book talk supported their opinion with positive comments about speaking in English whereas five students whose opinion of book talk was 'liked somewhat' referred to limitations in speaking English as their reason. The following comments are representative, "I think describing the book content in English led to improvement in speaking ability" and "my ability to express my ideas in English probably increased." Limitations in English were expressed as, "Sometimes we used Japanese and couldn't talk when we should have used English."

Book talk groups provided the students with an opportunity to test their communication ability (5) as expressed in the following comments. "I was happy when I was able to describe the interesting nature of a book" and "It made me happy when I introduced a book I liked and others were interested in it" and "It was difficult to describe a book without telling the ending." These findings show that social collaboration provides opportunity to build other communication skills such as persuasion, synthesis of ideas, and negotiation.

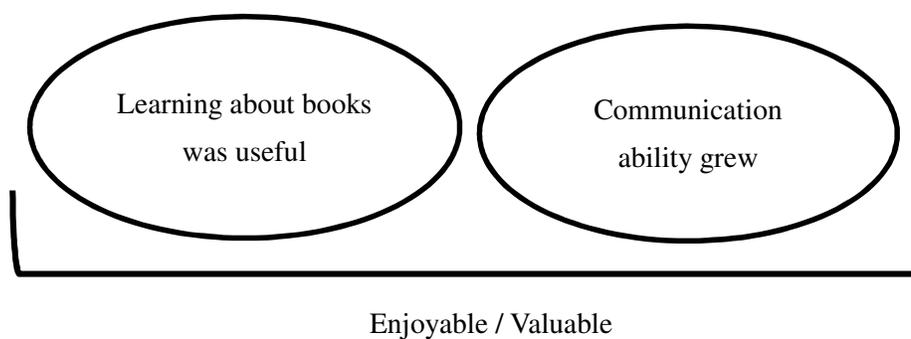
Being able to talk to classmates (6) was a reason often given to support why they liked book talk. Talking with classmates that they did not know well and getting to know friends more deeply were both mentioned repeatedly. "It was a good opportunity to talk to people I didn't know." Similarly, "I could talk to classmates that I usually don't talk to, and it was a chance to become friends."

Lastly, participants explained their opinion of book talk was positive because it was enjoyable (7) as expressed in the following comments. "Not just reading, but sharing thoughts with each other was fun," "It was fun to learn the kind of books classmates like and to talk with

each other about them,” and “Sometimes it was fun and sometimes it wasn’t fun.”

Relationships between the above concepts can be easily seen. The first three concepts are related to the books; learning about books was not only interesting, it was useful because it led to receiving recommendations of books which stimulated their interest in books and made book selection easier. The second theme described in concepts four through six is related to communication, expressing one’s ideas in L1 and L2, practicing English expression, and expanding relationships with classmates. Although communication was difficult at times, the participants expressed that it was a positive opportunity to grow. Both the benefits gained from learning about books and communication opportunities led many students to write that book talk was enjoyable. The figure illustrates that learning useful information about books and increasing communication ability was valuable and enjoyable.

**Figure 1.** Participants’ Appraisal of Book Talk



## DISCUSSION

First, there may be some questions as to whether or not book talk can be called a collaboration task. There was no finished product or presentation to show the outcome of students talking together. Were students really working together, accomplishing something that they could not do on their own? This study found that the outcome of book talk was broad and useful knowledge of the books constructed by L2 readers. Because students were selecting a new book almost every week, book information was valuable in assisting students to find books of interest and continue reading.

The aim of this study was to include a collaborative task to extensive reading and through listening to student voices see if it influenced their motivation to continue reading. Question 4 was one attempt at approaching the effect of collaboration on motivation to read. Thirty-eight of the 41 participants responded that book talk had influenced them to want to read more. This positive response shows that the multiple benefits of book talk did leave a favorable view of L2 reading.

The overall opinion of book talk (Question 5) was also evaluated positively by 38 of the 41 participants. These negative voices are of interest. There was one student who visibly did not want to talk with classmates. At times he refused to talk or even face group members. He is probably the one respondent who reported not liking book talk as well as the cause of some negative comments. This student is a reminder that the social element of collaboration may not be beneficial or motivational for some students.

Students viewed book talk positively because it met an academic need to find interesting books. Reading a large amount of books in L2 is difficult and unpleasant if students do not enjoy the content of the book. Thus, book selection is a critical element of enjoying and continuing extensive reading. Book talk played a valuable role in giving the participants a broad knowledge of books that assisted them in selecting books of interest and progressing in their academic tasks.

Book talk may be a motivational strategy that supports students' psychological needs. Motivational strategies are defined as "instructional interventions consciously applied by L2 teachers to elicit, enhance, and sustain student motivated behavior..." (Guilloteaux, 2013, p. 4). Guilloteaux points out that the effectiveness of a motivational strategy may vary due to cultural variables. In Japanese culture, university students are young adults seeking friendships, intimacy and self-esteem (Kitzman, 2008). A needs analysis related to learning English found that university students (N = 1134) chose learning "with a friend" (41%) over individual study methods. Thus, adding book talk to a reading class may be a motivational strategy that particularly fits the psychological needs of Japanese young adults.

Psychological needs of the participants were supported by book talk as students' relationships with classmates developed. Students reported that they enjoyed book talk because it caused them to talk with classmates they had not talked with before. Particularly book talk groups that were formed randomly created the opportunity to get to know other classmates, as seen in the following comment, "I could talk to classmates that I usually don't talk to, and it was a chance to become friends." Thus, broadening one's circle of acquaintances is a positive result of book talk. Students also wrote about deepening relationships with friends in book talk as a reason for enjoying the activity. Social interaction in the classroom supports students' desires to have a fun social life.

Face-to-face communication may be another reason that book talk was evaluated positively. Media-based student-to-student communication has been a part of some extensive reading programs. For example, learning management systems, such as MReader (mreader.org), have been developed to administer extensive reading programs and can be designed for students to share opinions of books. However, media-based interaction has had mixed results on motivation to read; some studies have found media-based collaboration promoted reading motivation, while others have found it was not satisfying to students (Lan, Sung, & Chang, 2007; Lingley, 2009; Ocker & Yaverbaum, 1999). Direct social interaction has been found to cause people to feel better over time in comparison to media-based interaction (Kross et al., 2013). The face-to-face element of book talk may have increased the pleasure of sharing information about books.

The findings from this study support current approaches to motivation that look at the learner in their social context (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011). In particular, the person-in-context relational view of motivation proposed by Ushioda (2009), describes the need to look at influences between learners and their environment along with changes within the learner. She suggests analyzing classroom discourse in order to learn about emergent motivation on the individual level. This study gathered students' evaluation of book talk which included descriptions of discourse that occurred in the book talk groups. Some students explained how book talk was the source of emergent motivation to read a book as seen in the following comment. "If the book being introduced was one I had read then our conversation expanded, and if it was the first time to see the book I thought, 'I want to read it!'" More simply stated, "Many times a friend in the group explained a book in an interesting way, so that I wanted to read that book."

Book talk was a time for students to develop their identity as a user of English. Describing opinions of a book was a good challenge in L1 and L2, and when done successfully it was a source of accomplishment for some participants. Being able to communicate opinions was a step in developing their identity as a user of English as seen in the following comment, “I was happy when I introduced a book I liked and others were interested in it.” Ushioda (2009) advocates “pedagogical practices which encourage students to develop and express their own identities through the language they are learning – that is, to be and become themselves” (p. 223).

In sum, adding a social sharing element to extensive reading appears to influence students’ motivation to read because it assists them in their need to find interesting books, supports their psychological needs for broader and deeper friendships, and develops their identity as English users.

### **Limitations**

Although this study revealed participants’ positive evaluation of a collaborative task with extensive reading, there are limitations. Due to the narrow sample of primarily 18-year-old Japanese women the findings are not generalizable. As a survey-based study, the findings are just one view of young adults’ experience of extensive reading with social sharing. The findings of this study could be developed by experimenting with more diverse participants. Book talk may be a motivational strategy that is beneficial to general students, but not helpful to the independently motivated or asocial student. I did not anticipate book talk to be important, yet I did plan time for it in classes 4 through 15. The participants may have noticed the teacher’s plan and thus been influenced to give socially desirable responses on the questionnaire; however, I did not teach about possible benefits of book talk.

## **CONCLUSION**

Avid readers may be intrinsically motivated to do second language reading; however, the average young adult experiences many distractions to solitary reading (de Burgh-Hirabe & Feryok, 2013). Thus, exploratory studies of influences on motivation to continue L2 extensive reading can shed light on student behavior. This study, although limited in scope, suggests that young adults find multiple benefits from a collaborative task like book talk. Book talk enabled the construction of broad information about the graded readers from peers, which aided book selection and thus assisted in students in their academic needs. Book talk was perceived as good communication practice; it pushed L2 output and expanded their relationships with classmates. Lastly, this study suggests that an information and social sharing task may create conditions for formation of reading motivation.

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## APPENDIX

### Questionnaire

Please answer the questions about your opinion and experience of Book Talk (3 person groups).

1. What is your evaluation of the size of the Book Talk groups?

prefer 2 people     3 people is good     prefer 4 people or more

2. What is your evaluation of changing groups every three weeks?

every week is better     3 weeks is good     less often is better

3. In Book Talk groups did you find a book that you wanted to read?

yes, several times     yes, one time     no, didn't find any

4. Did Book Talk groups influence you to think you wanted to read more?

no     yes

5. What was your general evaluation of the Book Talk?

liked     liked somewhat     neither liked nor disliked

didn't like it very much

Why? \_\_\_\_\_