

Extensive Reading: Theory and Samples

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I Introduction

What are language learners given to strengthen their reading skills and develop an appreciation for foreign literature? This is of course a pointed question, as formal curriculums have each their own ambitions. In Japan, English education remains oriented toward preparing students for examinations, and so takes on the characteristics of such exercises: logical progressions through the salient points of English grammar, illustrated by lists of disconnected sentences. Work on vocabulary and syntax is often treated likewise, though here more effort is made to embed these in longer passages. While it is true that teachers in progressive secondary schools are coming up with more creative approaches to the task, even they cannot ignore the fact that their students have to “test well” on university entrance exams, and so must give more than a passing nod to the current forms and trends that these exams follow. New approaches to child education, exposure to foreign media, and the decline in competition for entrance into universities are all working to ameliorate the situation, but the central role of examinations and formal certification has such a long history in the East Asian cultural sphere, any radical departure in the near future is highly unlikely.

The instructor of English at the university level in Japan then, finds herself in the odd predicament of freedom to teach in a less predetermined manner (the students are matriculated; most will never have to take another entrance exam) but to students who have been trained never to stray from the bottom line of exam success. The worst scenario, after unsuccessful tries by the teacher at eliciting self-motivation, is a return by default to the same type of mechanical drills and excruciating translation that the students are used to.

Some schools are integrating programs that succeed at tapping students' individuality and rewarding motivation in an accountable way; but at most universities the compulsory classes, for students often with no interest in the subject, are less than likely to leave students with even a modest fluency in, much less appreciation for, English in its written form.

II Extensive Reading Theory

One of the possible responses to this dilemma is the Extensive Reading approach, in which students are provided access to a large number and wide variety of books, either especially adapted or initially written for foreign learners. The majority of available readers still fall in the category of adaptations, usually of well-known originals. These in turn may be divided into those "entirely restating the ideas of the text in simpler form and language" and those "retaining in general terms the form and language of the original text, but abridging, reordering certain parts for clarity, and sometimes elaborating on difficult concepts" (Day & Bamford, 1997, pg. 57). In theory, these two approaches to adaptation are sometimes referred to, respectively, as 'simple accounts' and 'simplified versions'; I have followed no such scheme in this paper however, preferring instead to point out in each instance the adapter's various, and often overlapping techniques.

As the works in question are being adapted from self-contained short stories and novels, as opposed to short passages fabricated to highlight certain grammatical usages, one of the main concerns of the adapter is how to make the text accessible to the learner-reader and still retain the conventions of the genre. Two benefits accrue from this immersion in longer, finished pieces: 1) increased skill of prediction, making for faster comprehension, and 2) practical

exposure to the rhetorical patterns and markers found in most written discourse. In Catherine Wallace's *Reading*, she stresses our dependence on context to explain the role of prediction in the process of comprehension, seeing context as not only providing its usual semantic information, but graphic, phonetic, and syntactic as well. In summarizing the work of Frank Smith (1971), she cites his example "The captain ordered the mate to drop the an__," illustrating our context-dependence in the following manner: "... As far as graphic information is concerned, our knowledge of English spelling tells us that there is a limited number of possibilities as to which letter might follow 'an__'. 'P' for instance would not be a possibility as there are no English words which have the letter sequence a-n-p. Phonetic information also plays its part in reducing the possibilities as to what kinds of sounds can co-occur. Uncertainty is further reduced by our knowledge that, syntactically, only an adjective or noun phrase can follow the item 'the'. Finally, with regard to semantic information, our propositional knowledge restricts the kinds of things that it is humanly possible to drop—for example 'anticyclone' would not be a possibility here. We can also draw on more specific schematic knowledge to predict what kinds of things captains might reasonably ask mates to do. We need, in short, to call up a 'nautical' schema which will give us 'anchor' as the most likely item" (Wallace, pg. 40). This, in my view, is an accurate description of our context-dependence. For learners, the continued syntactic reinforcement alone, that comes from processing long texts sustained by plot, is a powerful argument for Extensive Reading, especially for false beginners. All English text is built around the basic 'being' and 'doing' verbs, and the redundancy of the less familiar ones that occur in any extended text will also give the learner more meaningful practice than she could acquire in drills and translation, for the redundancy here is not repetitive, as it occurs naturally and is secondary to the plot itself. Of our other three facets of context dependence, the phonetic one is

probably least applicable to the learner in an Extensive Reading situation, unless some reading aloud is included, which would then of course make it very useful. One of the main virtues of Extensive Reading however, is its inclusion of students in the learning process by giving them the choice of what to read and at what speeds; occasional oral presentation might be welcome, but only as an adjunct to the main practice of learner-directed silent reading. Graphic and semantic dependence remain, and are probably the areas where Extensive Reading most benefits learners from different cultural spheres with different scripts, for the obvious reasons.

Increased familiarity with rhetorical patterns and their lexical markers is the second benefit we should examine. Most material used in Extensive Reading are self-contained pieces of prose fiction, that must, by the conditions imposed upon them, be accessible to an individual, unguided reader. Care is taken then, by adaptors and editors, to present the material in rhetorical formats universally recognizable, at least at the lower levels. This may mean considerable reordering of textual elements, and even insertion of scenes or narration for the purpose of orienting the learner-reader(see below, Direct Speech). There is a limit to what can be done however, and still retain the identity of the original work, so as the student progresses up the scale of difficulty he is more likely to encounter less modified rhetorical patterns. Sandra Silberstein(1994, pgs. 54-57) groups these patterns around the following six foci: comparison and contrast, cause and effect, chronological order, classification, process, and definition. Each of these operations has characteristics and conventions the experienced reader is familiar with and can follow automatically in his reading. The learner, however, especially if coming from a fundamentally different literary tradition(East Asia, Islam) must experience these operations en route to comprehension many times before they become the aids they are meant to be,

when she can recognize a purposeful shift in thought by the rhetorical marker that precedes it: 'likewise', 'in fact', 'on the other hand', and 'nonetheless' keep her focused on the comparison or contrast of two or more subjects, while 'consequently', 'therefore', 'thus', and 'accordingly', let her anticipate the shift to cause and effect reasoning. These conventions of English prose are most probably encountered in grammar classes before the student reaches the university level, but fluency in reading will not come until that cognitive awareness is augmented by experience both physical (the eye's) as well as mental, something that can be attained most painlessly through the extensive use of graded readers.

The above presentation of rhetorical patterns and markers is in Silberstein discussed in the context of expository prose (1994, chapter 4), such as students might find in reading academic books and journal articles. She herself makes the point however, that though different fields and "journal articles may differ in style,.....most share a remarkably uniform purpose and structure" (1994, pg.57). The same can be said for prose fiction, over a wide spectrum, as well. The roles and conventions of speech vis a vis narration, for example, while possibly confusing to the reader at the lowest levels, will not have to be relearned at later ones. Openings and story developments fall within a core number of categories that the learner will soon become accustomed to. On the level of rhetorical markers, the six operations listed above will be found at all levels of learner language literature. Likewise, the skills acquired in Extensive Reading will apply to the expository reading first mentioned, as well as newspapers, practical instructions, etc. Aside from the most superficial formalities and vocabulary, reading skills are not genre specific.

III Sample Readers and Comparison Outline

Graded readers have been around for most of this century, though have a longer history of use in the former English colonies than elsewhere, no doubt to meet the special needs of learners in those societies (Bamford & Day, 1997). Since 1981, however The Edinburgh Project on Extensive Reading (EPER) has worked to spread the use of adapted or simplified texts in ESL classrooms around the world. The idea is to nurture fluency in reading by, simply that, reading : at levels just below what is taxing but in large amounts, with the texts chosen by the student (from a wide variety assembled by the teacher). EPER has not only contributed to establishing the theory and its correlations, but has done the practical work of recommending books and putting together kits for teachers interested in the program (Hill, 1997). Assignments regarding the books may vary from teacher to teacher, but the students are required to choose and read a large number of books (or pages, depending on how the task system is set up) over the length of the term. The class does not choose a book to read together; each student is reading at his own pace (within set boundaries) and level.

The rest of this paper will be an examination of a sample of Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*, in the original (Everyman's version, 1908) and, for purposes of comparison, the same title in adaptation and re-tellings by four different authors at three different levels of difficulty. For ease of reference, I will identify these readers in the body of the paper by the abbreviations in parentheses; they will appear again in the references at the end of the paper in alphabetical order by these abbreviations :

Heinemann Guided Readers(HGR); retold by Anne Collins; 600 word level.
 Oxford Graded Readers(OGR); retold by Lysbeth Glibbery; 1000 word level.
 Yohan Ladder Edition(YLE); adapted by Ron Davidson; 1000 word level.
 Oxford Bookworms(OB); retold by John Escott; 1400 word level.

A guideline correlating vocabulary levels with test scores is offered by EPER and included in Hill(1997). The word levels do not correspond exactly to the selections above, but will give some idea as to the difficulty of the readers at the different levels :

<i>Average Vocabulary</i>	<i>Student Level</i>	<i>TOEFL</i>	<i>TOEIC</i>
500	beginner	no correlation	no correlation
800	elementary	350	150
1200	low-intermed.	400	300
1600	intermediate	450	450

The original *Little Women*(1908)begins with the four daughters talking about the upcoming Christmas, their less than happy circumstances, and what they might do to enjoy themselves. After some sibling banter and the arrival home of their mother however, their more unselfish dispositions prevail and they resolve themselves to do their best at the trials that lay ahead—in the next chapter and onward. What are interesting for our purposes though are the various literary elements employed by Alcott in creating a lively text that is also rather dense in telling detail. Five of these elements, at least, are worth considering at some length, for the purposes of comparison with the various language learner versions that have been fashioned from this classic: speech; narration; interludes(letters and drama); and literary references(*The Pilgrim's Progress*).

First of all, likely enough, is the opening line, “Christmas won’t be Christmas without any presents.” It is an *in media res* opening, with direct speech by Jo, and invites the reader into an already developed situation in which the sisters are bemoaning their circumstances. Responses by the other sisters follow, and set the conversational tone of the story; in fact, conversation easily accounts for three-fourths of the chapter. The importance of this is that Alcott can unobtrusively inform the reader of what the main characters are like, through what they say, as well as through the shortest qualifiers describing their delivery. Examples are: “sighed Meg, looking down at her old dress”; “added little Amy, with an injured sniff”; “returned Amy, with dignity”; “cried Jo, examining her heels in a gentlemanly manner”; “said Beth contentedly, from her corner.” These are later amplified by what the sisters say to and about each other, which make clear their very different personalities.

Of the four readers in our comparison, only Escott’s(OB)retains the pattern of the original opening: “ ‘Christmas won’t be Christmas without any presents,’ said Jo crossly.” This differs from the original only in substituting ‘crossly’ for ‘grumbled’ and leaving off the tag “lying on the rug.” In contrast, the other readers begin with narratives designed to set the scene, orienting the reader quite extensively before having the characters speak : “The place was a small town in Massachusetts, North America. It was a cold evening in December 1862. Snow was falling softly. In the living-room of a small house, four sisters were sitting by the fire”(HGR); “One afternoon in winter, Meg, Jo, Beth and Amy March were sitting by the fire in their living-room. It was a pleasant room. Although the furniture and carpet were old, there were a few good pictures on the walls, and there were several shelves full of books”(OGR); “The four March girls sat knitting in front of the fire. It was just before Christmas, 1861,

in the United States of America. There was a war in the south of the country and Richard March, their father, although over-age, had joined the army as a chaplain”(YLE). Although the differences are striking, all three versions share descriptive vocabulary that has in fact been taken from further on in the original(see below: narration). This reversal of order, narration for conversation, provides the learner-reader with some of the basic facts of the plot, at the cost, perhaps, of a more arresting opening. The addition, in the YLE version, of the sentence about the war and their father’s joining up might even be taking the orientation too far. The decision to retain the original order in the 1400 word level book(OB)seems to reflect the reteller’s judgment that learners at that level would not be confused by the technique.

When conversation is introduced, key lines from the original are again included in all four versions. Note should be taken however of the different wording as well as the placement at different points in the respective narratives. Meg and Amy’s responses to Jo’s opening statement about Christmas not being Christmas, runs as follows in the original: “ ‘It’s so dreadful to be poor !’ sighed Meg, looking at her old dress. ‘I don’t think it’s fair for some girls to have plenty of pretty things, and other girls nothing at all,’ added little Amy, with an injured sniff”(Alcott, 1908). Again, the most faithful version is the OB one, substituting ‘awful’ for ‘dreadful’ and, aside from minor changes, only replacing the telling tag “added little Amy, with an injured sniff” with the plain “said little Amy.” Such vocabulary substitution is a necessary one in graded readers ; deletion of descriptive wording, especially when such a central technique, is a more difficult problem, where the re-writer must weigh the value of aesthetic impact against ease of reading.

The easiest version of the same lines are the simple “ ‘We are poor,’ said

Meg, the eldest girl. 'It is terrible.' Meg was very pretty. She had large eyes and soft brown hair. 'Other girls have lots of pretty things,' said Amy, the youngest girl. Amy had golden hair and blue eyes" (HGR). The deletions and vocabulary changes here are obvious; the descriptive narrative inserted between the spoken lines however does not belong to this part of the original text, again being borrowed from the longer narrative that Alcott places—in one piece—in the center of the chapter. The other two renderings are notable only for the deletion of Amy's comment altogether (OGR) and the insertion of borrowed narrative preceding the start of all conversation (YLE).

The next element we should direct our attention to is the matter of narration. Although, as mentioned above, direct speech accounts for by far the majority of the chapter in the original, there is supporting narration in between spoken lines. It is of the unseen omniscient type, simply informing us of what we would see were we there: "Jo immediately sat up, put her hands in her pockets, and began to whistle" (Alcott, 1908). The most distinctive narrative form of this chapter however comes midway between the opening and the arrival of mother; it is the author's soliloquy, or stepping out to address the reader directly: "As young readers like to know how people look, (*italics in the original*) we will take this moment to give them a little sketch of the four sisters, who sat knitting away in the twilight, while the December snow fell quietly without, and the fire crackled cheerfully within. It was a comfortable old room, though the carpet was faded and furniture very plain; for a good picture or two hung on the walls, books filled the recesses, chrysanthemums and Christmas roses bloomed in the windows, and a pleasant atmosphere of home-peace pervaded it. Margaret, the eldest of the four, was sixteen, and very pretty, being plump and fair, with large eyes, plenty of soft, brown hair, a sweet mouth, and white hands, of which she was rather vain. Fifteen-year-old Jo was very tall, thin, and

brown, and reminded one of a colt; for she never seemed to know what to do with her long limbs, which were very much in her way. She had a decided mouth, a comical nose, and sharp, grey eyes, which appeared to see everything, and were by turns fierce, funny, or thoughtful. Her long, thick hair was her one beauty; but it was usually bundled into a net to be out of her way. Round shoulders had Jo, big hands and feet, a fly-away look to her clothes, and the uncomfortable appearance of a girl who was rapidly shooting up into a woman, and didn't like it. Elizabeth—or Beth, as every one called her—was a rosy, smooth-haired, bright-eyed girl of thirteen, with a shy manner, a timid voice, and a peaceful expression, which was seldom disturbed. Her father called her “Little Tranquillity,” and the name suited her excellently ; for she seemed to live in a happy world of her own, only venturing out to meet the few whom she trusted and loved. Amy, though the youngest, was a most important person—in her own opinion at least. A regular snow maiden, with blue eyes, and yellow hair curling on her shoulders; pale and slender, and always carrying herself like a young lady mindful of her manners. What the characters of the four sisters were, we will leave to be found out”(Alcott, 1908).

This passage is important not only for its direct narrative beginning and ending, which Alcott employs elsewhere in the novel, but also for its descriptive content and placement well into the chapter, just following the extended conversation discussed above. The direct address to the reader that Alcott employs, is a device that, along with the ‘in media res’ beginning, is used to gain acquiescence to the plausibility of the story. Again missing from all four adaptations, its deletion for the sake of easy understanding is probably necessary, though some of the work’s charm as a work of art is undeniably being sacrificed. On the other hand, the contents of the description, as mentioned above, are used extensively to orient the reader at the beginning of the various

versions, again with simplifications or adaptations thought suitable to the differing levels. As noted in the section on speech above, the simplest version (HGR) borrows descriptions from this narrative section and places them in the midst of conversational scenes. The first two paragraphs of the OGR version is essentially this section, though it is substantially abbreviated, especially in the detail it allows the individual sisters. The Yohan version, however, in this case most closely approaches the original, even exceeding the 1400 word OB version. Full paragraphs are allotted to each sister, in the same order and general style as the original. Compare the following description with its model above: "Jo, who was fifteen, one year younger than Meg, was tall and thin with long arms and legs which often got in the way. Her nose was not pretty and her hands were big, but she did have lovely hair. However, because she wanted to be a boy, she often wore her hair up. Her sisters, especially Meg, thought that Jo not only tried to look like a boy, she acted like one too. Her great love was reading, and she would spend many hours reading her favorite books. She dreamed of writing some herself one day" (YLE). Much paraphrasing has taken place here, rich adjectives such as 'decided', 'comical', 'sharp', and 'thoughtful' have been eliminated, as well as colloquial phrases such as 'shooting up' and 'fly-away'; and yet, on the whole, the aesthetic intent, along with the information value, of the original remains to a degree that makes it stand out among the four adaptations.

The third and fourth aspects of the original story that we should examine, are the interludes provided by letters and theater scenes. The letters and telegrams, in particular, are skillfully used by Alcott for dramatic effect, and allow an added mental dimension to the different characters as the characters must put their thoughts and feelings into prose and verse. A whole chapter, "Letters", XV I, is in fact devoted to no less than seven missives from servants,

friends, and daughters to mother, though these are excluded from the retellings, perhaps due to their too discursive nature. The letter from father in the first chapter, however, serves as the catalyst for the girls' efforts at moral courage and is thus included in all four versions. The original is as follows : "Give them all my dear love and a kiss. Tell them I think of them by day, pray for them by night, and find my best comfort in their affection at all times. A year seems very long to wait before I see them, but remind them that while we wait we may all work, so that these hard days need not be wasted. I know they will remember all I said to them, that they will be loving children to you, will do their duty faithfully, fight their bosom enemies bravely, and conquer themselves so beautifully, that when I come back to them I may be fonder and prouder than ever of my little women"(Alcott, 1908, pg. 8). It is said in the original that this is the end part of a letter made up mostly of news and descriptions from his life on the battlefield; nevertheless, the tone of the ending is such as to accomplish exactly the moral encouragement the author intends. The ways in which the four adaptations deal with this moving passage shows their ingenuity, various attitudes towards literary style, as well as the different limitations the adapters had to work within.

The most unusual approach is that found in the six hundred word Heinemann version(HGR). The text itself is reduced almost to the point of unrecognizability, and its role in inspiring the daughters has been completely ignored by making it the very last lines of the chapter. What uniqueness it does have is in its presentation, as the adapter, or editor, decided to put this and other letters in cursive form, to simulate an actual letter, even varying the handwriting styles of the different writers. It is a novel idea, and might even be of some value in exposing learners to handwritten English, but due to the heavy adaptation, the story's literary impact will be a very different one from

the original. The two 1000 word versions retain the motivational purpose of the letter, though giving very different scope to the text itself. Compare the OGR version to the Yohan one following: "I think about my little women every day, and pray for them every night. Please tell them that. They'll work hard and be good, I know"(OGR, pg. 8). "Tell them I think of them in the day and ask God to look after them at night. A year seems a long time to wait before I see them. Tell them that while we wait, we can all use the time to make ourselves better, so that these hard days are not for nothing. They must look at themselves and think about how they can become better people. I know that they will succeed in this, and when I come back to them I will be even prouder of my little women"(YLE, pg. 4-5). It is obvious that the OGR version retains the bare minimum of the letter's intent, in order to remain true to the original plot structure of self-indulgence, inspiration, and moral striving. The Yohan version, on the other hand, makes full use of the letter's literary impact, and retains its length and much of its wording. What differences there are result from phrasal substitution or deletion, in order to stay within the 1000 word level: "comfort in their affection" and "fight their bosom enemies" have been removed, while "need not be wasted" has been changed to "not for nothing". This last change illustrates well the difficult task of the rewriter: the new phrase is indeed the more informal, and so would seem to be the easier, yet "not for nothing" is an idiom whose double negative sense might be even harder for one seeing it for the first time than the original, explicit "need not be wasted." The 1400 word OB version is similar to the OGR in its attempt to be faithful to the letter's role in the overall plot structure ; the letter appears in italics and its prompting of the girls' emotions is emphasized. It also shares the shortcoming, however, of thinness of text, even below the 1000 word Yohan version.

The last element in this survey, the daughters' drama production, is unfortunately given scant treatment. In the original, Jo gives an impromptu rehearsal of their upcoming Christmas day play (Alcott, chapter 1), which is followed in the next chapter by its performance by all four sisters. The preparations and plot narration make up much of the account and among the spoken lines there are even two stanzas of rhymed verse. Of the four versions, HGR gives only the brief note that the girls acted in a play and enjoyed themselves (HGR, pg. 15), while the OGR version makes no mention of the play at all. The Yohan version also only refers briefly to the play in recounting the day's events, without including any of the plot narration or spoken parts. Only the 1400 word OB adaptation includes the characters' names and some description of its preparation and mishaps; it also includes a large illustration from one of the scenes (OB, pgs. 8-9). The nested narration that would be required to describe the play within a larger storyline is most probably the reason for not giving it fuller treatment, though it is unfortunate that some way to include the rhymed portions could not have been found.

The last literary device to be considered in this overview is the use of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, which supplies the title for the opening chapter and serves as a central motif for the novel as a whole. Near the end of the chapter, after being reminded by their mother of the game they used to play as children using the story, the girls renew their vows to conquer themselves and face with courage life's trials in the pursuit of goodness. *The Pilgrim's Progress* is mentioned explicitly by only one of the four writers of the graded readers, briefly, in the Yohan version. The seventeenth century allegory was no doubt a common piece of the average American's mental furniture at the time *Little Women* was written, and so fits naturally into the story, providing a wealth of meaningful reference in the process. End-of-twentieth-century Americans

would be far less likely to appreciate it however, its author and date's appearance on one or two tests being probably the extent of most people's acquaintance with John Bunyan. To introduce and elaborate on the reference in the text would no doubt be distracting to the learner-reader, so its exclusion is not surprising. It could however be given a brief note of explanation in the glossary, giving its provenance and significance to the book as a whole (Yohan gives definitions of the words separately, but does not identify it as a literary work).

IV Conclusion

I have intended to show, in this paper, through examinations of reading theory and comparisons of graded readers, the benefits to be had from an Extensive Reading program. Theoretically, the importance of context to comprehension, for readers in their native tongue, speaks all the more strongly for attention to sustained discourse for the learner-reader. Familiarity, acquired through experience, with the rhetorical patterns of the target language and their lexical markers, can also be considered a *sine qua non* for reading fluency. Comparisons of the graded reader texts themselves centered on how the five literary elements of speech, direct narrative, inserted letters and dramas, and literary references, are treated among four different adaptations at the 600, 1000, and 1400 word levels. The different renditions revealed the difficult choices, some more successful than others, that rewriters must make in keeping the level of text difficulty within the prescribed parameters while retaining the aesthetic identity and impact of the original. A somewhat surprising finding in this area was the superiority in some instances of the readers designed for the less advanced students. Given the imbalance in ratio between the time most students invest in preparing to read and actually doing so, and for the rea-

sons cited in reading theory generally, it is my opinion that a well organized Extensive Reading program would clearly enhance the typical curriculum in Japanese universities today.

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