

ERJ

Extensive Reading in Japan

The Journal of the
JALT Extensive Reading
Special Interest Group

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Innovations in Extensive Reading

The Foundations Reading Library

Daniel Stewart
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Editor's comments-

Writers for this column will describe an innovation in ER by following the six headings you will see below. If you know of an innovation you would like to share with the other members, please contact-

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The Way it Has Been

Prior to the release of the Foundations Reading Library, the easiest standard graded readers were the Penguin Readers Easystarts. The Easystarts were written using a list of 200 words and according to the Start with Simple Stories (SSS) website (SSS, 2008), those books are all between 880 and 1,000 words in length. Books easier than the Easystarts were available, but they were written for children or at least looked like they were meant for

children. In addition, with the exception of Macmillan's L.A. Detective series, the Penguin Marcel the Mouse Detective series and a few others, graded readers are individual stories with characters that are only seen in one book.

What's New?

The Foundations Reading Library is a series of forty-two graded readers written by Rob Waring and Maurice Jamall with contributions by Julian Thomlinson on most of the level six and seven books. There are six books at each of the seven levels. The books have been written in such a way that vocabulary reappears sufficiently in each level for the

students to easily make the jump to the next level.

There are several key innovations in this series. Firstly, the books start at a remarkably low 75 headwords in level one. That is much lower than the previous easiest books, the Easystarts, which have 200 headwords. Secondly, as can be seen in Table 1, there are very small jumps in the number of headwords between levels.

Level	Headwords	Length (words)
1 Low beginner	75	500-620
2 Beginner	100	640-760
3 High beginner	150	680-910
4 Low elementary	200	1,270-1,430
5 Elementary	250	1,120-1,750
6 High elementary	300	2,300-2,640
7 Low intermediate	350	2,280-2,930

Table 1 Foundations Headwords and Length

Thirdly, the books get gradually longer so students have time to adjust to reading longer books in English. Finally, the books all involve the same group of teenagers in a small town in the United States. Students get to know the characters as they meet them again in later books.

What is Good About It?

I teach at a private junior and senior high school for boys. I originally set up an ER programme

seven years ago with junior high third year students. I expanded that to high school first year students and wanted to start earlier with junior high second year students. Until the Foundations Reading Library was released, I could not find books that:

- were easy enough for junior high second year students to read quickly and easily
- covered topics of interest to junior high boys

- did not look too childish for teenage boys

This series enabled us to start ER a year earlier and set the boys up for success in ER. They are now accustomed to reading quickly in English and take it for granted that they are supposed to move up levels often. This is quite different from the past where I have had some students read forty books at Edinburgh Project on Extensive Reading (EPER) level G,

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because our pre-test in April told them that was their level.

Another good thing about this series is that the characters get what they deserve. If they are dishonest, they are caught and suffer the consequences. The writers have done a very good job of adding this moral dimension to the series without preaching or making the characters unrealistic.

Potential Weaknesses

While most of our students enjoyed the books right from the start, a few of the cooler boys in our school found the level one books a little too simple saying not much happens. Not much can happen with only 75 headwords. Personally I think Waring and Jamall did an excellent job making interesting stories with just 75 words and those few students are being overly picky. Luckily even those boys really got into the series by level 2.

When I first saw the series I thought it was a little strange that two British writers would create a series about teenagers in a small town in the United States. Fortunately that did not seem to matter much as I only found one situation in all the 42 books

in which the behaviour of a character did not seem like something an American teenager would do. In *Slam Dunk for Mark*, the school's star basketball player goes to school all day and then skips the championship basketball game so he can take his grandmother to see a doctor. At my own high school in Canada, the teachers would not have minded at all if I missed a class to take a family member to the doctor. On the other hand, if a student missed an important athletic event they would be chastised for letting down the team or even letting down the whole school. When I questioned my Japanese students about this, they had not noticed anything strange about the hero's actions. They just liked the book. In the end it was quite useful as we ended up having a class discussion. Anything that gets the students talking about the books is not much of a weakness.

Student Reaction

In order to make time for students to read the Foundation Readers Library in junior high second year, we had to eliminate something. One of the young Japanese teachers agreed to cancel his grammar classes

for the first month of the school year in 2007 and take the students to the library to read these books instead. So instead of two hours a week of grammar per week with him, they sat and read the Foundation Readers Library. The students really enjoyed the books. They convinced him to continue the programme for an additional two weeks, as they preferred it to studying grammar. That is not surprising, but their results might surprise some teachers. Every April we give a pre-test to all third year junior high students before they start the ER programme. We use the reading section of the standardized Secondary Level English Proficiency (SLEP) test created by the same people who make the TOEFL test. It is normally used to test the English level of students who wish to study at a high school in the United States. The boys who read the Foundations Readers for six weeks in 2007 instead of studying grammar took the SLEP test in April 2008 when they became third year students. Interestingly they did the same or better than the students at our school in the three previous years who did have that six weeks of grammar study. The results can be seen in Table 2.

Year	2008	2007	2006	2005
N	297	299	295	300
Average	19.875	19.097	18.634	18.657
SD	2.852	3.085	3.019	3.371

Table 2 SLEP Test Results

Does this mean reading the Foundations Reading Library is more effective than studying grammar? It is too early to tell. Perhaps the teacher who used the Foundations series is just more effective than the three teachers who preceded him. Still, the results were compelling enough that the teacher who is in charge of second year students this year also used the Foundations Reading Library instead of teaching grammar in April. If his students also have equal or slightly

higher SLEP scores next April, that would certainly be interesting.

We have seen that the students like the books and the Japanese teachers find them innovative enough to justify changing their own teaching style. Still, this was just one private school for boys, so I contacted a few friends working at different schools to see how their students liked the series. One teacher who teaches at a private school for girls said the Foundations books are always borrowed quickly as they are

very popular (A. O'Brien, personal communication, May 22, 2008). Another teacher at the university level sent me the following uncorrected quotes about the Foundations Reading Library from an end of the term survey:

What did you think of the characters?

I think the characters is average people.

I think Steve and Ryan is tricky persons but poor persons.

They has good character.

Reading

you take a serious look at these innovative books.

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References

- Start with Simple Stories (2008) USSS
- Graded Readers Word Counts and Recommendation Lists
- Mr Jenkins is poor man. I think him lonely. His dolphins are very cute. Ray is wise. And she is young girl full of vigor. Mr Jenkins is kind. He lived in big old house on the hill. (E. MacGregor personal communication, March 28, 2008)

Notice the students feel they know the characters as they are used

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throughout the series. Getting the students to

Conclusion

Since the Foundation Reading Library, I was hesitant to start ER with second year junior high school students. I was surprised at how popular the books were and how well they did as students for further ER. Other teachers have had success with them with older students. If you have not yet seen them, I heartily

They were interesting people. There were few characters but there was personality.

Although, that Steve is cunning boy. Mr Jenkins is poor man. I think him lonely. His dolphins are very cute. Ray is wise. And she is young girl full of vigor. Mr Jenkins is kind. He lived in big old house on the hill.

(E. MacGregor personal communication, March 28, 2008)

Notice the students feel they know the characters as they are seen

throughout the series. This has been getting the students to read more

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one of the members of the ER SIG took a look at many sources. This list will save time for SIG members and help them to

Editor's comments:
2007 and the end of May, 2008. Subsequent lists will be from five different publishers. If you would like to each year to determine what new books have become available. Hopefully this list will save time for SIG members and help them provide a greater variety of books to their students.

This list covers books released between the start of January, 2007 and the end of May, 2008. Subsequent lists will cover books released since the previous issue of ERJ. This list consists of books from five different publishers. If you would like to have books from additional publishers included in future issues, please contact

New Book Releases

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New Book Releases

ISBN	Title	Level	Publisher
978-0521704649	Death in Oxford	Level 3	Cambridge
978-0521705851	Girl at the Window, The	Level 3	Cambridge
978-0521713672	Wild Country	Level 4	Cambridge
978-0521714600	Love in the Lakes	Level 4	Cambridge
978-960-7609-81-0	Happy Prince, The	Level 1	Cengage
978-960-7609-82-3	Phoenix and the Carpet, The	Level 3	Cengage
978-960-7609-83-0	Twelfth Night	Level 4	Cengage
978-960-7609-84-7	Great Expectations	Level 5	Cengage
978-960-7609-85-4	Three Musketeers, The	Level 5	Cengage
978-960-7609-86-1	Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court, A	Level 5	Cengage
978-960-7609-87-8	Heart of Darkness, The	Level 5	Cengage