The Effect of Grade Weighting on Student Extensive Reading Performance

Thomas N. Robb
Kyoto Sangyo University, Japan

This paper describes three approaches for grading the extensive reading requirements implemented at Kyoto Sangyo University in. In order to encourage less motivated reader who likely would not complete the reading assignments, a grading requirement was imposed. The results suggest that when the course grading criteria includes a requirement to complete extensive reading, students are more likely to complete the reading.

An ideal extensive reading (ER) program, as outlined in Day and Bamford (2002), would place no grade requirements on students' reading because "reading is its own reward" (p. 132). This paper, however, discusses a more common case—a curriculum in which ER is imposed on students as an outside assignment. For required classes consisting of mainly unmotivated students, reading goals must be set and students' achievements must be reflected in the class's final evaluation if students are to meet expectations.

In Kyoto Sangyo University's general education program, two approaches to ER have been attempted, one with a much heavier weighting on the final grade than the other. The result was predictable: More students attempted to do the reading when it was weighted more heavily on the final grade; thus, more of those students achieved the target goal for their specific reading level.

Description of the ER Program at Kyoto Sangyo University

This paper reports on the curriculum-wide ER program that was in place from 2008 to 2012 at Kyoto Sangyo University. (In 2013, sadly, a new curriculum with no ER and emphasis on the TOEIC was put in place.) All students had access to the MoodleReader module on the school's Moodle system, which has now been supplanted by the browser-based M-

Reader system. A typical student screen is displayed in Figure 1. Students took short quizzes on the books they read and accumulated a reading word count for each quiz they passed. See Robb and Kano (2013) for a discussion of the effectiveness of the program and http://mreader.org for further information about the software.

Figure 1. Student screen in mreader.org.

The General Education English Program at Kyoto Sangyo serves all first-year students in the university with the exception of the English and international relations majors in the Faculty of Foreign Languages and the students in the Faculty of International Culture ("Bunka Gakubu"). Until 2013 students were required to take eight credits of a foreign language, of which at least four credits were usually English. Each 90-minute class met twice a week for 15 weeks per term.

Table 1. Distribution of Language Study Choices, 2008 and 2009

	Year:	2008	2009
Oral Communication (OC) and Reading Skills (RS)		872	659
Oral Communication and another foreign language		1,131	1,192
Reading Skills and another foreign language		596	558
Eight credits of another foreign language, no English		198	637
	Total:	2,797	3,046

The program also offered a wide range of topical elective courses for students who wished to continue studying English or who failed to gain all eight credits during their first year.

Starting with the 2008 academic year, ER became a required component of the Oral Communication (OC) and Reading Skills (RS) courses. Students who elected to take both courses thus had a doubled reading requirement. Following is an extract from the introductory information about ER that was distributed to approximately 70 teachers who would be teaching the OC or RS courses with the ER requirement:

> We realize that Sandai first-year students can be very busy with other school work, but we are convinced that extensive reading is important for them. While you are not required to do so, you might from time to time give them slightly less homework and instead encourage them to read their books. How much you compensate for this with the amount of homework you assign is completely up to you and will vary depending on the total amount of outside work expected of your students in their other subjects. This may vary considerably from faculty to faculty.

We foresaw that there would be reluctance on the part of many students to fulfill this requirement. Since we were implementing ER for the first time in this program, we opted to make the requirement, and its impact on the students' final grade, relatively light.

Three Approaches to Weighting

Approach 1 (2009–2010)—Book count, final course grade +/- 5 points.

The following is extracted from the information provided to the teachers:

If the students have read five books and successfully passed their quizzes, their grade will not change. They will lose one point from their final grade for each book not read. Similarly, they will gain one point for each book that they read above the required amount.

Example:

1. A student's final grade is 72. He or she has read only two books. His or her grade will be reduced by 3 points, to 69.

2. A student's final grade is 72. He or she has read 11 books. His or her grade will be increased by 6 points, to 78.

Approach 2 (2010–2012)—Word count, final course grade +/- 5 points.

While the same point value was retained, the program switched from a "book" requirement to a "word" requirement (see Table 2). This change was prompted by a questionnaire administered to all of the students, which garnered over 1,000 responses. When questioned about the average time it took to read a book, 70% of the students at Level 1 (the lowest level) reported "30 minutes or less," while 30% of the students at Level 5 reported "three hours or less."

We realized that we were placing a much higher burden on the higher-level students while allowing the lower-level students to invest less time than we expected in their reading. An approach using word counts thus helped level the playing field, although we still required a higher word goal from the higher-level students, with the assumption that they were faster readers. (This assumption, however, seems to be misleading, but a discussion of this point will have to await another paper.)

This is the English translation of the information given to the students in Japanese:

If you read the number of words for your level shown in this chart [see Table 2], your final grade will not change. If you read fewer words,

your grade will go down a maximum of five points. If you read more than the required amount, your grade can go up a maximum of five points. If you read even more, your teacher might give you extra credit.

Table 2. Word-Based Requirements

Level	Words for 1 point	Required minimum words	Words required for full 5 points
1	3000	15000	30000
2	4000	20000	40000
3	5000	25000	50000
4	6000	30000	60000
5	7000	35000	70000

Approach 3 (2012–2013)—Reading counts as 20% of final grade.

In the 2012 school year the English Curriculum Coordinating Committee decided to increase the weight of ER by (a) making it a percentage of the total grade so that students could more clearly grasp the consequences of not doing the work, (b) increasing the weight to a span of 20 points rather than the previous 10 points, and (c) awarding no credit to students who completed less than the minimum requirement. Thus, points that mathematically yielded a grade of 1–9 for the ER component were treated as if nothing at all had been read. The actual number of words required for each level remained the same.

Table 3. Word Requirements in 2012 and 2013

Level	Words required to obtain 10 points*	Words required to obtain 20 points
1	15000	30000
2	20000	40000
3	25000	50000
4	30000	60000
5	35000	70000
*Word counts under the minimum receive '0' points		

Results year by year

    Table 4 displays student performance over four years. Only the results for spring term are reported. Fall-term results are consistently less, perhaps because some students discovered that they could receive a passing grade for the course without expending too much effort on their extensive reading.

Table 4. Student Performance by Year

Term/Year	Total Students†	Passed No Quizzes	Percent	Achieved Min. Requirement	Percent
Spring 2009*	2.899	367	12.6%	1,588	54.78%
Spring 2010	3,351	103	7.3%	2,091	62.40%
Spring 2011	2,847	33	3.1%	1,386	48.68%
Spring 2012	3,066	86	7.0%	2,626	85.65%
* 2009 was assessed in "books," not "words." † Students taking both the OC and RS courses are counted twice.					

    From these data we can observe that the policy followed in 2012 had a significant effect on student conformance. Since two factors were changed, we cannot determine whether the threat of receiving zero points for failure to reach the minimum requirement or the fact that ER comprised 20% of their final grade was the greater motivator. We can, however, clearly state that in a Japanese university context, students are less likely to complete assigned outside work if nonconformance is not a threat to passing the course.

Discussion

    There are many ways to confirm whether students have completed the desired amount of ER. With instructors invested in the ER approach, direct discussion—or oral or written reports—might suffice. For large classes, or when an ER requirement is applied in a top-down manner over

an entire curriculum, electronic assessment is more effective overall despite its lack of a personal touch.

Regardless of the manner for performing the actual assessment, however, the importance placed on the ER component in overall class evaluation will determine how much the average student will comply with the requirement.

If the students read a lot, preferably over 100,000 words per term, teachers may find that the ER component of the class has contributed significantly to the students' overall improvement in language ability as well as in reading itself. The requirements displayed in this paper are admittedly low, but in light of the fact that the students were, on average, taking 15 other 90-minute courses concurrently, this was all that we could reasonably expect from them. There were some students, however, who read significantly more than their assigned target amount.

References

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About the Author

Thomas Robb, PhD, is an English professor and Chair of the Department of English in the Faculty of Foreign Languages at Kyoto Sangyo University. He has been an advocate of extensive reading for over 25 years and is the developer of the MoodleReader plug-in and the mreader.org website.