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## Feature Article

# Graded Readers: Selecting an Appropriate Level for University EFL Students

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### Abstract

It is well established that extensive reading is beneficial for L2 language learning. The importance of extensive reading in promoting language development for L2 learners has been advocated by many scholars (Krashen, 1993; Nation, 2001; Waring & Takaki, 2003). However, in order to get the most out of the learning, choosing the appropriate materials is crucial. This paper discusses the importance of graded readers and on how to decide on which graded reader's level to assign each student by using the Vocabulary Levels Test (Schmitt, 2000; Schmitt, Schmitt & Clapham, 2001). Finally, it reports on the findings of whether assessing the vocabulary size is an effective decision-making tool to determine the selection of level of graded readers for this target population.

多読の学習効果については、多くの先行研究で立証されてきた (Nation, 2001; Waring & Takaki, 2003)。しかし、学習効果を最大限に引き出すためには、多読に使用するリーディングの選定及び適切なレベルの把握が鍵となる。本研究では、Graded Readersの重要性及び語彙レベルテスト (Schmitt, 2000; Schmitt, Schmitt & Clapham, 2001) によるレベル選定が有効かを検証した。アンケートの結果、Graded

Readersのレベルが上がるほど語彙レベルテストのみでは、難易度が測れないことを示唆した。

One of the central aims for an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) Reading program is for students to become fluent readers, and researchers have pointed out the importance of extensive reading in achieving this (e.g. Grabe & Stoller, 2001; Nation, 2001, 2009; Waring & Takaki, 2003). However, studies suggest that although most Japanese university students already recognize the basic 3,000 English word families (Mochizuki & Aizawa, 2000; Nonaka, 2004; Saida, 2006), they do not have the range of vocabulary necessary to read unsimplified text and to guess unknown words from context. In order to meet such linguistic demands, especially for basic and intermediate learners, graded readers play an important role, as they are written by using a limited number of vocabulary words. This study examines whether using the Vocabulary Levels Test is an appropriate tool to decide the selection of level of graded readers for Japanese university students.

## **Extensive reading**

Reading has been considered as one of the most important language skills and serves different purposes in academic settings (Grabe & Stoller, 2001; Nation, 2001, 2009). For instance, it can provide valuable sources of information from different perspectives and give critical analyses of the issues. Also, it is a useful means by which students can work individually to gain more knowledge of the topic and improve their linguistic abilities. To put these into practice, Grabe and Stoller (2001) suggested ten key implications for EAP reading instruction. For example, they recommend students increase their receptive vocabulary size, read a large number of texts to develop their fluency and automaticity, and do extensive reading.

Extensive reading (also called *pleasure reading*) involves exposure

to a large number of texts. Nation (2009) defined it as “a form of learning from meaning-focused input” (p. 50). According to the definition given by the *Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics*, extensive reading is “intended to develop good reading habits, to build up knowledge of vocabulary and structure, and to encourage a liking for reading” (Richards, Platt, & Platt, 1992, p. 133).

Krashen (1993) makes a strong argument for the use of extensive reading, or Free Voluntary Reading (FVR), for several reasons. He avows that reading comprehension, writing style, vocabulary, and spelling and control of grammar will all improve. Other studies have shown that incidental learning through reading plays a significant role in promoting vocabulary acquisition in the L2 context (Grabe & Stoller, 1997; Nation, 2001, 2009; Waring & Nation; 2004).

## **Conditions for reading unsimplified texts and the role of graded readers**

In order to read for pleasure without consulting a dictionary, a number of conditions need to be met. First, there is a general consensus that 95% of lexical coverage (one unknown word in every 20 words) or higher is essential for minimal comprehension of reading text. This means that a threshold of 3,000 word families (4,800 lexical items) has to be attained for minimal comprehension (Laufer, 1992). A word family refers to a “headword, its inflected forms, and its closely related derived forms” (Nation, 2001, p. 8). For example, “accept,” “acceptability,” “unacceptable,” “accepted,” “accepting,” “accepts,” and “acceptance” are all counted as one word family.

Second, to read a short unsimplified novel for pleasure, learners need to know more than 98% of the words in the text (i.e., less than one unknown word in every 50 running words). With a working

knowledge of 2,000 basic words of English for language learners, it is believed that the higher the number of unknown words, the less suitable the text is for extensive reading. Students otherwise will not benefit as much from reading and learning new words through context (Waring & Nation, 2004). Having a recommended lexical coverage of 98% translates into knowing roughly about 5,000 word families (8,000 lexical items) according to Hirsh and Nation (1992).

However, studies reported that Japanese university students know an average of 3,769 English word families (Mochizuki & Aizawa, 2000). In another study with 1,736 participants conducted by Saida (2006), Ibaraki University students had an average of 3,138 English family words, which is roughly the same figure provided by Mochizuki and Aizawa. If we were to focus only on non-English majors, Nonaka (2004) concluded that Japanese students at an intermediate level of English have an estimated receptive vocabulary size of 3,773 word families. Similarly, Maruyama (2009) found that her first year non-English major students had an average vocabulary size of 3,411 word families. Even worse, recent studies (Okamoto, 2007; Maruyama, 2008a, 2009) suggested that students' vocabulary size is at its peak in the final year of high school and declines rapidly after entrance to university.

As it has been widely acknowledged that lexical knowledge is closely tied with reading comprehension (Grabe & Stoller, 2001), reading graded readers provides an ideal condition for learners to meet the new words repeatedly in a different comprehensible context within a short period of time when the memory is still fresh and words are retained (Waring & Nation, 2004).

## **Graded readers**

Graded readers are books written especially for foreign- or second language learners to develop their reading ability by simplifying the

vocabulary and grammar so the learner can easily understand the story. They are similar to basal readers but are written specifically for language learners. Graded readers are published by various publishers such as Oxford, Pearson Longman, and Cambridge. They are divided into different levels, graded by headwords (e.g., 250, 400, 700, 1000), grammatical structure (e.g., present simple to clauses of concession, condition), syntax, and plot (e.g., simple sequential to flashbacks).

The importance of using graded readers especially for lexical and fluency development has been widely acknowledged in the field especially in Japan. Waring (2006) strongly claimed that “graded reading, or extensive reading, is a completely indispensable part of any language program” (p. 44). Nevertheless, there has been a long debate over whether using simplified text or authentic text is more effective than the other. For example, scholars who believe in the Fluency First Approach (Rorschach, Tillyer, & Verdi, 1992) based on whole language philosophy (Freeman & Freeman, 1992) believe learners, even at basic levels, should read massive amounts of authentic texts (e.g. classic and contemporary literature) not readings adapted for language learners. A study conducted by Kweon and Kim (2008) suggested the possibility of incidental vocabulary learning through using authentic written texts at college level. In their study, 12 Korean learners of English read three authentic teen novels (over 100,000 words) for five weeks. After the treatment, they showed a significant vocabulary growth. However, it should be noted that seven out of 12 students who participated in the study scored an average of 607 on TOEFL ITP (paper based) test indicating that they were advanced students.

As Nation (2009) stated, “unsimplified texts have a very heavy vocabulary load and, for the purposes of extensive reading, do not set up the conditions needed for successful learning from meaning-focused input” (p. 58). If they contain too many unknown words, reading these types of books will turn into intensive study which disrupts the flow of reading.

Another important factor which needs to be considered is the English language learning environment. Compared with other Asian EFL countries such as Korea and Taiwan where English is learned as a mandatory course beginning in the third grade, English education starts from junior high school in Japan. Although it should be noted that English education will become mandatory from elementary school starting from 2011 (the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology, 2008). Therefore, it is more likely for Japanese students have had limited experience reading English books. In fact, Maruyama (2008b) found that even though 87% of her first year Japanese university students ( $N = 67$ ) gave positive responses to reading in their L1, more than half of the students (52%) had minimal interest in reading in English. This was probably due to the fact that none of her students had experience reading English books. Based on the questionnaire analysis, 10 students commented that they did not enjoy reading in English because they were not confident enough to read English books. They believed their English was not good enough and felt that they had difficulties understanding the content. As two students commented, the lack of confidence might have led them to keep away from reading English books. If students start extensive reading using authentic texts which are relatively long and challenging, this may prevent the development of fluency and detract from the pleasure of reading.

## **Choosing appropriately graded reader levels**

Learners are able to process reading texts fluently, only if the texts are well within their linguistic level. Thus, choosing the right level of graded readers for students is crucial. Consequently, how can we select the appropriate level? One strong indicator is the students' current receptive vocabulary size (Nation, 2001, 2009). For instance, the total word families used at each level is roughly the same as the

graded readers' level in the Oxford Bookworms series as shown in Table 1 (Nation, 2009).

Table 1. *Total New Words and Word Families at Each Oxford Bookworms Level*

Level	New words	Total word families at each level
1	400	400
2	300	700
3	300	1,000
4	400	1,400
5	400	1,800
6	700	2,500

Note: Adapted from Nation (2009, p. 52)

According to Nation (2001), there are two types of extensive reading depending on the learning goals. If the learning goal is to enlarge vocabulary size, learners should know 95-98% of words covered in the texts. Learners are suggested to read at a level which is slightly above their current vocabulary level, " $i + 1$ ." However, if the aim is to develop fluency, the vocabulary coverage should be even higher, 99-100%. For fluency development, a level which is slightly lower than the present vocabulary knowledge, " $i - 1$ ," is recommended.

Based on the Course of Study guidelines established by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (2003), Japanese junior high school students are expected to have learned a minimum of 900 English words and an additional 1,800 words in senior high school. That means by the end of senior high school they should have learned at least a total of 2,700 words. This suggests a minimum set of words introduced in all the English textbooks. Through the study of junior high and senior high English textbooks, Hasegawa and Chujo (2004) found: (a) an average of 1,000 different types of words introduced in junior high English textbooks and (b) about 3,700 words in senior high textbooks. This figure also includes the words which have already been

introduced in junior high textbooks. If we exclude those words, a total average of 4,000 different types of words are introduced in junior high and senior high English textbooks.

As we have seen in the previous section, since university students have a working knowledge of more than 3,000 word families (Mochizuki & Aizawa, 2000; Saida, 2006), we can estimate that level 6 (Oxford Bookworms) with a total of 2,500 word families would be the most appropriate level.

The current study was designed to investigate whether assessing student vocabulary size is an effective decision-making tool in choosing the appropriate level of graded readers for students. Furthermore, the study investigated the students' perceptions of the appropriateness of their selection based on a questionnaire conducted on the final day of class.

## **The study**

### **Participants**

The participants in this study were 33 first year students in one class at a private university in Tokyo. Eleven participants were male and 22 were female. This was a convenience sample of Social Welfare majors taking an EAP Reading course.

### **Instruments**

Two instruments were used in the present study:

1. The Vocabulary Levels Test (Schmitt, 2000; Schmitt, Schmitt & Clapham, 2001) was conducted to measure students' current vocabulary size and to decide on which level of graded reader to assign each student.
2. A survey questionnaire covering aspects of their reading.



### *Instrument 1: Vocabulary Levels Test*

This fixed-choice test is reputed to be capable of showing the stage of learners' vocabulary size based on a list of high frequency words called the General Service List (West, 1953). There are five sections in the test, but only three sections (2,000-word level, the 3,000-word level, and the 5,000-word level) were used in the present study. In total, the test consisted of 90 items.

Each section is comprised of six words and three definitions. In each section, the test takers are asked to match the words on the left with the definitions given on the right (see Figure 1 for a sample from the Vocabulary Levels Test). The test took about 15-20 minutes (5 minutes for each section) to complete.

1. original	
2. private	
3. royal	<u>1</u> first
4. slow	<u>2</u> not public
5. sorry	<u>6</u> all added together
6. total	

*Figure 1.* Sample items from the Vocabulary Levels Test.

To estimate the student's current vocabulary size, the formula created by Laufer (1998) was used. First, even though students were tested on three levels (2,000, 3,000, and 5,000 levels), the 1,000 and 4,000 levels were accounted for statistically. For the 1,000 level, students were assumed to have the same score as for the 2,000 level. For the 4,000 level, the average score for the 3,000 and 5,000 words

was taken. Then, the total score was added and multiplied by 5,000 (as students were tested up to a size of 5,000 word families) and divided by 150 (30 items per level for 5 levels—1,000, 2,000, 3,000, 4,000 and 5,000). For example, if a student scored 20 out of 30 at the 2,000 word level, 15 out of 30 at the 3,000 word level, and 5 out of 30 at the 5,000 word level, it is estimated that a student has 20 out of 30 at the 1,000 word level and 10 out of 30 at the 4,000 word level. The total score adds up to 70. This figure is multiplied by 5,000 and divided by 150 which roughly equals to 2,333 word families.

In this study, using the estimated vocabulary size, students were recommended to read graded readers which were slightly lower than their current vocabulary knowledge since the aim was not to expand their new vocabulary words but to develop reading fluency. For instance, if the result indicated that a student had a vocabulary size of roughly 2,333, this showed that he/she was in control of 1,800 word families (Oxford Bookworms Level 5; Table 1) but not for 2,500 word families (Oxford Bookworms Level 6).

### *Instrument 2: Survey questionnaire*

The purposes of the questionnaire in the Appendix was to check whether the students read the assigned number of graded readers i.e., minimum of five graded readers (Item 1), whether students chose the expected right level (Item 2), and whether they felt comfortable with their level of reading (Items 3 and 4).

The questionnaire consisted of three fixed-response questions and one open-ended question. One of the fixed-response questions (Item 3) used a 6-point Likert scale in which 0 represented “I don’t understand the question” and 5 represented “I strongly agree.”

## **Test procedure**

The classes followed a procedure of pre-reading, while-reading and post-reading stages. Most of the class time was devoted to teaching

reading skills (e.g. previewing, skimming, scanning, and annotating) and focusing on intensive reading. As an extra-curricular activity, students were required to read at least five graded readers. Nation (2001) recommends learners to read a book every one or two weeks until they reach the 2,000 word level. As students were already at the 2,000 word level, reading five graded readers during one semester (i.e., about one every two weeks) was considered sufficient to ensure the repetition of vocabulary. Students were not given any extra credits for reading more than five books. The only thing that was assigned and assessed for the extensive reading task was to write five short book responses (about 100 words long) which included a short summary of the book and response to several questions (e.g. What does the reading make you think of?; Does it remind you of anything or anyone?; What is your opinion?).

On the first day of class, the students were given instruction on where they could buy graded readers. Then the students purchased their first book based on their interests and results of their receptive vocabulary level test. The students chose their books from the collection of Oxford Bookworms. The series has six levels from level 1 (400 headwords) to level 6 (2,500 headwords) which mainly consist of condensed versions of classic novels. Then, on the second day of class, to confirm whether the students bought the right books, they were required to bring them to class. The students were instructed to read for at least 30 minutes every day outside of class. Students were asked to read one book within two weeks, for a total of five books in total for the entire thirteen week semester.

On the day of the final exam, the questionnaire was administered. To obtain accurate information from the respondents, all the questions and instructions were written in both English and Japanese to avoid misunderstanding.

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## Data analysis procedure

Learners' mean scores and standard deviations for each frequency band (2,000, 3,000 and 5,000-word levels) were computed using SPSS version 17.0. In the Vocabulary Levels Test, students got one point for each correct answer. A perfect score for each section was 30 points. Thus, the maximum score that students could get was 90 (30 items per level times three levels). For the questionnaire, the data analysis process consisted of two types: Likert-type and open-ended item analysis.

### Result 1: The Vocabulary Levels Test

The mean scores of the three frequency levels were 26.85 ( $SD = 1.91$ ) for the 2,000 word level, 19.76 ( $SD = 4.73$ ) for the 3,000 word level and 18.03 ( $SD = 4.11$ ) for the 5,000 word level (Table 2). Using Laufer's (1998) formula, if we convert the figures into numbers of word families, the total of 64.64 is roughly equivalent to 3,680 word families. Comparing this figure to typical Japanese university students who range from 3,138 (Saida, 2006) to 3,769 English words (Mochizuki & Aizawa, 2000), the data suggests that the present students were well within the range of average intermediate university students. The result indicated that level 6 was appropriate for most of them.

Table 2. *Results for the Vocabulary Levels Test (N = 33)*

Level	<i>M</i>	<i>Max</i>	<i>Min</i>	<i>SD</i>
2,000	26.85	30.00	22.00	1.91
3,000	19.76	28.00	10.00	4.73
5,000	18.03	25.00	11.00	4.11
Total	64.64	83.00	47.00	8.98

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## Result 2: Questionnaire

Students indicated that they read an average of 4.8 graded readers ( $SD = .39$ ) over thirteen weeks (Item 1). Based on the Vocabulary Levels Test, students were presumed to know an average of 3,680 word families. This indicated that level 6 (2,500 word families; Table 1) was appropriate for all students (the lowest score was 2,750 word families). However, contrary to expectations, as they moved towards the end of the semester, students showed a tendency to choose a level that was much lower than their actual vocabulary level as suggested by Table 3 and Figure 2.

Table 3. *Mean level of graded readers that students reported reading (Item 2)*

	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean Level</i>	<i>SD</i>
1 <sup>st</sup> book	20	5.65	1.14
2 <sup>nd</sup> book	21	5.33	1.20
3 <sup>rd</sup> book	21	5.14	1.49
4 <sup>th</sup> book	22	5.36	1.47
5 <sup>th</sup> book	19	4.68	1.80

*Note.* The number of students completing each book varied from 19 to 22.

The follow-up responses explain this result (Table 4). As for the first graded reader, the majority of 20 students (80%) out of the 25 who responded chose their level based on their results in the vocabulary level check test. However, a gradual shift was seen in the reasons for their selections by the end of the fifth book. 48% (12) of the students who responded, chose their books based on the level check test (number 1), yet 29% (9) of the students indicated that they chose their books simply from the book title (number 8). This result could be interpreted as serving the real purpose of using graded readers for

extensive reading, where students, not the teachers, chose books based on their own interests.

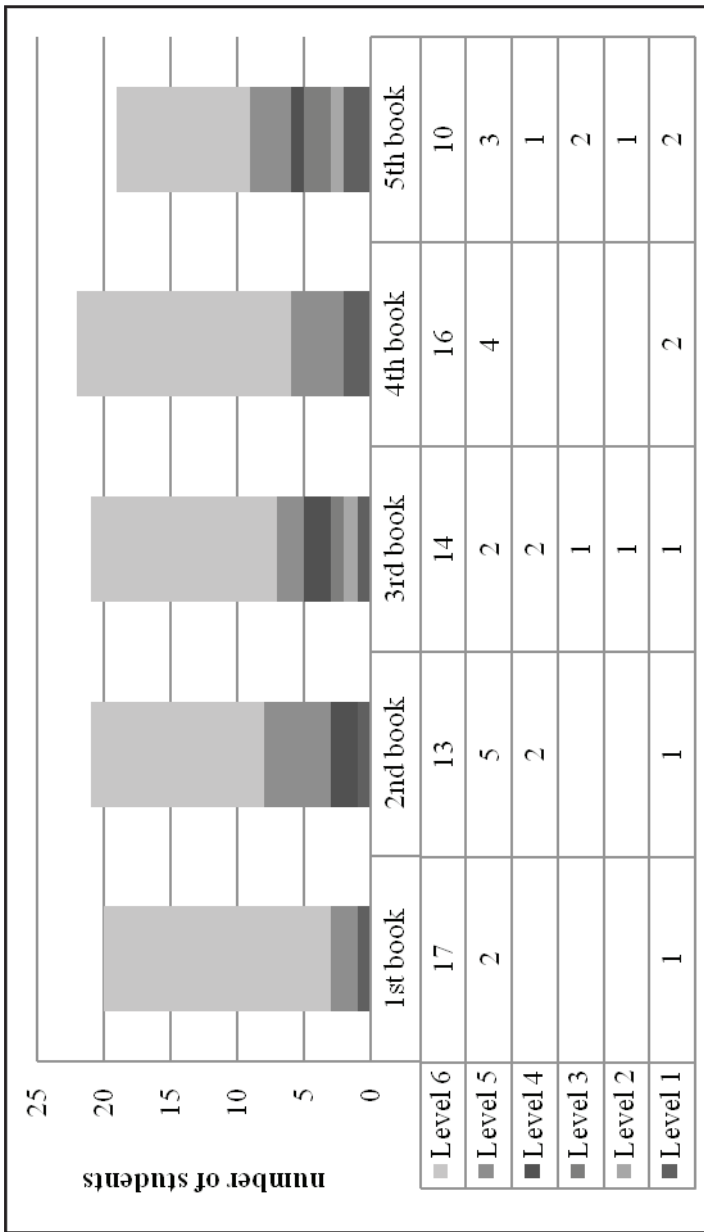


Figure 2. Distribution of level of graded readers that students reported reading (Item 2).

Table 4. *Reasons that Students Indicated for Selection Text Levels (Item 2)*

Items	1 <sup>st</sup> book		2 <sup>nd</sup> book		3 <sup>rd</sup> book		4 <sup>th</sup> book		5 <sup>th</sup> book	
	<i>N</i> = 25		<i>N</i> = 26		<i>N</i> = 25		<i>N</i> = 25		<i>N</i> = 21	
	freq	%	freq	%	freq	%	freq	%	freq	%
1. Based on the test result.	20	(80.0)	12	(46.2)	12	(48.0)	12	(48.0)	10	(47.6)
2. It looked easy to read.					1	(4.0)				
3. It looked challenging enough.			1	(3.8)						
4. It looked appropriate for my level.	1	(4.0)	1	(3.8)	3	(12.0)	1	(4.0)	2	(9.5)
5. The previous level seemed too difficult.			3	(11.5)						
6. The previous level seemed easy.			1	(3.8)						
7. The previous level seemed appropriate.			2	(7.7)	2	(8.0)				
8. It was a book I wanted to read.	2	(8.0)	5	(19.2)	6	(24.0)	9	(36.0)	6	(28.6)
9. Others	2	(8.0)	1	(3.8)	1	(4.0)	3	(12.0)	3	(14.2)

Note. While 33 students filled in the questionnaire, not all the students answered Item 2.

Looking at the students' perceptions of the appropriateness of the books' level (Questionnaire Item 3, see Appendix), the mean was 3.32 and the standard deviation was .75, giving a neutral result. This suggests that although students' chose a much lower level than their actual vocabulary size, many believed the selected books were neither easy nor difficult. This was an unexpected result.

Even more surprisingly, three students indicated that the books were challenging for their levels (Table 4, Item 5). They felt the graded readers of the levels were difficult as they found many unknown words in their reading. This is probably due to the recent findings that higher levels (levels 4 to 6) of graded readers include more words that are not from the most frequent 2,000-word level list, i.e., General Service List

(Wan-a-rom, 2008). This suggests that the unknown words students encountered were unique to the books they read and were beyond the students' vocabulary level.

## **Discussion**

Since there is a strong correlation between vocabulary size and reading comprehension (e.g. Grabe & Stoller, 1997; Nation, 2001), it is natural to assume that testing vocabulary size will be the most efficient and effective tool to decide on which graded reader's level to assign each student. Indeed, the overall findings indicated that testing students' vocabulary size was an appropriate measure to decide their books' level. The majority of students reported that they chose a certain level based on the result of the Vocabulary Levels Test, and found them appropriate for their levels.

However, as the semester moved on, there was a gradual change in students' attitudes toward selecting their books. While half of the students chose their books relying on their vocabulary test results, about one-third took the initiative to select their books based on their own interests. In this sense, the reason for the selection served the real purpose of "pleasure reading" in which the students themselves, not the teachers, choose their books.

Another interesting finding is that although the books they chose were lower than their actual vocabulary level, surprisingly, students felt they were neither too easy nor too difficult on average. Although the number was limited, a few students even commented that the levels were challenging for their abilities. This could be explained by Wan-a-rom's (2008) recent research where he concluded that higher levels of graded readers tend to include more words that are unique to the books than the lower levels. This is because vocabulary level tests constructed from the word frequency lists may not correspond directly to the graded readers' level, especially for higher levels.



## **Limitations and suggestions for future research**

The results of this study point to several things. Firstly, since the Vocabulary Levels Test contains several English loan words in Japanese (e.g. sport, choice, trick, bench, assist), it may not be the best measure of Japanese students' true English vocabulary level. Furthermore, due to the fact that I limited the testing instrument only to vocabulary size, it would be worth investigating how the result will be different by using other assessment tools to assign book levels to students. Nation (1990) himself pointed out the limitations of the use of the Vocabulary Levels Test by stating, "[it] can be used as a test to see if learners have enough vocabulary to read, but it is important not to confuse having an adequate reading vocabulary with skill in reading" (p. 116).

Since one of the major benefits of doing extensive reading is to improve students' reading fluency, other testing measures could include checking students' reading speed and finding out how long it took students to get through each book. This could be done through assigning students to fill out a short record sheet indicating the date and time it took to read each book. This could show how much reading has been covered over what period of time.

Secondly, it would be useful and interesting to analyze the vocabulary in the graded readers which students read to get a better understanding of how many words were actually new to the students. In this way, we can get a clearer picture of the relationship between lexical knowledge and reading difficulties.

Lastly, since only a small number of students took part in the present research, it is necessary to carry out the same experiment with a greater number of students in order to verify the results.

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## Appendix

### Graded readers' questionnaire

- 1 How many graded readers did you read in total during this semester?

今学期何冊のグレーデッド・リーダーズを読みましたか。

- 2 Which level of graded readers did you read? Please write the level for each book. Also, indicate the reason why you chose that level from the list below. どのレベルのグレーデッド・リーダーズを読みましたか。各本について回答してください。また、どうしてそのレベルを選んだかもっとも当てはまる理由を下記のリストから選び記入してください。

1. Based on the test result. レベル診断テストの結果に基づいて
2. It looked easy to read. やさしそうに見えたから。
3. It looked challenging enough. そこそこ難易度が高そうに見えたから。
4. It looked appropriate for my level. 自分のレベルに適していると思ったから。
5. The previous level seemed too difficult. 前回の本は難しかったから。
6. The previous level seemed too easy. 前回の本は易しすぎたから。
7. The previous level seemed appropriate. 前回の本は、妥当なレベルだったから。
8. It was a book I wanted to read. そのレベルで、読みたい本があったから。
9. Others 他の理由。

1<sup>st</sup> graded reader      Level: ( ) Reason: ( )      4th graded reader      Level: ( ) Reason: ( )

2<sup>nd</sup> graded reader      Level: ( ) Reason: ( )      5th graded reader      Level: ( ) Reason: ( )

3<sup>rd</sup> graded reader      Level: ( ) Reason: ( )

- 3 Please think about the following statement. Then choose a number 1-5 to show the extent to which you agree or disagree with the statement. Write the number in the space on the right.

5 = Strongly agree; 4 = Agree; 3 = Neither agree nor disagree; 2 = Disagree; 1 = Strongly disagree; 0 = I don't understand the question

次の文章を読み、その文章の内容について自分の考えに最もよく当てはまる選択肢を1から5の中から1つ選び、その番号を右の空欄に記入してください。5 =強くそう思う; 4 =そう思う; 3 =どちらでもない; 2 =そう思わない; 1 =強くそう思わない; 0 =問題の意味がわからない

Graded readers were appropriate for my level.

グレーデッド・リーダーズは自分のレベルに合っていたと思う。

- 4 If you answered "1" or "2" in "3", why not? 合っていなかったと3番で答えた人は、どうしてですか?( )