

# ERJ

## Extensive Reading in Japan

The Journal of the  
JALT Extensive Reading  
Special Interest Group

## IN THIS ISSUE:

### Feature Articles

Reading Reaction Reports – Options and alternatives for student book reports. Page 4  
Marc Helgesen

Extensive Reading from the First Day of English Learning. Page 11  
Akio Furukawa

### How We Do It

How We Do It at *Seikei Institute for International Studies*. Page 15  
Tomoko Kawachi

### Innovations in Extensive Reading

Did They Really Read it? A Website for Checking. Page 17  
Daniel Stewart

### Regular Features

New Book Releases Page 24

Recent ER Research Page 25

Volume  
1  
Number 2  
Autumn 2008

# Reading Reaction Reports

## Options and alternatives for student book reports.

Marc Helgesen  
Professor  
Miyagi Gakuin Women's University



Interest in Extensive Reading is growing in Japan. We see the foundation of this JALT ER SIG. The *JALT Language Teacher* has twice had special issues on the topic. Publishers report a huge growth in the sales of readers and bookstores that stock them often give graded readers good display space. As the notice on page 14 shows, ER is even showing up in the popular Japanese press (*an.an*, 2008).

As ER becomes more commonplace, many teachers want ways for students to report on the books they are reading. This is useful not only as a way of providing evidence of books read but also as a way for students to share what they are reading – what they think about the stories and what they do and don't enjoy. Making such evaluations, of course, reflects thinking at a higher level than simply retelling the story. Also, ongoing student reporting is a classroom management tool for us as teachers. It provides some structure – and a bit of positive pressure to make sure the students are reading throughout the course and not just cramming all their reading into the last couple of weeks before the end-of-term deadline.

Habituation – the result of always doing the same thing – can kill motivation for learners. ER has the motivational advantage that students are usually choosing the books they want to read and the plots of those books vary. So variety is guaranteed. But how about the reporting process? As Dornyei (2001) points out, “monotony is inversely related to variety.” If they are always writing the same type of report, we are losing an opportunity to engage the learners with motivation-building variety, as well as to appeal to different learning styles and intelligences.

This article will attempt to help with that variety by introducing eight frameworks for reporting. Four are in-class speaking activities. The other four are written reports, usually done outside of class.

# Reading Reaction Reports - Helgesen

## In-class reporting activities.

### 1. Instant book report.

On the board, write the following:

*I read a book called \_\_\_\_\_.*

*It's a(n) \_\_\_\_\_ story*

*(adventure, love, mystery, true, etc.)*

*It's about \_\_\_\_\_*

*The main characters are \_\_\_\_\_*

*(names, jobs, personalities)*

*In the story, there was a problem. \_\_\_\_\_.*

*I liked / didn't like this book because \_\_\_\_\_.*

Students choose any book they have read or are reading. I give them about a minute of "think time" to decide what they want to say and how they will say it. They are not required to follow the form on the board, but having that form provides enough structure that they can successfully report on the book with little preparation time.

After the "think time", students work in pairs. They report on their book to their partner.

Variations

- *Questions:* Require the partners to ask 2-3 follow-up questions.

- *Task recycling.* Have students change partners and do the same

book report with new partners. Do this 2-3 times. Since they have new partners each time, learners don't get bored. Levels of fluency and complexity increase with the recycling (Lynch and Maclean, 2001, Helgesen, 2007).

- *Show a picture.* Instead of just talking, students show an illustration from the book. They introduce the story as above, then explain the picture.

Although none of the activities here require printed handouts, teachers (including the present author) sometimes prefer to use handouts for the activities. Free photocopiable pdf files of worksheets for each activity are available at: <http://HelgesenHandouts.terapad.com>. Click on the "Extensive Reading" link on the left.

# Reading Reaction Reports - Helgesen

## 2. My top 5.

This is an the end-of-term or end-of-year reporting activity. Students think about all the books they read over the period. They decide on their own “Top 5” books and at least one reason they liked each. They should write their reasons or make short notes. They are writing words or sentences here, not full paragraphs. For a first-year university class, I allow about 10 minutes to plan and write.

The students work in pairs. One partner starts by describing her favorite book and why she liked it. The partner listens and asks questions.

Either have them take turns talking about their books or set a specific amount of time (2-3 minutes each).

Then they change partners and continue.

Note that, in most cases, they won’t have time to talk about all five books. Ironically (though not surprisingly) often the stronger students will only have time to talk about one or two books. The weaker students say less about each book so talk about more of them. But, having prepared ideas for five, it means everyone has material to talk about so they all achieve success.

*Variation:* This activity is easily used in “The 4/3/2 technique” framework. In short, the technique involves having each member speak to partners, four minutes to the first, three minutes to the second, two minutes to the third. They try to say as much as they could during the previous round. For information on the technique in ER, see Renandya (p. 95-96 in Bamford & Day, 2004). For information on the technique in general, google “the 4/3/2 technique” (in quotes).

## 3. Dramatic reading

Reading aloud is a specialized skill. It is quite difficult to read a text aloud for the first time and focus on meaning. However, once a text has been read silently for meaning, a “dramatic reading” is a great way to help learners convey emotion and understanding.

Begin by choosing a short passage (one that takes one or two minutes to read aloud). My personal favorites are the opening pages from *Jojo’s Story* (Moses, 2000), the beginning of *Jaws* (Benchley, 1974) or the shower scene from *Psycho* (Bloch, 1959). These texts convey intense emotion. I make copies\* which the learners read silently as I read aloud. I read the passages as an actor would – essentially, I’m doing oral interpretation.

Before the next class, each student is responsible for selecting a short passage from a book they have read. They practice reading it aloud with feeling. They make a copy of the passage. In class, they work in pairs. They do their

## Reading Reaction Reports - Helgesen

dramatic reading while a partner listens and follows along with the extra copy. As with the variation on “Instant book report”, do *Task recycling*. Learners read their passages at least 2-3 times to different partners. Their oral reading usually gets better each time.

Students sometimes think reading aloud simply involves speaking loudly enough to be heard. You might find it helpful to have them analyze what you did with your voice in your example. For instance, pauses and phrasing does a lot to communicate meaning. For scary or unpleasant parts, the speaker voice is often lowered to draw in the listener.

Some teachers wonder if dramatic reading really constitutes a report since the students are not creating the content. Students selecting which passage to read constitutes “evaluation”, a much higher level of comprehension than the typical “literal” questions often used for reading checks (See Barrett Taxonomy of Reading Comprehension, cited in Helgesen & Brown, 2007. For on-line information on Barrett, see <http://tinyurl.com/barrettcomp>).

As an example, you can get a 5-page sample of *Jojo’s Story* at:

<http://www.cambridge.org/catalogue/catalogue.asp?isbn=9780521797542&ss=exc>

Or, more simply, google: Jojo’s Story Cambridge

Note: This is modeled after an activity suggested by Patrick Fulmer in Bamford & Day, 2004.

### 4. Soon to be a movie

Give each student a large (B4 or A3) sheet of paper and, if possible, colored pencils (ah, the joy of ¥100 shops). Ask them to choose a book they really liked. Ask them to imagine that the book is being made into a movie – and they are the director! First they need to decide who will be cast in each role. Across the bottom of the paper, they write the cast:

Staring . as \_\_\_\_\_. (I’ve had more than a few students cast themselves opposite Brad Pitt or Johnny Depp in remakes of *Romeo and Juliet*.) They then make a poster for the movie. Stress that the poster should be original, not just a redrawing of the book’s cover or a picture from the book.

Students then work in pairs or small groups. They show their posters and explain their casting decisions.

Variation: If the book has already been made into a film, they imagine a Japanese remake and decide on Japanese stars.

Note: This was modeled after an activity suggested by Thomas Farrell in Bamford & Day, 2004. (p. 157-158). Tom suggests it as an alternative to “the boring book report.” That’s an emotion I applaud and hope that the ideas in this article contribute.

# Reading Reaction Reports - Helgesen

## **Out-of class, written reports.**

Many ER teachers require written reports on all the books the students read. In my case, students are required to read at least 500 weighted pages during each term. They write a report on each book, which they glue into a notebook. I collect their notebooks about twice a month, read their reports, stamp them OK and write an occasional note or comment, in part to let them know I actually read the reports.

I use four different reporting forms. They need to use each form at least once. After a form has been introduced, they can use whichever they like. The idea is to provide variety – new forms are introduced in April, June, September and November. Also, because they can choose whichever they want to use after an initial use, they are making decisions which most likely fit in to a kind of intelligence and learning style that fits them as individuals (Gardner, 1993; Jensen, 1995).

**5. Summary /opinion.** This is probably the most common type of book report. Students write a short summary of the book and then react to it. I find this a useful report-type to begin with. The summary is something the learners expect to do. Since the ideas behind ER – reading a lot of easy material for enjoyment – are new to so many students, starting with a report-type that they expect let's them focus on their new tasks. The opinion section does make it clear from the beginning that students have to add their own ideas to the report. It also encourages them to include their own feelings – an important aspect of “intrapersonal intelligence” and helps them process at the comprehension levels of evaluation or appreciation, both higher than the processing necessary just to summarize the story.

**6. Draw a picture.** By early summer, students are used to both the idea of extensive reading and to writing reports. At that point, I give them a report form that asks them to draw a picture as a way of reporting. It should be an original picture, not one they copy from the book. Then they write a paragraph explaining the picture, what happened before and what happens after the scene shown in the picture. I emphasize that the point is not quality artwork. The artwork is just a way of sharing the story. This report-type appeals to students with strong artistic / visual / kinesthetic intelligence. The pictures often reflect a sense of appreciation, a high level of processing. In addition to the picture and description, they also write their opinion.

## Reading Reaction Reports - Helgesen

The kinesthetic nature of the drawing task is important. Of the three major sensory learning styles (*visual, auditory* and *kinesthetic* [also called *haptic*] (Neff, 2006), kinesthetic learners are the least likely to get reinforced at school. Visual and auditory learners get praised (“*You always pay attention.*” “*You always listen carefully.*”) Kinesthetic learners, on the other hand, get punished (“*Sit still and get to work!*”) Consciously incorporating kinesthetic activity into coursework is a way of building in success for those learners.

**7. Your own questions.** When we read a book “in real life” (as opposed to the classroom), we often start by looking at the cover, reading the blurb on the back cover and, perhaps, flipping through. If the book has pictures, we might pause to look at them. All of these are useful steps to activate schema (what we already know about the topic) and create questions we’ll mentally answer as we read. In my ER classes, I try to use reaction reports to help students do this same thing. I ask them to look at the front cover and read the blurb. Then they flip through the book. They find a picture somewhere in the first third of the book and write a question about it. They do the same with pictures in the middle and final thirds. Then, as they read the book, they write the answers to their own questions. Of course, these questions / answers are combined with a short summary and the learner’s opinion. This report-type serves two functions. It encourages schema activation. It also building on a more analytic “logical-mathematical” type of intelligence that requires inferencing and speculation.

This report-type obviously requires readers with pictures. Not all readers have them but most do. Therefore, in practice, that is not a problem.

**8. The book and you.** When we read, we bring our own life-knowledge and life-experience to the story. This final report-type asks learner to do that consciously. There is a vertical line down the center of the report form. One side is labeled “The story”. The other is labeled “My life”. Students write their summary on the “story” side. Under “My life”, they write things from their own lives that parallel the story. This is certainly the most challenging of the report forms, relying on both intrapersonal and interpersonal intelligences in that they connect their own lives to the events and lives of the characters in the book. At times, the comments are superficial (A student reading *Dracula* commenting, “I’ve never met a vampire.”) but at other times, learners write deep responses. I recall a student who had read a biography of Princess

## Reading Reaction Reports - Helgesen

Diana writing, "Diana's life had tragedy." In the parallel panel, she went on to explain that her own father had died of cancer the year before. She went on to explain and draw comparisons.

Reading reaction reports, written and oral, can be far more than "tell me about the book." They can be a springboard for learners interacting with the books, each other and themselves.

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\* I refer to copying a section of the book for students to read silently while I demonstrate the activity. Of course, this is not technically legal. However when considering copyright violations, publishers do consider situation and motive. In this case, I'm not copying to avoid purchasing the books. Indeed, most ER enthusiasts buy many – sometimes hundreds – of readers every year. Rather, I am copying to model an activity that the students will do using the actual books. It is unlikely this would lead to problems.

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## The ER SIG Website

[www.jaltersig.org](http://www.jaltersig.org)

People can download ERJ here once SIG members have had their hard copy for a while.