

# Adding a required self-study extensive reading and listening component to the existing Shoin Junior High School : Senior High School English curriculum: A personal view

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# **Adding a required self-study extensive reading and listening component to the existing Shoin Junior High School / Senior High School English curriculum: A personal view**

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*This paper, while recognizing the inherent difficulties in trying to persuade Shoin Junior High School (JHS) and Senior High School (SHS) English teachers to change their teaching methodology and practice, proposes an alternative, pragmatic model that advocates a change in the use of class time. The proposed model allows for the continuation of traditional teacher-centered learning, but now includes student-centered learning components in the form of required extensive reading and listening in every English class from JHS through SHS. After exploring the rationale and potential outcomes and benefits of adding extensive reading and listening components to each English class, this paper offers some options on how to implement and manage these components.*

## **Introduction**

Attempts by English education specialists in the past from Osaka Shoin Women's University, through a number of workshops to try and influence and persuade Shoin JHS and SHS English teachers to implement changes to their English teaching methodology and practice, have for a variety of reasons failed. It is clear that the so-called "traditional guard" to teaching English is, for the foreseeable future, not about to change. Indeed, other researchers (Kikuchi and Browne 2009; Gorsuch 2001) tend to reinforce this notion regarding English education in JHS and SHS in Japan.

Based on personal observation<sup>1</sup> of Shoin JHS and SHS English classes, and being privy to the schedule in the aforementioned schools, the following common characteristics are noted:

- (a) Classes are 50 minutes long
- (b) <sup>2</sup>JHS and SHS students have an abundance of English classes: 4 classes of English a week and SHS have 5 classes of English a week.
- (c) The teacher talks for almost 100% of the class time – essentially classes are completely teacher-centered.
- (d) As a consequence of (c), there is almost no student-student or student-teacher talking time – in other words, there is no student – centered learning taking place.
- (e) In spite of classes being “English” classes, because of the teaching methodology employed, the language environment is essentially Japanese.
- (f) As there is very little active participation in the lesson by students, boredom, and lack of interest soon set in.

With the above background in mind, plus resignation to the fact that JHS and SHS English teaching methodology is unlikely to change in the foreseeable future, a workaround model that would satisfy all stakeholders – teachers, administrators, parents, as well as students is proposed. The model is quite simple: there is a deliberate shift in how class time is used.

Figure 1 below, exemplifying one SHS and JHS class each, shows what the current schedule situation looks like:

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<sup>1</sup>It should be pointed out that in academic year 2017, only 2 classes (one JHS and one SHS) were observed, so while making wholesale generalizations regarding English teaching in Shoin JHS and SHS should be avoided, there is still a degree of confidence that the observed teaching methodology is probably more the norm rather than the exception.

<sup>2</sup>This figure is based on the 2016 curriculum. Different grades, course may have slightly different numbers of English classes a week.

SHS

	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thurs	Fri	Sat
1						
2		英 R				
3						
4						
5			英 W		英 W	
6	英 R		英 W	英 R	英 W	

JHS

	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thurs	Fri	Sat
1						
2						
3					英語 3-O	
4		英語 3-O			英語 3-O	英語 3-O
5						
6	英語 3-O					

Figure 1. Current SHS and JHS schedule for two classes.

Figure 2 below shows a model of how each class time is now divided into 3 distinct components. The first 10 minutes<sup>3</sup> of class is for extensive reading (ER), where students would read simple graded-readers at their level. The next 30 minutes is devoted to the required textbook/subject/skill that has been originally assigned to the class, and the teacher is free to teach this in the style that they are comfortable with. The last 10 minutes of the class is for listening. Where there are back-to-back classes, ER and listening may be done only once over the combined 100 minute

<sup>3</sup>ER and listening components can be reversed, and depending on resources available, one scenario is that half the class could be doing ER while the other half does listening. In the last 10 minutes of a class, this would be reversed.

class time. In essence, using these two classes as examples, the SHS English class could now potentially have ER and listening 5 times a week, and the JHS class could potentially have ER and listening 4 times a week.

SHS

	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thurs	Fri	Sat
1						
2		ER (10)				
		英 R (30)				
		List. (10)				
3						
4						
5			ER (10)		ER (10)	
			英 R (40)		英 R (40)	
6	ER (10)		List (10)	ER (10)	List (10)	
	英 R (30)		英 W(40)	英 R (30)	英 R (40)	
	List. (10)			List (10)		

ER = 5 times a week List = 5 times a week

JHS

	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thurs	Fri	Sat
1						
2						
3					ER (10) 英語 3-O (40)	
4		ER (10) 英語 3-O (30) List (10)			List (10) 英語 3-O (40)	ER (10) 英語 3-O List (10)
5						
6	ER (10) 英語 3-O (30) List (10)					

ER = 4 times a week List = 4 times a week

Figure 2. Proposed new model of use of class time.

Another advantage of implementing this model is that classes would no longer be 100% teacher-centered. In the current teacher-centered Shoin JHS and SHS English classroom, it was observed that teacher-talking time (TTT) predominates. TTT, if it is almost all in English, is not in itself completely a bad thing, as it provides not only valuable listening practice for students but also gives students an excellent role model when they observe their teacher talking in English. However, the reality of the situation is that TTT is almost all *in* Japanese, offering no benefit to students. Darn (2008) summarizes the positives and negatives of TTT and advocates reducing TTT so as to reduce students' boredom, shift responsibility and autonomy more onto the student, and reduce redundant information that students themselves could very well study on their own.

This model would create more of a balance, in that only 60% of class time

would now be teacher-centered and 40% of class time would now become student-centered. Teachers, who are reluctant to change how they teach, can through this model still retain their traditional way of teaching. The upshot being that an additional learning environment, “student-centered”, has been now added to each class.

What are the rationales and the potential outcomes and benefits of this model?

1. Poor reading and listening skills of university entrants: It is abundantly clear that the increasingly poor reading and listening skills as demonstrated by university entrants to Osaka Shoin Women’s University confirms that these skills have never been properly addressed in students’ JHS and SHS English curriculum or syllabi. A required reading and listening component in every JHS and SHS English class, sustained over 6 years, simply because of time devoted to these skills, would by default see an improvement in reading and listening ability by university entrants. There is an abundance of research that has shown the benefits of doing extensive reading. These benefits include the development of learner autonomy, improved overall language competence, development of general worldwide knowledge, vocabulary acquisition, improvement in writing skills, etc. (Day, R. and J. Bamford, 2004; Waring, 2011; Nation and Waring, 2011). To be fair, there has been some attempt to introduce extensive reading in the SHS and combine it with student accountability by the use of Mreader as means of checking students’ comprehension and measuring their reading progress, but this is only being done once a week. In other words, because of the paucity of time spent on this important skill, the benefits are negligible.

Why include a required listening component? Listening is probably the most underrated skill that is taught (or more to the point, not taught) in the EFL classroom where there is usually a paucity of exposure to natural English. This is surprising when one considers that “listening is the primary source of language learning. Actually, it constitutes almost 50% of daily communication” (Bozan 2015:2) , and furthermore...(it is)”also crucial for foreign language (FL) learning, as opposed to second language learning.” (Bozan 2015:2). Listening takes on even greater importance when we consider that a baby learning its first language, before there is any attempt to speak, listening is the primary source

of language input. Therefore, extrapolating to the EFL situation, listening should be the foremost skill taught. Nunan (1997) reiterates Rost's statement that "Listening is vital in the language classroom because it provides input for the learner. Without understanding input at the right level, any learning simply cannot begin." As many students have not had adequate listening training and practice in their formative years of learning English (JHS/SHS), they, as Waring (n/d) points out, simply give up EFL study because they get frustrated at listening to material that is above their level. Some of the benefits of doing listening are: improvement of listening fluency and speed, vocabulary recognition, grammar understanding, plus "listening is...fundamental to speaking"(Nunan,1997) and there is "sufficient evidence that acquisition of listening skills leads to acquisition of other language skills, i.e., speaking, reading, and writing." (Cheung, 2010:2)

2. **Balanced opportunities for learning:** Nation (2013) outlines in detail the concept of providing students with a balanced language program. It is Nation's contention that in any EFL program a balance between four key equal strands-meaning-focused input, meaning-focused output, language-focused learning and fluency development is needed. In Nation's ideal scenario, each of the four strands has half of all class time (not necessarily each class time) divided between meaning-focused input (listening and reading), and meaning-focused output (writing and speaking), and the other half of class time is shared between language-focused learning and fluency development. As has been pointed out because of systemic issues surrounding syllabus requirements and methodological hang-ups of teachers within the JHS and SHS, Nation's four strands scenario, is at the present time not possible to implement. However, a watered down version is definitely possible. Two strands, meaning-focused input through the reading and listening components, and language-focused input through the retention of the teacher-centered traditional use of the required textbook are now introduced. While not the "best" scenario, it would be a far cry better than what is currently going on in the JHS and SHS classrooms. Students would not only enjoy the mix of skills to alleviate boredom, but teachers would also be given a break from lecturing continuous for 50 minutes



in each class.

3. Reduce teacher-talking time (TTT): This follows on from (2). By now dividing the class time between teacher-centered learning and student-centered learning, teacher-talking time (TTT) would be drastically reduced and there would now be more of a balance between “studying English” and “learning English” environments.
4. Create a sense of a program: Currently, JHS/SHS is just a collection of unrelated, uncoordinated English subjects, using required textbooks taught independently by each teacher. This proposal of use of class time, if it were to be implemented across both JHS and SHS in all English classes, would create a sense of a coordinated program being in place. In statistical terms, there would now be “face validity”- in other words, because there were now coordinated components across the English curriculum in both schools, English education is now perceived as looking structured and the perception of “being effective” is also generated. This takes on even greater importance in the light of the fact that there is falling number of children in Japan, and schools now must compete even harder for students. Having a program that appears to be different and unique would help attract students to both schools. The introduction of this model would go some way to presenting and selling the JHS and SHS to prospective caregivers, as it could be sold as a new program that combines the traditional approach to English teaching with current EFL theory and methodology.
5. Public and private test preparation: Many students take public and private test (STEP test, TOEIC, TOEFL, National Center test) during their JHS and SHS years. Reading skills and listening skills constitute the main portions of most of these tests, so it would seem that an English program that purposely included regular reading and listening components would put students in an advantageous position when they attempt any of these tests. Indeed, the National Center English exam is set to be overhauled in 2020 (Mainichi Newspaper, 2016), with high school students being required to take certified privately administered English tests as part of their English requirement for entering university, that extends to speaking and writing components as well as

the current reading and listening sections. So, it is even more incumbent upon JHS and SHS teachers to adapt to these future changes. Adding the required reading and listening components as outlined in this model would aid students in adapting to the changes in the English test format, as well as aiding them in gaining better test results.

6. Building blocks for other skills development: The ability to read is the precursor to writing. Donaghy (2016) quotes research by Elley and Mangubhai, and Hafiz that shows that there are gains in writing proficiency amongst those students who read extensively, this being probably due to the fact that readers are encountering a variety of language structures multiple times. Logic dictates that to write successfully a learner needs to have a certain command of vocabulary and grammatical structures. The more a learner reads (or has read), the more exposure to vocabulary and grammatical structures they will get, and intuitively there will be transfer to their writing skills.

“Listening is the natural precursor to speaking; the early stages of language development in a person’s first language (and in naturalistic acquisition of other languages) are dependent on listening” (Nation and Newton 2008:37). The general inability of Japanese university students to speak English is directly related to the failure of their JHS and SHS English courses to provide sustained listening practice to natural English in the classroom. When students are equipped with the ability to discriminate among the distinctive sounds of the target language, recognize stress and intonation, reduced forms of words, and rhythmic structure (Richards, 1983), then they have in place the prerequisites to be able to pronounce the target language. Further, when they are able to retain chunks of language, recognize word boundaries, word order patterns, and vocabulary used in common conversation topics, then they have the prerequisites in place for taking part in every day conversation. In other words, if students cannot differentiate between the sounds of English at either the word, phrase or sentence level, they will never be in a position to be able to mimic those sounds and extrapolate them into wider conversation. The planned inclusion of a speaking component in the National Center Examination of English from 2020, means that JHS and SHS teachers are going to have to

drastically change the way they approach English education starting from JHS up. The proposal in this paper would go some way to preparing students to meet the challenges of the new exam.

7. Coordinated English program in Shoin *Gakuen*: In order to encourage Osaka Shoin Women's High School students to go on to the university to study, the *Gakuen* has set up several mirror courses in the high school. As for English education, the use of a common textbook series in one particular class is designed to entice students to continue their English studies in the Department of English as an International Language as well as instill a sense of "linkage/coordination" between high school English and university English programs. While this is a positive step, it is at best just "superficial" and fraught with potential problems- the main one being that a sudden change in the textbook series, and the inability to find a suitable replacement would put the whole concept in disarray. Instead of looking to textbook series to give a "sense of linkage" between the different schools in the *Shoin Gakuen*, implementing this model across all schools, and in all university English programs<sup>4</sup>, would not only make the subject of English into a coordinated, structured common program, but also could be used as a sales pitch to attract prospective students.

### **Setting up and managing the ER component**

This is relatively easy to do. First you need to get a set of graded readers to create the class library – either it is one set per class or it is also possible that multiple classes share the same books. To ensure a wide range of books, you get each student to buy 1 or 2 graded readers. These all go to form the class library. Every English class you have, designate a class monitor to go and collect the class library from a central storage point. The monitor gets to the library bag and brings

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<sup>4</sup>Required reading and self-study listening components are in the Undergraduate English program, where native speaker teachers and Japanese English teachers sharing a common textbook, divide each class time into different required components similar to this paper's proposal. Required English is for most students at the university only for one year and twice a week. English as a full on program only really exists in the Department of English as an International Language, but to date they have not adopted this proposal into their curriculum.

it to class, lays out the books, and students pick up a book – either a new one or they continue the book they had been reading but didn’t finish from the previous class and start reading. (Alternatively of course, the teacher could be responsible for bringing the library to class).

### **Accountability**

Robb (2002) correctly points out that the extensive reading principles as expounded by Day and Bamford (2002) while exemplary, in the Asian context (especially Japan) don’t quite reflect the reality of the situation. As Robb points out, students in Japan are not that self-motivated and are more concerned about meeting course requirements. While Robb takes issue with the assumption that reading will take place in the “reading class”, and thus advocates reading outside the classroom and making students accountable by getting them to take online quizzes via Mreader, it is my contention, that because of the plethora of classes devoted to English in JHS and SHS, and the fact that Japanese students do very little study outside of school and the fact that most of them attend class regularly, that ER can be successfully conducted in-class. However, some kind of accountability needs to be in place. Mreader<sup>5</sup>, as suggested by Robb, is one way to address accountability – but the logistic of scheduling a computer lab and the lack of resources may make this option unviable. The very low-tech version of accountability is probably best. Students fill in a reading record sheet as they complete each book. The reading record sheet contains the following common elements: book title, author, number of words, starting date, finishing date, and a short summary or impression of the book (in Japanese). Students hand it in to the teacher either at the end of the semester or after so many classes for ongoing assessment.

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<sup>5</sup> “MReader is designed to be an aid to schools wishing to implement an Extensive Reading program. It allows teachers (and students) to verify that they have read and understood their reading. This is done via a simple 10-item quiz with the items drawn from a larger item bank of 20-30 items so that each student receives a different set of items. Students who pass a quiz receive a cover of their book on their own home page on the site.”(<https://mreader.org/mreaderadmin/s/html/about.html>)

### **Setting up and managing the listening component**

The setting up and management of the listening component is a little more complicated and challenging. The degree of complication and challenge is dependent on a number of factors such as type of content students listen to, type of listening done, wholly or partially self-study in nature, and the method the audio is delivered to students. Once again, accountability will also need to be taken into consideration.

### **Types of listening**

Schaaf (2016) summarizes the types of listening tasks (intensive, selective, extensive, interactive, fluency), and to give learners exposure and experience, advocates a regime of variety. Other researchers are more specific on the type of listening learners should do and the logic behind these choices. Waring (2010) advocates extensive listening, which simply put is listening for pleasure. Other key features are that learners get to listen to a variety of listening activities that is meaningful and within their range of understanding- i.e. learners can understand “about 90% or more of the content... understand over 95% of the vocabulary and grammar...” (Waring 2010). Extensive listening can be done in class or out of class. Also it can be either teacher-directed or student-directed (Renandya and Farrell, 2011).

At the other end of the spectrum, Krashen (1996) advocates narrow listening. The key features of narrow listening are repeated listening to topics that are of interest to learners as well as being familiar to them in their native language. After listening to multiple speakers talk on the same topic with a degree of understanding, learners move on to the next topic.

### **What to listen to?**

For beginners (JHS), even material that helps students differentiate between vowel sounds, consonants, words, blended sounds is a good starting point (intensive listening). Graded reader CDs, pop songs, level based podcasts, CEFR listening topics by level, private and public test material are all potential possibilities.

The type of listening done in JHS and SHS, will in the end be governed by practical considerations that will be explained below. The bottom line is that there needs to be some kind of regular, incremental and principled listening program,

irrespective of the type of listening, whether it is teacher-directed or student directed, or a combination of both, as long as it is done in every class starting from JHS.

A number of potential options are available on how to conduct the listening component:

Option 1: Students use their mobile phones to access listening activities. Most JHS and SHS now have mobile devices<sup>6</sup>. With mobile devices, students can access listening activities via a LMS. Not only is it possible to have a huge range of listening materials online (extensive listening or narrow listening) but, depending on the settings listening activities can be completely interactive or non-interactive. Assessment is automatically recorded in the LMS grade book, taking care of the accountability factor. Students work at their own pace, but must, by the end of certain cut off date(s), have completed the assigned listening. See Maran (2016) for detailed information.

Option 2: Paper-based listening worksheets and using mobile devices as audio players. Listening/audio is accessible via a LMS, YouTube or students download the audio to their mobile devices. The teacher prints up the listening activities must be completed by a certain date. The teacher holds on to answer keys, and as students finish a set number of listening activities in class, they show the teacher they have finished, and if the teacher is satisfied, he or she hands out the answer keys. Students self-correct and fill in the results on some kind of listening progress chart that must be handed in for assessment at the end of the semester. As per option 1, cut off completion dates are set.

Option 3: Similar to option 2 with regard to use of paper-based worksheets, but instead of mobile devices, students use mp3/mp4 players that either they themselves have purchased, or the school has purchased. With this option, budgetary and logistical issues become a huge factor. Does each school have enough budget to purchase one mp3 player per student in a class? Who will be responsible for keeping the mp3/mp4 players charged? If there is only enough budget to purchase enough mp3/mp4 players for half the class, the possible workaround would be that in the

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<sup>6</sup>The problem is that that mobile phones are banned at school. However, if they can be proved to be a valuable learning aid, then for at least in their English classes, students could be allowed to use them for self-study listening in class.

first 10 minutes of class, half the class would do extensive reading while the other half does listening. In the last component time of the class, students would reverse the skill they did.

Option 4: What happens if multiple classes have English at the same time? How is it going to be possible to utilize a limited number of mp3/mp4 players across multiple classes? Option 4, therefore proposes a blended approach, where a class, that meets, for example, 5 times a week, would have 2 teacher-controlled listening components a week, where the teacher controls the content and delivery of the audio. Extensive listening content might be suitable. Students listen together and complete a worksheet. The other 3 times a week the class meets, students, work at their own pace, would do self-study listening using mp3/mp4 players and paper-based worksheets, focusing on narrow listening tasks.

### **Conclusion**

For this model to be put into practice, a consensus amongst full-time English teaching staff is going to be required. This consensus will include designing the reading and listening components' structure and content, writing up a set of guidelines for part-time staff outlining the philosophy and the schedule of classes and content/ material of the program. An orientation session would also be beneficial to setting the tone and ensuring that all teachers are on the same page.

This paper has argued that because of the failure to influence the current teaching methodology and practice amongst JHS and SHS English teachers at Shoin, and given lack of self-motivation amongst students to study outside the classroom on their own, a more pragmatic approach is required. This approach simply calls for a redesign of the use of class time. This redesign calls for the division from the current almost 100% teacher-centered classroom to use of class time that would see 60% of class time being retained for teacher-centered learning, and the other 40% of class time to be used for student-centered learning, placing emphasis on extensive reading and listening, two skills that freshmen entering university seem to be bereft of. The paper has also attempted to outline the potential benefits of the execution this model, not only in terms of language benefits that would be accrued, but also in terms of sales appeal to prospective JHS and SHS applicants and their care-givers.

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