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# FOSTERING LEARNER AUTONOMY THROUGH A SELECTION OF POST-READING ACTIVITIES

ABSTRACT. Learner autonomy is a key element to mastering a foreign language since it encourages students to reflect on and assess their learning process, strategize, and set goals (Holec, 1981). To promote autonomous learning in reading courses, Extensive Reading (ER) is commonly promoted because students can select the material they read which leads to a more positive attitude toward both reading and learning in the target language (Day & Bamford, 1998). However, learner autonomy can also be encouraged through a variety of post-reading activities, not just in reading selection. This paper will explain the benefits of assigning a variety of book reports for post-reading activities, introduce 15 types of book reports that were used in two first-year reading classes at a private university in Japan, and explain how these reports were introduced. Finally, this paper will present survey results of student attitudes toward the book reports and effects this variety had on student word counts.

*Keywords*: assessment, critical thinking, extensive reading, learner autonomy.

## 1. Introduction

Learner autonomy is defined as the ability of an individual to be responsible and in control of his or her own learning (Holec, 1981). It is also defined as the ability to reflect critically, make decisions, and act independently (Little 1991; Sinclair, 2000). For language learners, this autonomy is desirable because then learners are better able to assess their own ability, strategize and set goals, and evaluate their progress toward those goals. However, learner autonomy is not something that people are born with, but rather something that is gained naturally

over time or through structured practice (Holec, 1981). In this way, learner autonomy can be seen as an individual process where an instructor plays the role of facilitator or guide to help students become more aware of where they are in the learning process so that students can be better decision makers (Guevara de León, 2010; Sinclair, 2000).

Encouraging learner autonomy is important because it can increase student motivation and engagement, particularly for students learning a foreign language (Dornyei & Ushioda, 2013; Little 1991). This higher level of motivation relates strongly with extensive reading (ER) where students are expected to read a lot in the target language, usually through graded or leveled readers of the students' own choosing. Students are supposed to select easy material that they can comprehend without needing to consult a dictionary. By selecting easy material, students can build reading speed and fluency, and read a lot. Moreover, allowing students to select their own material can make the reading experience more enjoyable for them so that they can develop a healthy and happy attitude toward reading the target language (Brown, 2012; Day & Bamford, 1998; Prowse, 2002). This free selection allows students to determine both the content of their learning and how they read.

This decision-making process fosters learning autonomy and helps lead to learning success and higher levels of motivation (Benson, 2001; Brown, 2012; Dickinson, 1995; Thornbury, 2002). Further, since students can choose what they read, when they read, and where they read, students are not only more involved in individual decision making but also more likely to develop a routine or habit of reading long after the course is finished. Autonomous learning is not only about the freedom to make decision but also about having the capacity to manage one's own learning (Holec, 1981). In this regard, ER is well suited to fostering learning autonomy.

Admittedly, however, there is considerable debate concerning definitions of learner autonomy and what the key components of learner autonomy are. After much research on this subject, the consensus suggests there are "degrees of autonomy" (Nunan, 1997, p. 192), depending on the age, background, level of ability, and goals of the learner (Little, 1991). For the purpose of this paper, I am using Benson's (2001) model of learner autonomy which involves three dimensions of control over learning language: control over learning management, cognitive processing, and content. In this model, autonomous learners understand the goals they need to reach or set their own language goals, take responsibility for reaching

those goals through action, are free to plan, manage and apply their own learning strategies to reach those goals, evaluate their progress continuously, and interact with others (Holec, 1981; Little, 1991; Noels et al., 2003). ER provides students with opportunities to control these three dimensions depending on the way it is assigned in the classroom and if there are abundant reading resources for students to select.

While learner autonomy is clearly and deeply related to motivation (Dornyei, 2001), it is not enough to simply create a learning environment which fosters learner autonomy. Students must also express willingness to use that autonomy to reach their language goals. As Ushioda (2006) points out, students must not only have opportunities for self-regulated learning but also have a desire to take advantage of those opportunities. Whether autonomy leads to motivation (Dornyei & Csizer, 1998) or motivation leads to autonomy (Vandergrift, 2005) is debatable but clearly the two are intertwined (Dornyei & Ushioda, 2013). Giving students more autonomy can increase their motivation in language learning (Dornyei, 2001; Noels et al., 2003) which can also lead to students seeking out more autonomy (Vandergrift, 2005). In other words, when students are free to choose to read what

interests them, they feel more comfortable and are more motivated to learn. When students are more motivated to learn, they assume more learner autonomy. Here again ER is well suited for developing learner autonomy and for measuring the effects learner autonomy may have on student motivation and how much students read.

## 2. Learner Autonomy in Assessment

In ER, one area where students can be given more autonomy and thus more motivation (or more motivation and thus more autonomy) is in allowing students to choose what type of post-reading activity to complete. Essentially, this choice gives students power over how they are to be assessed. As with portfolio assessment, a collection of student work gathered over time, allowing students to select what types of assignments to submit for assessment strengthens learner autonomy and motivation (Chen, 2006) because it puts more value on the work that students do and moves assessment from something that is done *to* them to something that is done *by* them. As Benson (2001) explains, if students gain control over planning their studies, it can lead to positive results in learning, motivation, and learner

autonomy (p. 152). Moreover, in order for students to become more autonomous, they need to be able to self-evaluate and reflect on their progress so that they can take the necessary steps or strategies to further their learning and reach their language goals on their own, (Holec, 1981). By giving students more autonomy in how they are assessed, they can develop assessment practices which can be used throughout their lives, not just while they are in the classroom (Ambrosio, Sa & Simones, 2014; Boud & Falchikov, 2006). By offering a choice in how to respond to a book, students have opportunities to analyze and evaluate, give opinions, make inferences and connect ideas in the reading material to other ideas or facts independently. This variety allows students to use higher orders of thinking and different intelligences, which promotes critical thinking, learner autonomy, and motivation toward and engagement in reading that can continue long after the course has finished.

This paper then will briefly explain the benefits and drawbacks of assigning book reports for post-ER activities which students present orally in class, and present 15 different types of book reports that target different levels of

comprehension, self-expression and intelligence to foster reader interest and autonomous learning.

### 3. Benefits of Sharing Book Reports Orally

In ER, most instructors assess whether students have completed the assigned reading with a follow-up activity such as a comprehension quiz, book report, or reading log. This practice is itself somewhat at odds with the principles of ER which stress that reading should be for its own sake, not for a grade or a score. The reality though is that if instructors assign students to do ER, they need to verify that students are indeed doing it. In other words, instructors need to evaluate student performance and create some sort of accountability for students. Otherwise, it is likely students will either not do ER as much as they should or not realize its importance in language learning. One of the ways this can be done is through book reports that are shared orally in small groups of 3-4 students before submitting reports to the instructor.

One of the benefits of book reports that are shared orally is that they can be stimulating. Students can learn about other books from classmates and sharing this

information may give students ideas about what to read or not to read next. Reading is an individual activity but, by sharing reports with others, students can engage with classmates and with the reading material meaningfully which can lead to a more positive attitude toward the target language and to reading. Students can also share what they have learned or share their struggles with reading. Shared experiences bring people together and can make the activity more appealing.

Another benefit is that sharing oral book reports typically has a fixed structure such as introducing the title, the genre, the characters and events. This structure helps students learn how to talk about something they have read and makes the task of talking about reading material more manageable even if students possess lower levels of proficiency in the target language (Waring, 2007). Summarizing requires knowledge and comprehension of the material but communicating this knowledge to others is a difficult skill. By having a structure to summarizing, students can gradually develop the skills they need to gain proficiency in summarizing to others. Students can also read from their written report when sharing with others to make the activity easier or just use notes to answer questions about, for example, the name of the book, genre, setting, and

characters. As Nation (2009) explains, these oral book reports work best when students are not telling the story in a complete way but with just enough information to encourage others to read.

Another added benefit of oral book reports is that the activity uses all four skills. This means students are further exposed to the target language and to a greater variety of linguistic forms and vocabulary, not just ones from the book they have read but also ones from the books read by their partners. By sharing reports orally students have an opportunity to use the input they have received from reading and convey that to others in a meaningful way that demonstrates their understanding, analysis and evaluation of the material and receive immediate feedback from their peers in the form of questions or even a nod of heads showing confirmation and understanding.

Moreover, book reports tend to ask students to evaluate what they have read in some way such as whether they like the book or not. Evaluating requires a higher order of comprehension than knowledge and understanding which is used when retelling a story. Analyzing and evaluating are necessary for giving opinions, making inferences, and connecting ideas in a book to other facts or ideas. These

higher levels of comprehension promote critical thinking (Helgesen, 2008; Norris & Philips, 1987). Activities requiring higher orders of thinking give students an opportunity to think more about what they have read and become more engaged with the material. This engagement can lead to higher levels of interest, motivation, and autonomy.

Sharing book reports with classmates also creates a sense of community in the classroom. The process of students sharing their experiences can bring students closer together as a class and establish a community of readers. That sense of community can lead to more positive attitudes about the target language and reading in general and can motivate students to continue to read and share. This community can also serve to create accountability. Students are more likely to do the reading if they know that they are expected to share what they have read with classmates, and not just submit a homework assignment to an instructor.

Finally, instructors can use the opportunity in class to monitor and engage in dialogue with students to act as guide and model reader (Day & Bamford, 2002; Green, 2005; Hayashi, 1999). If students merely submit book reports to the instructor without talking about them in class, this dialogue is limited to written

comments on student reports which are also limited by the time restraints of the instructor. Dialogue is even more limited if students do reading quizzes instead of reports since the talk might be limited to comprehension questions. If reports are only done orally without a written record of them, teachers are also limited by what parts they happen to overhear. By reading and listening to student comments, instructors can identify what kind of books students like or do not like, what level might be more appropriate for students to read or not read, and what suggestions to offer individual students or the class in general. Instructors can also give thoughts on books and demonstrate that they are also a reader and that reading is not just a course assignment.

## 4. ER Book Report Objections

Despite the benefits of follow-up activities and oral book reports specifically, there are some legitimate concerns with them, too. One of the main objections is that book reports may interfere with student enjoyment of reading (Fox, 1990; Prowse, 2002). The length of the homework assignment becomes longer if students must write a report for books they have read. This means students may have less

time to read which could interfere with student growth in reading speed and fluency. Students may even spend nearly as much time writing as they do reading depending on the nature of the report they have to write (Fox, 1990; Schmidt, 2007). Because of the book reports, students may also view reading not as a pleasurable activity but as just another assignment for class, as study. Helgesen (2005, 2008) also warns about the repetitive nature of book reports. Students can find reports not just time-consuming but also tiresome leading to lower motivation or interest in the target language or in reading in general. Even most instructors admit that they do not have fond memories of the book reports that they did when they were students so why should instructors inflict that same sort of assignment on their students?

Book reports can also be disadvantageous for lower-level students who have trouble expressing themselves in writing in the target language. Because of their lack of writing skill or lack of grammar and vocabulary knowledge, students might receive lower scores in class not based on their reading ability but on their writing ability. In fact, one of the biggest dangers and complaints of book reports is that course evaluations are more based on student writing skills, not reading skills, which may not be one of the course objectives. This leads to cases of plagiarism

where students, either due to a lack of time, a lack of confidence in their own writing, or a lack of understanding about copying, may just take words from the book or copy another student's report. The nature of book reports makes plagiarizing appealing for students if they feel are pressured to complete the homework or pass the course or feel they can do it without getting caught (Robb, 2002). This monitoring could change the role of the instructor from one of guide and model reader to one of police officer and judge, which may harm the relationship between the instructor and students as well.

## 5. Minimize the Drawbacks: Put Focus on Reading and Discussion

Although there are legitimate concerns about the use of book reports with ER, students need to be held to some degree of accountability for their reading. Even if students are not given a quiz or not writing and sharing a book report, the act of reading ER, even for pleasure, is still going to be viewed as a class assignment. Furthermore, exposure to the target language is not enough (Rodrigo et al., 2007). Students need to interact with the material to more fully process what they are reading and to make more gains in language development. Since book reports

shared orally use all four skills and are conducted in class with classmates, this activity would seem to be ideal if their disadvantages can be minimized by reducing how much students write such as by setting a maximum word count for summaries or written responses, advising students to make mind maps of summaries instead of short paragraphs, or by providing a form to fill out that involves circling key information such as publisher, level, etc. Finally, focus on tasks that lead to oral discussion and self-expression in class rather than writing tasks done outside of class by having students create two discussion questions related to the contents of the book. Students should avoid general questions that apply to any book (Do you like mysteries?) or quiz questions which other students would not know how to the answer (What is the name of the girlfriend?). Ideally, students should provide a very short and simple summary of one aspect of the book to set up their question. This kind of task reduces how much students write and leads to a more interesting exchange than listening to lengthy summaries of books when the reports are shared in class and can be more engaging (Hannel, 2009).

## 6. Build Learner Autonomy through a Variety of Book Reports

An important step when assigning book reports is to vary the type of report that students submit to foster more learner autonomy. Adding variety can decrease fatigue and boredom from writing and orally exchanging book reports (Helgesen, 2008). If students write the same report each week, the repetitious nature of the reports can be tiring and less stimulating intellectually. Students may end up writing the same kinds of responses and be less engaged with the material and less motivated toward reading.

Instead, teachers should introduce a number of different ways that students can respond to the books that they read and give students the power to choose which type of report to write. This empowerment can lead to higher levels of motivation toward the task and to reading in general as well as encourage students to consider carefully how they wish to respond to the material. By offering a selection of responses, students are more likely to use several different types of intelligence (Gardner, 1993) and higher orders of thinking than knowledge and comprehension. Depending on the type of report they do, students may also use

higher orders of thinking: application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation (Bloom, 1956). As they engage in these other ways of thinking, students become more involved with the material they read and are more likely to appreciate reading (Richards, 1990; Lundy, 2008; Tienken et al., 2010). This involvement may also transfer to more interesting discussion when students later share the reports orally in their groups. Lastly, this autonomy may not only offset any negative feelings students may have toward the target language but also guide students to set their own learner goals (Mede et al., 2013).

### *6.1 Types of Book Reports*

The "standard" book report typically asks students to write a short summary and give a reaction. For the reaction, students usually explain whether they like the book or not and why. As suggested here, students should write two discussion questions so that the task focuses on oral discussion in class rather than a listening activity which is unlikely to engage peers. Below are additional book reports which can be introduced to replace either the summary or reaction of the standard book report to keep the workload low. The alternative books reports listed are inspired

from a variety of sources (Bamford & Day, 2004; Helgesen, 2005; Pigada & Schmitt, 2006).

*6.2 Three Questions*

Instead of a summary, students preview the book and write three questions that they have about the story before reading it. The questions can be quite simple. After students make their questions, they should read the book and write down answers to their questions if ones are available. In some cases, questions may inspire students to do additional research to learn the answers to these questions. This type of report is especially useful for training students to think about a book before they read it, to better evaluate what book might be suitable for them to read, and to activate their prior knowledge to better understand the material.

*6.3 Storyboard*

Instead of a summary, students draw six to eight pictures to illustrate the story. Then using the pictures, students explain the story to their partners in class. The purpose of this report is for students to visualize the story and to help partners

in a group understand the story as well through these pictures. This report allows students to use visual-spatial intelligence and can be motivating for students who are skilled at drawing pictures and a means for them to express themselves in a way that they may struggle to do linguistically.

*6.4 Three Objects*

Instead of a summary, students select three objects which are important to the story and explain what they are and why they are important. This requires students to use evaluation and analysis to select and explain why these objects are important or symbolic. This report could even be combined with "Storyboard" by asking students to draw pictures of three important objects.

*6.5 Relationship Diagram*

Instead of a summary, students draw a diagram or mind map of the characters in the book. Students explain what kind of relationship (i.e. brother, friend, mother, rival, enemy) each person has with the main character and two or three adjectives to describe that person. This kind of report allows students to

explain the book without giving away the ending and can be useful when students read a book with many characters, especially characters with foreign names. A character diagram uses visual-spatial intelligence and may help students better understand the story.

*6.6 Dear Diary*

Instead of a summary and reaction, students write 3-4 diary entries of the story from the perspective of one of the characters in the book. The character can be the protagonist, the antagonist, or even one of the minor characters. If the book is non-fiction, students can write 3-4 diary entries from the perspective of someone who has learned this information from a tour guide. This type of report allows students to be more creative when making a summary. Also, since students must consider how another character in the book feels about the story's events, they must use intrapersonal intelligence.

*6.7 The Choice*

Instead of a reaction, students select one pivotal choice that any one character makes in the book and describes that choice. Then students must explain why they agree or disagree with that choice and/or whether they could have made the same choice. This is similar to a reaction response in that students are voicing their opinion about the book, but it narrows the focus from their feelings of the book in general to their feelings toward one aspect or scene in the book. Sometimes students struggle with giving an opinion about a book because they have mixed feelings about it, genuinely have no feelings about it, or feel they do not understand the story well enough to comment on it. Here, however, students can select a specific moment in the book they understand and have an opinion about. Students are also making a "choice" of which character and decision to focus on and how they feel about that choice. Like "Dear Diary", this assignment makes students consider the story from another character's point of view and uses both intrapersonal and interpersonal intelligence.

*6.8 The Gift*

Instead of a reaction, students select a gift for one character and explain why they chose that gift and/or why this gift will be appreciated or needed. Students may select any gift except money, which would be just used to purchase something. Instead, students must decide what to purchase for the character. Students may also choose gifts that cannot be purchased such as courage, patience, or freedom. This reaction requires students to show a higher order of understanding of the book. They must use analysis (recognize what a character needs), evaluation (choose a suitable gift) and synthesis (recognize how the gift would affect the character). This type of assignment also requires using some intrapersonal intelligence.

*6.9 A Letter*

Instead of a summary and reaction, students write a letter to one of the characters in the book. In the letter students should explain that they have heard about what happened to the character (i.e. a 2-3 sentence summary of events). Then students should write a response to the character based on the contents of the story. This assignment is similar to a standard book report but the perspective is more

personal and informal and requires more intrapersonal intelligence. Students can also be creative in their responses. Since the assignment is written in the form of a letter, students can also practice letter writing.

### *6.10 Five Years Later*

Instead of a reaction, students should explain what happens to the major characters five years after the story in the book has concluded. This type of assignment requires students to be creative and use higher orders of knowledge, both analysis and synthesis. Students can re-write a book's ending that they are not satisfied with or decide the ending when the ending of the book is either ambiguous or left open to the reader. If the class is reading the same graded reader, this type of assignment can be interesting because students will have a wider variety of responses compared to a standard summary and reaction report.

### *6.11 Character Analysis*

Instead of a summary and reaction, students must select any character in the book and describe that character physically, intellectually, emotionally, and

socially. Students need not select the main protagonist in the story. However, they should choose one of the major characters or significant minor characters. Common items to address include general background of the character (age, sex, marital status, etc.), personality, fears, dreams, feelings toward others, and so on. This type of assignment helps students look more carefully at characters and how characters are written and developed in a story. It also helps students develop opinions of characters and become more engaged with a story. This type of report uses interpersonal, intrapersonal, and visual-spatial intelligences as well as analysis and evaluation. If students read the same book, then each student or group could do an analysis of a different character.

*6.12 Personal Connection*

Instead of a reaction, students explain one or more events that occur in the book and then explain similar events in their own life and compare them. This type of report is more personal than some of the previous ones and requires students to share their own experiences with classmates. This response can generate interesting class discussions as classmates are often more interested in one another rather than

in the characters of a book. By making a personal connection with a book, students become more engaged with the reading and become more critical readers. Even if students do not have a personal event which mirrors the events in the book, there is often an event in the world which is similar that students can compare. This type of report draws on both higher orders of knowledge (analysis, synthesis, and evaluation) and multiple intelligences (interpersonal and intrapersonal).

*6.13 Interesting Passage*

Instead of a reaction, students select one to three sentences or short passages from the book that have made some sort of impression, either positively or negatively, and explain why they selected these passages and the significance of them to the story. This type of book report is an excellent opportunity to focus on simile, metaphor, and personification. It also makes students more mindful of the language an author uses, and it demands higher degrees of linguistic intelligence than other reports. This type of report also may lead to questions about difficult passages that students do not understand, leading to more dialogue between instructor and student.

*6.14 Cultural Comparison*

Instead of a reaction, students should choose two to three examples of where the culture in the book is different than the culture students are familiar with. Students should then give their reaction to these differences. This type of report asks students to make judgments of characters, behaviors, and events, and uses higher orders of comprehension, particularly evaluation. Discussion in class can focus on these differences and how students feel toward them, either positively or negatively. Students may also discuss why such differences exist.

*6.15 Movie Poster*

Instead of a summary and reaction, students design a movie poster of a book they have read. Students should include the title, a picture to represent the story or characters, names of actors the student feels should play each character, some descriptive quotes about the story, and a movie review. Alternatively, students could select their favorite book that they have read for that term for the movie

poster, which would then let teachers know which books are more popular and why. The activity can also be conducted as a poster session rather than in small groups.

## 7. Research Questions

When assigning oral book reports, there were several questions I wanted to examine.

1. Would students appreciate having a variety of book reports to choose from?
2. Would students choose a variety of book reports when doing the assignment?
3. Would offering students a choice lead to students reading more words?
4. Which reports were more and less popular and why?

## 8. Participants

The participants (n=48) in this project were first-year non-English majors from two reading classes at a private university in Japan. Students were given a placement exam before the academic year began and streamed by ability. Both classes were identical in levels of ability, receiving the same average class score on the placement exam. Students were high-beginner/low-intermediate learners, and

initially read books with 300-450 headwords, which is roughly A1-A1+ on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment (CEF) scale. Students had access to nearly every graded reader from major publishers such as Cambridge, Cengage, Macmillan, Oxford, Penguin and Scholastic. Multiple copies of each book were in the library and books could be checked out for two weeks at a time. There were 24 students in both groups, after one student dropped out in the experimental group and stopped coming to class.

## 9. Methods

In the first week of class, students were introduced to ER and shown examples of graded readers from a variety of publishers. Students worked in groups to find basic information about each book such as the title, publisher, level, word count, and genre. Then students read the same graded reader for 10 minutes and marked how far they had gotten in the book to estimate how long it would take to finish the book. The class set of graded readers was intentionally chosen at their reading level or even a level below. Class discussion focused on what was happening in the story, making predictions of what would happen next, and how

difficult it was to read. The novel was a Cambridge level 1 book which was generally easy for the class to read with few unknown words in the text.

In the experimental group students were assigned a standard book report in the first two weeks of the term so that students could get used to the basic format. Then each following week a new book report was introduced, following the same order as the order listed in this paper. Students were given instructions on how to complete the report and given a model report as an example. Students then had a choice of submitting this new style of report or one that had been previously introduced. Students were encouraged, however, to do the new style of book report if possible. Introducing each book report listed in this paper took thirteen class sessions or one semester. All the reports listed in this paper were introduced except for "Character Analysis" which was deemed too challenging for this group of students and "Movie Poster" which was assigned as a final poster presentation at the end of the academic year. In the fall, students were re-introduced to all the reports they had done and were told they could select from any of them each week. In the control group, students were only assigned the standard book report each week with no variation in routine throughout the academic year.

In both classes, if students read more than one book, they needed to write a separate report for it but only had to explain one book in class in their groups. To reduce the amount of writing students would have for writing multiple reports, if students read additional books in any given week then they had to write a standard book report, but the length of the summary was reduced from 50 words to 30 words.

Grading was done in several stages. For the oral part of the reports, peer assessment was used. Students assessed on a scale of 0-3 how well they thought their peers could answer questions about the book and how good they thought the discussion questions were. A "zero" was given to students who had not read a book for that day or had an incomplete report with no written discussion questions. The written reports were graded holistically based on two simple criteria: "Did the report fulfill the task?" and "Was the report complete?" Teacher feedback focused on what students needed to do to meet these objectives or positive reinforcement for interesting comments and/or discussion questions. Sometimes comments were made about student performance when explaining reports orally in class. Finally, I recorded each student's word count in an Excel file. If students plagiarized or simply wrote a summary based on the back cover of a book, students were given

half credit for the number of words in the book the first time it occurred and no credit in any additional instance.

The ER project was worth 40% of the grade for the course: 10% was given for the oral, 10% for the written, and 20% for the word count. Each element was given a high enough percentage to show the importance of each activity and to encourage students to read each week. The word count was given the highest percentage to show that reading and reading a lot was the main objective for the project. The word count objectives were given at the start of each quarter, and students were given two updates of their progress. The course objectives were for students to average 4,000 words a week. At the end of the fourth quarter, students were given a survey about their attitudes toward explaining books orally in small groups, writing reports and ER in general.

## 10. Results

Surveys results were quite positive. Students were encouraged to write in English but were also allowed to write comments in Japanese if they preferred. Most of the students elected to write in Japanese with a few inserted English words. Students were asked not to write their name on the survey to maintain some anonymity. Some students could be identified by their handwriting but no note was made of this. Due to the informal nature of the feedback, the author cannot make any strong claims. In some cases, students probably wrote positive comments because that was what they thought was expected of them or what they thought I wanted to hear. When asked about the ER project in general, students wrote that they enjoyed sharing books orally the most. Students wrote that they enjoyed listening to what other students had read, that they could choose books based on other student recommendations, and that they felt they could improve their speaking and listening skills. Students also liked that the class did not just focus on reading and that they could make friends in the class. They also liked that I randomly assigned groups so that they could meet everyone in the class. Students did comment, however, that it was hard to make discussion questions and that

sometimes they got asked the same discussion questions each week. Students also commented that they felt that their reading skill had improved.

When asked about having a variety of reports to choose from, student response was also positive. Students wrote that it was fun choosing different reports each week, that it made the assignment "fresh". Students also wrote that they liked it when other students choose different reports because it made the oral discussion more interesting. There were a few comments though that there were too many options, so it was hard for some students to select which type of report to do each week and that most of the choices only suited non-fiction. Students seemed to enjoy having a selection of book reports to choose from but that having too many choices was a little overwhelming for them.

What was interesting for me was whether students would take advantage of having a variety of book reports to choose from. Two questions I wanted to research were "Would students choose different styles of reports?" and "Which reports would be more and less popular?" Perhaps not surprising, the standard book report was the most common one completed. It was the most familiar and, as a result, probably the least demanding to do. Figure 1 shows how many times each

report was submitted in the fall (quarters 3 and 4). The numbers do not include any additional reports that students might have selected each week as those reports had to be a standard book report.

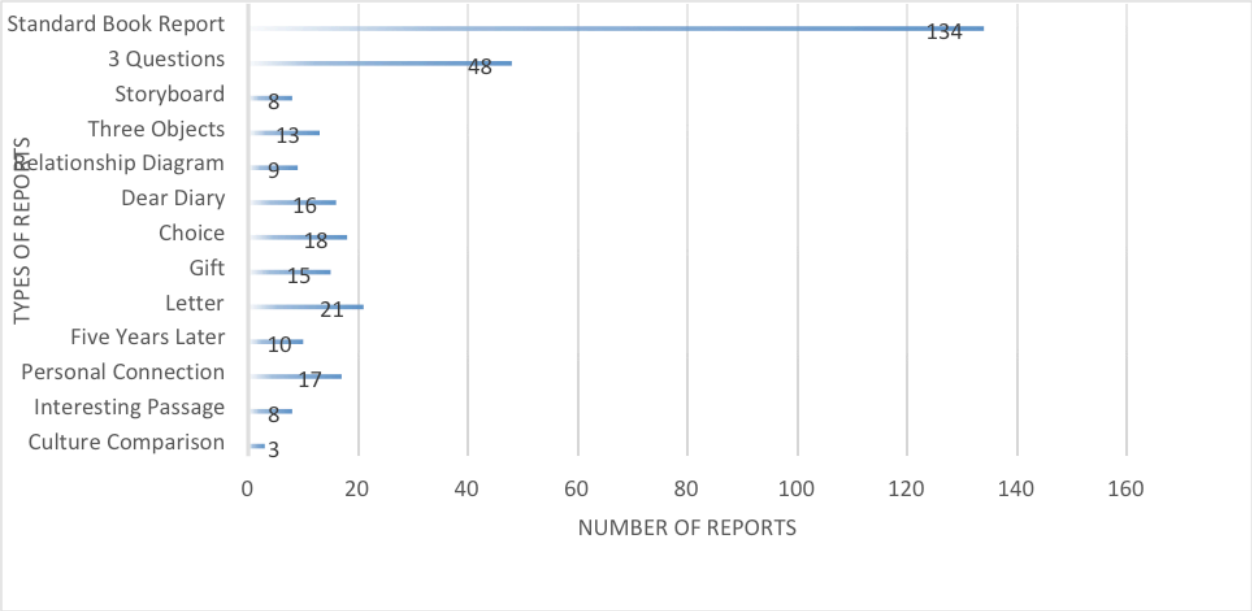


**Figure 1:** Student Book Report Selection in Quarter 3 and 4

From the results, the standard book report was the preferred choice with 134 of the 320 reports (41.9%) following that format. However, over half of the reports were one of the other selections. "Three Questions" was the second most popular option (48 submitted or 13%) while "Culture Comparison" was the least popular

(1%) with only 3 students submitting one. Considering that over half of the reports were not the standard book report, the results seem to match student survey responses that they liked having a variety of reports to choose from.

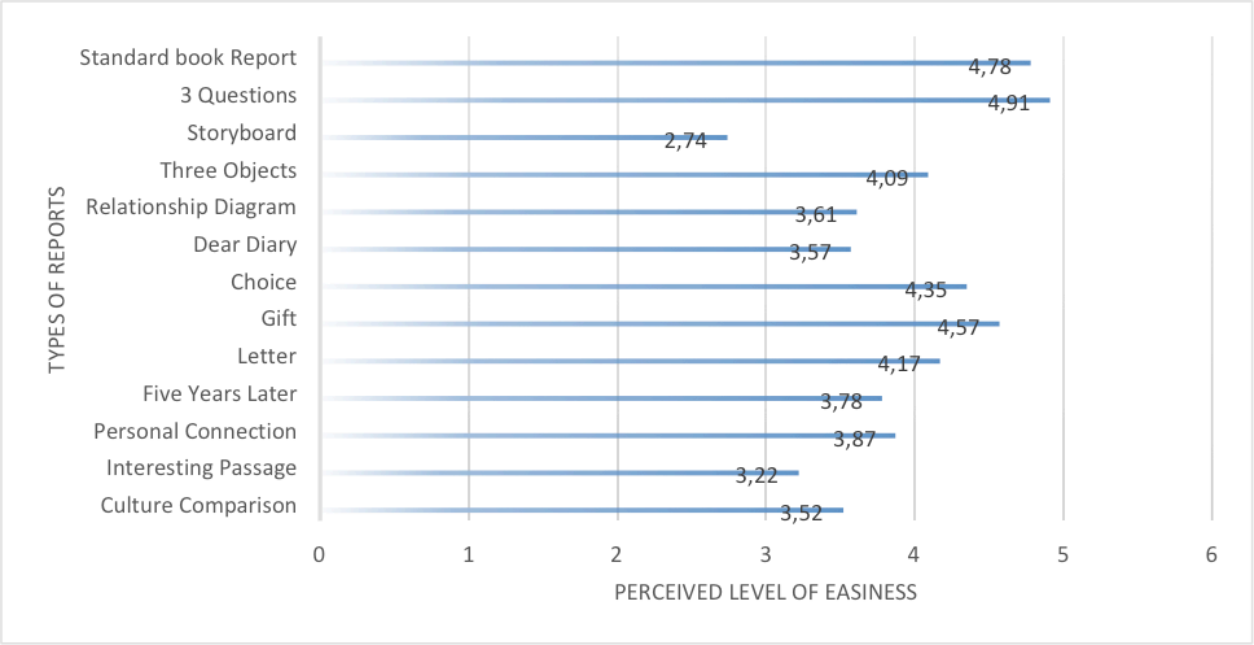


**Figure 2:** Ranking Level of Difficulty of Book Reports from Easiest (5) to Most Difficult (1)

Students were asked to evaluate how easy or difficult each report was from one to five with one being "difficult" and five being "easy". Figure 2 above shows how easy or difficult students perceived each type of report. The results explain

why certain report types were more popular than others. The ones ranked the easiest were also the ones students submitted more often. There were some slight exceptions. "Gift" was considered fairly easy to do (4.57), yet it did not receive so many submissions. Students ranked "Storyboard" the most difficult (2.74), yet "Culture Comparison" was submitted the least. Curiously, "Three Questions" was considered the easiest to do (4.91), yet "Standard Book Report" was still submitted the most. I suspect the results are partly due to the survey questions. I should have asked separate questions, such as "How easy is the report to understand?", "How easy is the report to explain orally?", and "How easy is the report to write?" Instead, I simply asked how easy students felt about each type of report. However, overall the easier the report, the more often the report was submitted.

One of the key questions of this is "Would a selection of book reports lead to higher reading rates?" As stated before, the course goal for these courses was for students to average 4,000 words a week of ER, which works out to 60,000 words by the end of the spring or fall term. However, both the experimental and control groups were avid readers in the spring and could reach this goal easily, so the target was raised in the fall: 52,000 words for a "C", 60,000 words for a "B", 72,000

words for an "A" and 84,000 words for an "A+". Students in both groups were given these benchmarks in the first week of quarter three. The control group performed well with a class average of 87,821 words read in quarters three and four and most students earning either an "A+" or "A" for the project. The experimental group performed slightly better with a class average 93,888 words read and more students earning an "A+" or "A" as evidenced in Figure 3.

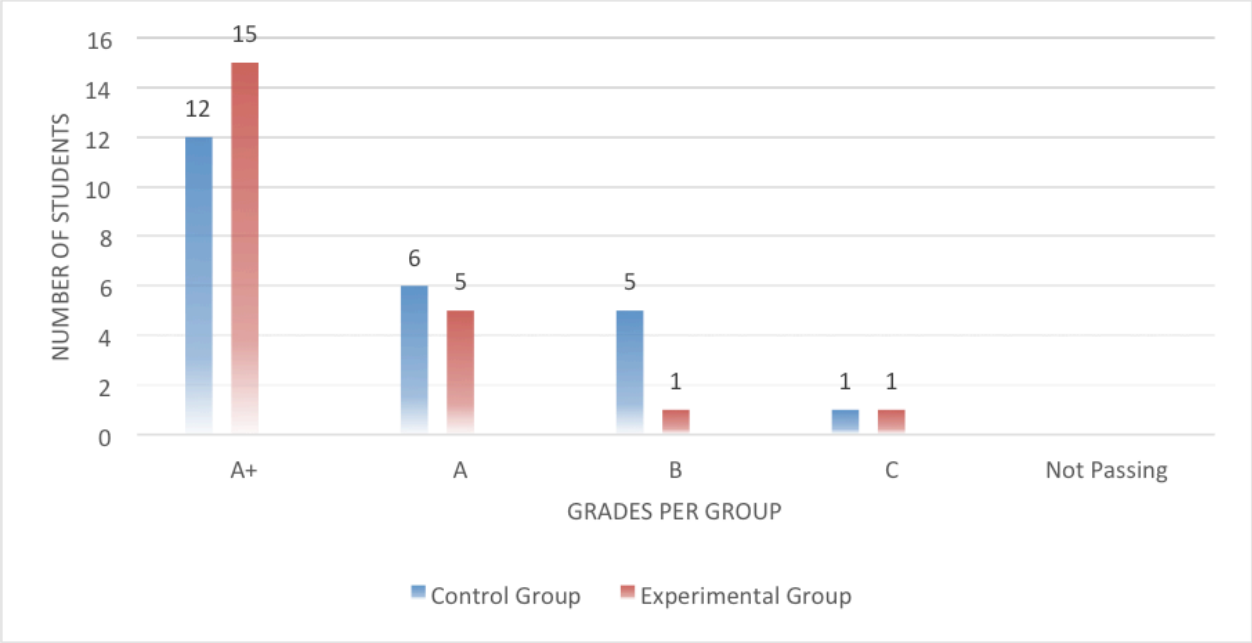


**Figure 3:** Fall Grade Distribution for the ER Project

In both groups, no student failed to reach the minimum word count required to pass the project. What is interesting here is not the higher class word count

average for the experimental group, although 6,067 more words is not insignificant. What is interesting is that all the book report options except for "Three Questions" were perceived to be more difficult than the standard book report, yet doing them did not negatively affect student word count levels. In fact, despite the added difficulty, students in the experimental group still outperformed the control group. Based on these results, I think we can suggest that offering students a choice of post-reading activities can lead to higher levels of motivation and engagement and higher student performance, even if the choices are more difficult or demanding.

## 11. Conclusion

Learner autonomy can be promoted through ER by allowing students to select the books they read. This paper argues that learner autonomy can also be encouraged by also allowing students to select from a variety of post-reading activities. In this way, students determine how to respond to a book and, therefore, how they are to be assessed. Not only can this empowerment be more motivating for students but it can also lead to more interesting class discussion and help students become more adept at analyzing stories from a variety of perspectives. In

essence, students are being taught how to become more independent learners, which is one of the major goals of granting students more learner autonomy. While the results are based on a small student sample (n=48), students who had more freedom in post-reading activities read more words in the ER project. Over half of student reports on average were of a different type than the standard book report, indicating that students not only appreciated the choice but also acted on it even though these choices were perceived to be more difficult or demanding. Future research in this area might examine which reports are easier to understand cognitively, easier to explain orally, and easier to write and determine how much of a factor these had in student selection.

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