# Feature Article

# A Study into the Benefits of Autonomous Reading of a Novel in an Advanced English as a Foreign Language Classroom

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#### Abstract

This study examines the benefits to students of the autonomous study of a literary novel that was used as a pedagogical resource in a high proficiency English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom. The population of the study was 20 Japanese first-year high school students studying an adaptation of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. The students engaged in autonomous reading and were evaluated at different points, pre- and post-reading, on their knowledge of vocabulary, awareness of the culture of the time and level of metacognitive engagement with themes from the novel. Analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data indicated that on completion of their reading, students did not show any consistent improvement in vocabulary and cultural acquisition. However, students' metacognitive capacities such as a realignment of their opinions, appear to have been stimulated through engagement with the novel. These findings, despite being tentative, suggest that to fully realize the value of literature as an ESL teaching resource, deliberate teaching of targeted language and cultural instruction should run concurrent with autonomous activities that can facilitate personal growth.

Key words: novels in ESL, culture in the language classroom, literature and vocabulary acquisition

Literature has long been recognized as a pedagogical resource for teaching foreign languages, yet, opinion has been divided as to the merits of its implementation within an ESL classroom. In the early twentieth century, literature was the "uncontested source discipline for the teaching of modern languages" (Kramsch and Kramsch, 2000, p. 553-573). Less than a century later, Edmondson (1997) opined that it has "no special status" in achieving proficiency in a foreign language (p. 45). It is not uncommon for teaching methodologies to fall out of favour over time. The Grammar Translation Method (GTM) and Audio-Lingual Method that once exemplified teaching pedagogies in EFL classrooms are now largely historical artefacts. However, unlike other teaching methodologies long since expelled from the

classroom, literature has recently "regained a degree of recognition as one of the approaches competing for our pedagogical attention" (Maley, 2012, p. 299) and therefore warrants closer examination.

The value of literature in the language classroom is endorsed by Carter and Long (1991). They propose that there are three models for teaching literature; the learning model, the cultural model and the personal growth model. These models, while including a language component, extend beyond language acquisition and present a holistic approach to education that deepens a student's cultural awareness and can stimulate their emotional, cognitive and metacognitive capacities. Language learning can occur as students encounter exemplars of lexical items and internalize grammatical patterns through engagement with the text. Hudson (2011), Nagy (1995) and Nation (2015), each agree that a literary text can enrich a student's stock of vocabulary and present them with opportunities to negotiate authentic language in use. Research has validated these opinions by finding that students performed better in vocabulary tests after reading a passage from a text than those who had not read the same text (see Day, Omura & Hiramatsu, 1991; Dupuy & Krashen, 1993). The cultural model, which Carter and Long (1991) posit is more teacher-centered, can develop an awareness among learners about foreign societies. For example, while reading Frank McCourt's Angela's Ashes, the teacher may elaborate on the hostile relationship between Catholics and Protestants at that time. However, Lazar (1993) extends the parameters of literature's role in developing cultural understanding beyond that of an object of study, to opening doors that foster intercultural understanding as readers unearth, explore and develop a deeper awareness of the cultures presented within the narrative. Meanwhile, the personal growth model posits that literature promotes a student's cognitive development through engagement with the narrative and the various themes that emerge. Topics arising from a novel offer scope for developing interpersonal relationships as students consider, formulate and exchange differing interpretations of the text's contents. For example, Charles Dickens' Oliver Twist could initiate a discussion on the contributing factors to poverty or crime. This process allows students to engage in authentic communication on themes that transcend national boundaries and contribute to a student's personal development (Paran, 2000) facilitating what Hall (2015) refers to as "Education' in short" (p.153). In other words, learning that occurs through literature can build upon the practicalities of, for example, mastering how to order food in a restaurant and enable the learner to participate in authentic conversation with the people around their table once the meal arrives.

Detractors cast doubt on these perceived benefits of literature by arguing that using literary texts warrants no special attention over other pedagogies and may even be counterproductive if they impede the flow of regular lessons. Edmondson (1997), claims that literary texts fail to justify their function in enabling a learner to achieve proficiency in a second language. He argues that other texts can equally introduce culture and stimulate cognitive mechanisms. For example, learners studying for a career in engineering or science may need to Walsh: Benefits of autonomous reading of a novel

prioritize technical vocabulary and language relevant to their chosen field. Edmondson (1997) continues to warn that in many situations, depending on the style of instruction, literature can be detrimental to learning as it can result in a disinterested classroom. This is especially the case if the EFL class replicates an L1 environment with the teacher lecturing on their personal interpretation of a text for the duration of the class. Lack of enthusiasm for literature among students is a worry echoed by Lazar (1994) who suggests that difficult authentic language and literary abstractions could affect the motivational levels of less proficient students. Hall (2015) also conceded that some educators believe that the language of literary texts is demanding and archaic. Indeed, using James Joyce's Ulysses to promote vocabulary acquisition among a group of Japanese EFL students may seem counterintuitive given the amount of contemporary material widely available to educators. These views could explain wider held assumptions observed by Ur (2012), who reported that many language teachers hesitate to adopt literature in an EFL classroom designed to improve communicative ability. Ur (2012) adds that it may even be deemed by some educators a "'luxury' item" (p.223).

These conflicting points of view make it difficult to come to a firm conclusion about the benefits of literature in an EFL classroom. However, both factions agree that there is 'a paucity of empirical evidence' that validates the claims made regarding the merits of a literary piece within a language learning classroom (Paran 2008, p. 470). The shortage of empirical studies underpinning theoretical writing is striking given that arguments are stronger if built on informed methodological research. This study, explained below, tentatively contributes its voice to research by assessing the value of literature as a pedagogical resource in the author's EFL classroom.

## The Study

In this investigation, the validity of Carter and Long's (1991) rationale for three approaches to using literature in the EFL classroom is measured against students' autonomous engagement with a novel. Specifically, the study assesses the impact free reading has on students' development with regards to language acquisition, cultural understanding, and personal growth. In an attempt to direct the study, the following hypotheses were tested.

- 1. Students' receptive knowledge of vocabulary improves after autonomous reading of the novel.
- 2. Student knowledge of a foreign culture improves after autonomous reading of the novel.
- 3. Student personal growth is activated after autonomous reading of the novel.

## **Participants**

The participants were 20 (N = 20) high school first-year Japanese EFL students at a private senior high school. All the participants were native Japanese speakers who had spent one year or more living in a country where English was the language of academic instruction. Because of their experiences overseas, 15 had an advanced English proficiency level of Eiken Grade Pre 1 or B2 of the Common European Framework of References for Languages (CEFR). The remaining five students had never taken an English proficiency test but, based on their scores from continuous assessments within the school, were adjudged to be of a similar proficiency level to their peers that had. The course material, the Pearson graded reader adaptation of Pride and Prejudice by Jane Austen (Pearson level 5; CEFR B2), had been deemed appropriate by the school's English faculty for the reading comprehension of the subjects.

#### Procedure

The adapted novel, *Pride and Prejudice*, formed the core element of the course and was delivered over a sixteenweek period comprising 31 fifty-minute periods. All of the reading was assigned for homework with the focus of class time allocated for student-led summaries, critical thinking tasks, group discussions, and role-playing activities related to the story. As the study focused on students' autonomous engagement with the book, activities explicitly teaching specific language structures and vocabulary, introducing cultural aspects of the novel, or delivering teacher-led interpretations of the book and themes contained within were deliberately excluded.

The participants were examined at six stages on their knowledge of vocabulary contained within the novel and at two stages on their cultural understanding of the time period of the novel and their opinions on themes arising from the novel. All students were informed that the results would be recorded for research purposes only and would not form part of their overall grades.

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#### **Data Collection**

## Language Learning

In lieu of a full treatment of language learning, such as orthography, syntax, and grammatical functions which are beyond the scope of this research, students were examined on their knowledge of vocabulary from the novel at intervals over the 16-week course. 'Knowledge' has varying interpretations: for the purposes of this study receptive knowledge - the ability of students to identify the meaning of a word from seeing or hearing it (Nation, 2013a) - was measured. The items to be examined were established from records of the previous year's students' vocabulary logs that identified unfamiliar or difficult vocabulary from the same graded reader novel. The book was divided into three seven-chapter sections, beginning with Chapter 8. Chapters 1 through 7 were omitted due to the absence of vocabulary logs from the previous year's students. Receptive knowledge of the vocabulary of each section was tested through two different synonym and definition matching quizzes preand post-reading. Each quiz contained ten randomly selected lexical items from the targeted chapters (see Appendix A). In line with Schmitt's (2010) advice for assessing vocabulary items and improving validity, the synonyms and definitions were compiled of higher frequency words than the ones being examined.

#### Cultural Understanding

Cultural knowledge of the time of *Pride and Prejudice* around the late 18<sup>th</sup> century and early 19<sup>th</sup> century was assessed through an identical True or False quiz, which was administered both before and after students read the novel (see Appendix B). The questions asked were established after consultation with other faculty members experienced in teaching the same novel and were related to cultural references contained within the novel.

#### Personal Growth

Students were asked to respond to four statements with their opinions on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = undecided, 4 = agree, 5 =strongly agree) and provide reasons for their answers. These identical statements were administered at two stages: prior to commencing, and on completion of the novel (see Appendix C). These statements were aimed at targeting students' self-awareness and reflection on various themes and social issues that arise from the novel. The themes were predetermined based on the researcher's experience of the novel and consultations with fellow faculty members. They were introduced by the teacher and discussed in groups by students at various points during the 16-week course. Three issues were focused on: judging someone without knowing them, the influences that shape people's personalities, and the reasons people get married.

#### Results

#### Language Learning

As shown in Table 1, the students' average post-reading vocabulary scores were lower than their pre-reading scores on two occasions. The results for chapters 8-14 and chapters 15-21 indicate a lower score post-reading with a mean differential of 1.11 and 1.1 respectively. Only chapters 22-28 signaled a post-reading average score higher than the pre-reading score by a positive mean differential of 1.35.

## Table 1.

Statements	Pre-R	eading	Post-F	leading	t-stat	р
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
Chapters 8-14	8.11	2.245	7	2.384	-2.194	.016
Chapters 15-21	7.3	2.23	6.2	3.24	-1.799	.057
Chapters 22-28	6.35	3.2	7.7	2.16	2.13	.045

Paired sample t-tests were conducted on each section to determine if statistically significant differences existed between pre- and post-reading test scores. The results indicated a significant difference in the scores prereading and post-reading for chapters 8-14 t(19) = - 2.194, p = .016, and chapters 22-28 t(19) = 2.13, p = .045. No significant difference was observed for chapters 15-21 t(19) = 2.13, p = .057.

#### Cultural Understanding

The results for cultural understanding, seen in Table 2, showed a shift in the mean between pre- and postreading on four statements. For Statement 1, the same mean was observed before and after reading the novel. The changes in the means for the other four statements were not consistent as the data indicated two aspects of culture where knowledge appeared to have increased and two other aspects where it seemed to have decreased. Cultural knowledge appeared to have been acquired for Statement 2, with a higher mean post-reading (M = 10, SD = 0) than pre-reading (M = 8, SD = 0.410). Statement 3 pointed towards the highest improvement with an increase from the pre-reading mean (M = 2.5, SD = 0.444) to the post-reading mean (M = 6.5, SD =0.489) and following a paired sample t-test, demonstrated significantly better understanding postreading t(19) = 2.491, p = .017. Interestingly, the results from the post-reading of Statement 4 (M = 7, SD =0.470) and Statement 5 (M = 7.5, SD = 0.444) signaled a decrease in the mean values post-reading.

#### Personal Growth

The results shown in Table 3, pointed to a change in students' opinion pre- and post-reading when responding to each statement.

## Table 2.

Statements	Correct Answer	Pre-R	eading	Post-F	Reading	t-stat	р
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
1	True	9	0.308	9	0.308	2.105	1
2	True	8	0.410	10	0	2	.083
3	False	2.5	0.444	6.5	0.489	2.491	.017
4	False	8.5	0.366	7	0.47	-1.151	.267
5	True	9	0.308	7.5	0.444	-1.071	.267

Results of Responses to Each	Cultural Statement Pre-	• and Post-Reading. p<0.05
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## Table 3.

Results of Students Responses to Personal Growth Statements. p<0.05

Statements	Pre-R	eading	Post-F	Reading	t-stat	р
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
1	2.5	0.856	3.1	0.963	2.259	.036
2	2.65	0.784	2.15	1.2	-1.876	.076
3	3.75	0.924	3.2	1.396	-1.993	.061
4	2.35	1.029	3.6	0.922	5.64	3E-05

Statement 1 indicated a statistically significant difference between pre-reading (M = 2.54, SD = 0.856) and postreading (M = 3.12, SD = 0.963); t(19) = 2.259, p = .036. Students' responses to the open-ended questions providing insights into the reasons for the change of opinion can be seen in Table 4).

The mean for Statement 2 increased between prereading (M = 2.65, SD = 0.784) and post-reading (M = 2.15, SD = 1.2), but did not indicate a statistically significant difference t(19) = -1.876, p = .076. Again, student responses offered an insight into their thought processes. (See Table 5) A further decrease in agreement was found with Statement 3 between pre-reading (M = 3.75, SD = 0.924) and post-reading (M = 3.6, SD = 1.396); t(19) = -1.993, p = .061. (See Table 6)

The response to Statement 4 indicated a clear significant difference between the scores pre-reading (M = 2.35, SD = 1.029) and post-reading (M = 0.922, SD = 5.64); t(19) = 5.64, p = 3E-05 with more students agreeing that people can marry someone without love. (See Table 7)

# Table 4.

Student comments on statement "I would be able to fall in love with someone whom I overheard say that they are not physically attracted to me."

	Before	After
Student 2	(Disagree) No, because I won't love someone who	(Agree) After reading Pride and Prejudice, I
	I overheard say that they are not attracted to my	learned that even if the person is not attracted to
	looks	your looks, they might still love you. For example,
		Elizabeth and Darcy.
Student 9	(Disagree) I don't think I would be able to love	(Agree) If I get to learn the person who said that is
	somebody who said that I don't look well. It is a	not attracted to my look, my feeling might
	rude thing to talk about how people look.	change. But if I don't, I would dislike the person.
Student 11	(Disagree) No, because that person has made you	(Agree) I think I would be able because love is not
	feel bad.	all about the looks. If the person's personality is
		good, I think it's OK.

# Table 5.

Student comments on statement "I can judge somebody without ever speaking with them"

	Before	After
Student 1	(Undecided) If I only hear about them from one	(Strongly disagree) Just because someone has nice
	person, I wouldn't If I heard about them from	looks or the opposite doesn't mean that they act
	many people, I think I would be able to believe it.	that way. From Pride and Prejudice Elizabeth
		thought Mr. Wickham has nice looks but he was
		actually a man with a bad personality.
Student 2	(Agree) Yes, if someone explains me about	(Strongly disagree) I can't understand someone's
	personality of them.	personality if not my family because I don't have
		in touch that much.
Student 6	(Undecided) If you heard about the personality of	(Strongly disagree) You cannot know someone's
	someone, you will understand that person's	personality without meeting that person.
	character, but you cannot know everything.	

# Table 6.

Student comments on statement 'We acquire our personality from our family

	Before	After
Student 5	(Disagree) You will not have the exact same	(Agree) Just like some of the sisters from the
	personality as your family but you will have some	Bennet family, we are influenced strongly by our
	similar parts so I think our family influences our	family.
	personality a bit.	

## Table 7.

Student comments on statement "People can marry someone even if they do not love them.

	Before	After
Student 17		(Agree) Some people can marry someone for their
		money and social status even if they don't love
	can't marry a person whom I don't love because	each other.
	marriage without love wouldn't make you happy.	

# Discussion

# Hypothesis 1: Students' receptive knowledge of vocabulary improves after autonomous reading of the novel.

In general, the results of this study could not definitively confirm whether receptive knowledge of vocabulary improves after autonomous reading of a novel. Even though a significant difference was observed in students' receptive knowledge of vocabulary pre- and postreading for chapters 8-14 and chapters 22-28, the mean score decreased post-reading for chapters 8-14. The cause of this observed difference is unknown, but could be attributed to random chance. Despite not adjusting the pedagogical approach, chapters 22-28 showed improvement in vocabulary acquisition post-reading. What is noteworthy is that the post-reading quiz for chapters 22-28 was conducted one week prior to students taking their end of term grade exams, which they were aware included a vocabulary section. Hence, motivation to study for the final exams could have been a contributing factor to the improvement in postreading scores for that section. Despite this increase, the overall inconsistency of the study's results support Nation's (2013a) claim that poorly focused vocabulary learning is insufficient for developing vocabulary and reinforces the argument that vocabulary learning should be supported by deliberate teaching and scaffolding (see Day, Omura & Hiramatsu, 1991; Dupuy & Krashen, 1993). Nation (2013b) and Schmitt (2008) also recommend a pedagogical strategy that scaffolds students' learning, such as highlighting targeted vocabulary and preparing tasks to be completed postreading. Research findings by Sonbul and Schmitt (2010) further support the requirement for an integrated process of vocabulary learning through reading and explicit instruction. An additional factor impeding vocabulary learning in this study is possibly the lack of

repetition of the lexical items within the text. As all the vocabulary in this study was identified by the previous year's students, there was no consideration given to word repetition. This limited contact with a lexical item is concerning as Pellicer-Sánchez and Schmitt (2010) found that even though one exposure can lead to learning of a word form and recognition, learning accelerated with multiple exposures. To conclude, learners may need to be given opportunities through intentional activities such as the creation and administration of structured vocabulary exercises to consolidate vocabulary, especially those words that appear less often.

# Hypothesis 2: Student knowledge of a foreign culture improves after autonomous reading of the novel.

The results for Hypothesis 2 are inconclusive but suggest that knowledge of more obvious cultural references can be improved, but more subtle references go unnoticed. Only Statement 3 indicated a significant difference in improvement pre- and post-reading. Although these differences could be statistical noise due to the small sample size, it is interesting to note that Statement 3 is connected to an inheritance theme that is central to the narrative and is revisited on many occasions throughout Pride and Prejudice. By contrast, the other culture related statements appear less frequently and, as a result, may have passed undetected by the students. Subsequently, teachers, especially those pursuing a pedagogical goal that is closely aligned with Carter and Long's (1991) description to introduce distinct cultural information, should consider highlighting more concealed references and provide adequate summaries. An alternative approach is for teachers to expand their interpretation of literature's function in transmitting cultural knowledge to

incorporating the goals of developing students' selfawareness and communication skills. Karsh (1993) believes that cultures contained within literature provide openings for learners to create meaning for themselves as they critically reflect on their own and the targeted culture. For example, rather than provide an extended analysis on the role of British women around the early 19th century, the teacher could direct students to examples from within the narrative and then have them compare the roles of women in Britain and Japan at that time. In this situation, the teacher functions as a facilitator by highlighting the culture, allowing students to assimilate it and then negotiate the differences and similarities between that and their own. As a consequence, cultural references contained within literature evolve from being objects of study to acting as catalysts for creating dynamic opportunities for students to develop self-awareness and communicative proficiency.

# Hypothesis 3: Student personal growth is activated after autonomous reading of the novel.

The data shows a shift and hence activation in students' self-awareness and opinions prior to and after reading the novel. In particular, more students appear to have become increasingly cognizant of the complexities underpinning different situations through their engagement with the narrative. Student feedback also suggests a greater maturity on completion of the novel in relation to different themes. However, it is important to remember that even though the teacher refrained from providing personal views on issues contained within these statements, they were predetermined prior to reading the novel and discussed at length by students at various points over the course of the sixteen-week Consequently, if sufficient time and period. opportunities are provided that allow students to independently negotiate themes within a novel with each other, educators can perform an ancillary role in promoting personal growth in an advanced EFL classroom. It is not clear from the study if metacognitive processes such as an increase in self-awareness and reflection on opinions would be observed in the absence of open discussion and dedicated class time.

## Conclusion

As teacher interest in literature in an EFL classroom grows, so does the need to assess its role within the classroom. The present research only touched the periphery of the benefits of literature in an advanced proficiency EFL classroom and the findings are certainly not definitive. However, the results tentatively support findings from previous studies that in parallel with autonomous reading, educators should consider deliberate teaching and scaffolding of vocabulary. Similarly, depending on the pedagogical objective when introducing culture, summaries may be needed if the goal is solely to chronicle it. By contrast, aspects of a novel that act as a catalyst for cognitive engagement which could include culture can be activated with minimal teacher involvement through student engagement with the contents of the novel and each other.

It is important to acknowledge this study has three major limitations. First, all of the reading was assigned outside of class, thus making it difficult to establish students' true engagement with the contents of the novel. Future research should consider dedicated in-class reading time. Second, the sample size is small, and further studies should incorporate a larger number of students. Finally, even though most students indicated via an exit survey that they enjoyed the novel, the book was not the participants' own choice. Despite these limitations, the present study offered an insight into the benefits or otherwise of literature in an advanced EFL class and informed the researcher at least, of the need for considerations when introducing a novel as a pedagogical resource in a language classroom.

## Author Biography

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# Appendix A: Vocabulary quizzes

# Pre-reading 8-14

Word	Synonym
1. shame	A. ask questions
2. inquire	B. worry
3. pale	C. non-attendance
4. blame	D. affect
5. swell	E. dirty
6. anxiety	F. humiliation
7. influence	G. become bigger
8. absence	H. hold someone responsible for something
9. muddy	I. be against
10. opposed	J. light colo(u)red

# Post-reading 8-14

Word	Synonym
1. plain	A. speak briefly about something
2. insincere	B. to like someone or something
3. mention	C. military person, in the army
4. sorrow	D. cut in on, stop someone talking
5. fond	E. to be angry with someone
6. colonel	F. to feel happy, have fun
7. interrupt	G. simple, not beautiful
8. scold	H. ask someone to do something
9. amusement	I. to feel sadness
10. proposal	J. not real

Pre-reading chapters 15-21

Word	Synonym
1. stretch	A. dislike
2. eager	B. to be fair
3. confusion	C. keep away, stay away
4. cross	D. high respect
5. swallow	E. nice
6. justice	F. excited to do something
7. pleasant	G. to pass something to your stomach
8. honour	H. make longer
9. avoid	I. to not understand
10. charge	J. accuse

# Post-reading 15-21

Word	Synonym
1. pardon	A. unfair
2. severe	B. not knowing something
3. suspicious	C. embarrassed
4. unjust	D. hard
5. ashamed	E. to trick
6. urge	F. to forgive someone
7. upset	G. injury, have pain
8. wound	H. to encourage
9. deceive	I. not sure, uncertain, to guess
10. unconscious	J. disappointed or worried

# Pre-reading 22-28

Word	Synonym
1. stem	A. make someone do something
2. scorn	B. to challenge
3. quarrel	C. reject/refuse
4. dare	D. wish for
5. desirous	E. be rude to/offend
6. heir	F. argue
7. debt	G. to come from something
8. persuade	H. next owner
9. insulting	I. minimum
10. least	J. have to give money back to someone

# Post-reading 22-28

Word	Synonym
1. sensible	A. move away
2. dull	B. uncomfortable
3. awkward	C. not real
4. intend	D. dark
5. conscience	E. well mannered
6. grateful	F. a person's sense of what's right
7. pretend	G. peaceful
8. calmness	H. to give thanks
9. polite	I. responsible
10. part	J. plan

# Appendix B: Cultural knowledge statements

Please circle whether each of the following statements regarding the culture of the time is true or false.

Statements		True	False
1.	Social status was very important around the end of the 18th century.		
2.	Parents wanted their daughters to marry a wealthy person.		
3.	Upon their parents' death, all the wealth and property of the family passed to the eldest child.		
4.	Every child had the power to freely choose who they could marry.		
5.	It was not unusual for relations to marry each other.		

# Appendix C: Personal growth statements

With 1 being *strongly disagree* and 5 being *strongly agree*, please rank your opinion on the following four statements. Please provide reasons for your opinion.

Statements		2	3	4	5	
1. I would be able to fall in love with someone whom I overheard say that they are not physically attracted to me.						
Explain:						
2. I can judge somebody without ever speaking with them.						
Explain:						
3. We acquire our personality from our family.						
Explain:						
4. People can marry someone even if they do not love them.						
Explain:						