Taking the Book off the Page:

Turning Extensive Reading into Meaningful Spoken Performance

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Picture this. The lights come on and a round of applause ripples through the auditorium. Three thirteen-year-old students walk out onto the stage, a microphone in one hand and a script in the other. Behind them, a slide show opens to a tropical beach, the sound of the waves whispering through the speakers. One student speaks confidently. The second answers. The third, after a slight pause to glance at the script, performs his line as a fourth enters from stage right. Within seconds, a story which began only a few weeks earlier as a graded reader has become a live English performance.

Truth be told, the audience is far smaller than the auditorium suggests—a group of thirty classmates sitting in the front two rows of seats—but this hardly seems to matter. Camaraderie links the audience to the performers. All have spent the past six weeks rehearsing, designing slides, perfecting their movements and improving their speaking and acting—not just reading aloud, but performing. What started as a private reading task done at home on a screen has become public, collaborative and unmistakably communicative.

The performing arts project described here is one of several post-reading activities built into a wider extensive reading (ER) programme for first- and second-year junior high school students. Such activities help to embed ER within the school's culture, rather than relegating it to an invisible, screen-based side-task—and the play is possibly the most demanding and most visible of these.

The Trouble with Reading Alone

Extensive reading has a well-documented record of building vocabulary, reading fluency and motivation (Nation, 2015; Grabe & Stoller, 2011). The school's own experience over its six-year history of ER has been encouraging, with later cohorts generally achieving higher scores in reading and listening compared with earlier cohorts. With the programme now at a mature stage, the average graduating student has read over 250,000 words of graded readers.

However, ER has one structural weakness. Almost all of it happens alone: at home, on a screen, unseen by anyone else until the data are tracked and reported. Unless this private reading is shared, it becomes invisible twice over: to the student who is rarely able to use what they have read, and to the school, which is tempted to view a rising word count alone as progress. A line often attributed to C. S. Lewis puts it simply: we read to know that we are not alone. For a thirteen- or fourteen-year-old at this school, this feeling of belonging and connection has everything to do with what happens after the book is finished.

A Syllabus with a Destination

ER occupies a central role within this NET-led communication class. However, due to time constraints, reading itself takes place outside the classroom through an online graded-reader platform. In order to offset this, roughly half the class time is linked back to the reading through activities such as book reports, presentations, discussion, manga creation, short videos, and, in the third term, plays. This design broadly follows Nation's (1996) Four Strands framework which calls for equal parts meaning-focused input, meaning-focused output, language-focused learning and fluency development. With this approach, ER provides a substantial source of meaning-focused input, while linked classroom activities create opportunities for students to use language productively. Grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation work provide a language-focused strand, while

repeated rehearsal of familiar language increasingly shifts attention towards fluency. The play therefore becomes a point at which several strands of the curriculum converge.

Term 3 is short—roughly six lessons in all - and the play functions as a capstone to the academic year. By this point, J1 students have begun freewriting and had some practice speaking English in front of others. J2 students have extended this through highly creative individual projects such as short videos and manga design, along with focused pronunciation work. The play brings all this together and adds another aspect. At this school, there is no performing arts class, and no plays are covered in the Japanese (***kokugo***) syllabus. For most students, this is literally the only time in three years of junior high school that they will perform on a stage in front of their peers.

The six lessons of Term 3 run as follows. In Lesson 1, students are placed into groups of three to five and asked to read a specific graded reader. In Lesson 2, they receive scripts and choose roles. Lessons 3 and 4 combine rehearsal time with other regular English activities. Lesson 5 is a dress rehearsal and Lesson 6 is the performance itself.

Bringing the Graded Reader to Life

The books selected for J1 run to a few hundred words, while those for J2 tend to be between two and three thousand—easily manageable for these ER-experienced students. Before handing out the scripts, students are shown what is expected of them. J1 students, who do not know what the process involves, watch edited footage from the previous year's most successful performances. J2 students are shown something more pointed: a similar clip of students from their own grade performing as J1, followed by the previous year's J2 performances. This is a deliberate, tangible demonstration of exactly how much further J2 performances are expected to go.

Once expectations have been set, students receive a script, written by the teacher, adapting each story's plot and characters into a play, complete with dialogue, scene setting and advice for the budding actors.

The adaptation of the books to plays underwent several revisions. In the first year, differences in the number of words per character (the very first thing students did was to go through and count), or the presence of longer sentences led to complaints of unfairness. The scripts went through several revisions to balance this out and now every role carries around the same number of words and a similar length of sentences. In *PB3 and the Jacket,* a J1 play with four characters, the number of words per role is 78, 74, 73 and 72 (although this has still led to disagreement on a couple of occasions ...). In the J2 play *A Helping Hand,* three of the four roles come in at 101 words, with the fourth at 102. This was no mean feat, though generative AI could now make this task easier—provided teachers still check the lexical and grammatical level of the resulting sentences.

Freedom within the project is narrow but does exist. With a mixed-level class of this age group, having students write their own dialogues would not have been practical. There are occasional exceptions, especially with more motivated groups, who may ask to change certain phrases (sometimes needing a further "polite" edit from the teacher). However, outside of the words on the page, students have a large degree of control. Movement, staging, use of props, background slides and sound effects (buzzers, animal noises, natural sounds)—some groups even make masks—become the main focus of the practice sessions.

What Difference a Year Makes

The jump in level between the two years is visible in the scripts themselves. Here is a section from the script for *PB3 and the Jacket* (J1):

S: It's a hand. It's taking my jacket. Hey!
B: Whose hand is it?
R: Hey, children! Hello. How are you?
S + B: A robot and an ET!

(Adapted from *PB3 and the Jacket* by Jane Cadwallader, ELI Readers)

Compare this with a moment from *A Helping Hand* (J2), performed a year later:

R: What's the plan? Which beach are we going to?
D: We are going to Jenkins' Beach. I've never been there. It will be exciting!
T: No! It's dangerous. Mr. Jenkins lives near there. He has big dogs.

D: Are you scared of dogs? Are you a chicken?

(Adapted from *A Helping Hand* by Rob Waring and Maurice Jamall, Cengage - Foundations Reading Library)

The J2 sentences are longer, the grammar more challenging, and the dialogue requires students to sustain more complex interactions. These differences are deliberately planned for the students' developing level and maturity as part of the wider progression from J1 to J2 (see Table 1).

Table 1. The J1 → J2 progression

Feature	J1	J2
Words per role	~ 70-80	~ 100-120
Performance length	4-5 minutes	6-7 minutes
Venue	Small hall, no stage / mics	Main auditorium, raised stage, mics
Recording	Teacher-recorded video	Professionally filmed
Pronunciation focus	General clarity, teacher coaching	Explicit coaching

Note: Both recordings shared by QR code.

As shown in the table, the venue itself is part of the progression from J1 to J2. J1 students perform in the school's smaller, familiar hall; J2 move into the main auditorium, a space usually reserved for ceremonies and official events. Students clearly feel the weight of that shift, and the atmosphere adds to the drama of the occasion.

Rehearsal as Active Language Learning

While the final performance is the most visible part of the project, it may not actually be where most learning happens. The performance gives students a goal—a reason to rehearse—but rehearsal is where much of the language practice occurs.

From Lesson 2, after the students receive their scripts, read through them and negotiate roles, each receives an audio recording of the play, acted out with appropriate voices, emotion and pace. During subsequent lessons, students move from sitting to standing, moving and acting. A director is elected from within the group and the teacher circulates to offer advice and encouragement. The tone is kept positive, suggesting rather than correcting.

For J2 students, the rehearsals also function as a place to recycle the pronunciation training from Terms 1 and 2. Students learn common features of connected speech, including the use of the schwa sound and reductions such as wanna, gonna, hafta, kinda, whaddaya, *etc*. These reductions are not explicitly engineered into the scripts but occur often enough in natural speech to be worth pointing out as a learning goal. Indeed, plays can provide a context for practising a range of previously taught structures and language features in an active and engaging manner, depending on the goals of the course.

The Script as a Scaffold

The initial goal of having students perform without scripts was short-lived. Most students could manage this in the classroom, but the added pressure of the stage and the short performance slots meant a single student freezing could derail the entire play. Full memorisation is still rewarded, and excessive reading visibly alters the momentum, but a quick glance for confirmation is generally enough to keep the show on the road. Students are coached to value smooth communication over perfect recall, and scores are given generously, further lowering the stakes.

Evaluating the Performance

Performances are assessed using the following rubric, scored independently by two teachers for a combined total of 50. *Pronunciation / Language* (5), *Effort* (5), *Speaking Performance* (5) and *Acting* (5) are marked individually, with stronger performers recognised as such. A final category, *Cooperation / Teamwork* (5) receives the same score across the whole group. This design choice rewards individual effort while preserving a shared responsibility for the group's performance.

Group Dynamics and Audience Expectations

Groups are fixed in advance of Lesson 1, mainly to avoid interpersonal conflicts but also to match or contrast levels of motivation and ability. As these classes come at the end of the academic year, teachers usually have a strong grasp of the students' personalities and class dynamics. Strong-

er or more confident students often take on the director role or contribute more heavily to the slide show and props.

The regular homeroom class is split into two smaller groups for this communication class. On performance day, the two halves are reunited, adding a fresher and tenser dynamic. Students are often keen to see performances they have not yet witnessed, and this is coupled with the fascination of seeing their "doppelgängers," as each half of the class is performing the same plays. Watching how another group interpreted the same lines, jokes, actions and background sets generates a sense of self-sustaining competition rare in a classroom environment. By the end of the performances, the room buzzes with excitement: students cheer, applaud and laugh, as the performers leave the stage, often with a visible look of both relief and pride.

Encore?

The play scores account for half of the Term 3 grade and are one component of the wider English programme. No attempt has been made to isolate individual effects experimentally, so any claims need to remain modest, but the surrounding evidence is encouraging. In a 2023 questionnaire (N=105), 80% of the students agreed or strongly agreed that the classroom activities linked to extensive reading had improved their English. In a follow-up questionnaire a year later, five students independently used the open-ended comment section to request more plays.

Perhaps more revealing than a statistic is watching what happens in the room. Students who begin by silently reading a graded reader end six weeks later speaking, listening, moving, acting, negotiating with peers and performing—perhaps for the first time—in front of a live audience. Pronunciation coached earlier in the year is suddenly applied in meaningful continuous speech. Repetition becomes rehearsal, rather than drill, and less confident students get the safety of performing in a group, developing a quiet sense of responsibility that would be difficult to replicate in a solo task such as a speech.

The Sequel?

The play is currently held only in J1 and J2. However, perhaps a more natural step would be to hand over more of the scaffolding built into J1 and J2 and let J3 students adapt or eventually build their own plays, rather than relying on a teacher-prepared script. The more interesting goal would be the process of students becoming increasingly independent, negotiating stories, language, character and staging decisions by themselves.

Extensive reading provides students with large volumes of meaningful input. Left on its own, that input stays on the page. Post-reading activities such as book reports, presentations, manga and, most demanding of all, the plays, give that input somewhere else to go. The model described here is one way of achieving this: a book to read, a script to work from, an audience to entertain and, eventually, a video to watch and share with friends and families.

When the lights come up and the students walk out onto the stage, that is just the visible end of the process. Much of the learning happened earlier—in every read-through, every delivered line and every rehearsal where a script gradually stopped being words on a page and became something students could say to people who are actually listening. That, more than the performance itself, is what it means to take a book off the page.

References

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