

Notes and Comments

Do Young People in Japan Like to Read? Let's Take a Closer Look

Stephen Krashen | skrashen@yahoo.com

Beniko Mason | benikomason@gmail.com

Jeff McQuillan | jeff@eslpod.com

Stephen Krashen is Professor Emeritus at the University of Southern California. He is a linguist, educational researcher and activist. He has been one of the most influential voices in second language acquisition in recent times.

Beniko Mason is Professor Emerita at Shitennoji University Junior College. She has been developing and researching Story-Listening and Guided Self-selected Reading for several decades. She has demonstrated her methods and has presented her findings at professional conferences in several countries. Her published papers are available at beniko-mason.net.

Jeff McQuillan is an independent researcher in Los Angeles, California (USA). He has published widely in the areas of literacy and second language acquisition. He is co-creator of ESLPod.com, one of the most popular English language learning websites in the world.

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Abstract

As part of literacy instruction, teachers use reading programs that use rewards to motivate students to read (Kohn 1999). Underlying such programs is the assumption that young people are not interested in reading and need a system of reward and punishment interventions to motivate them to read. This assumption is not supported by us.

Mori (2015, cited in Milliner, 2020), affirms that because '... most young people, at least in Japan ... do not seem to have (a) strong ... affection for books ...' (Mori, p, 130). We have to intervene in our school programs in order to make sure students read.

To support this claim, Mori presented data from a newspaper article showing a decline in the amount of reading as students get older, with fewer books read per month by older students:

Table 1: *Books Read per Month*

Level	Books/month
Elementary	11.4
Jr. high school	3.9
Sr. high school	1.6

Data from Mori (as cited in Milliner, 2020)

What is clear from the data in Table 1 is that the students did a considerable amount of reading in elementary school and still read a respectable four books a month in junior high school.

The results of a government survey conducted in 2019 by the Agency for Cultural Affairs, Japan report similar findings. (https://www.bunka.go.jp/tokei_hakusho_shuppan/tokeichosa/kokugo_yoronchosa/pdf/r1393038_02.pdf). Almost 84.5 per cent of 16-year-old high school students (n = 1960) said they read two books per month or less.

A Decline in the Interest in Reading?

Both the newspaper article and the government survey reports give us data on how much the students were reading, but not their attitudes towards reading.

Data from the United States suggests that the decline in reading does not represent a lack of interest in reading. Krashen and Von Sprecken (2002) reviewed studies in

which subjects were asked a straight-forward question: "Do you like to read?" They reported that attitudes toward reading was positive for all ages tested, and there was very little evidence for a decline in interest in reading as children get older. Krashen and Von Sprecken conclude that "overall, there is no doubt that the research shows that children and adolescents in the US say that they like to read" (p. 16).

Another research shows that interest in reading is stimulated by reading aloud to children at home and that more access to books consistently result in more reading (Krashen, 2004).

Results from the 2019 Japanese government study suggests that young people (16-year-olds) in Japan do value reading indeed, but mainly for practical reasons: 61 per cent said they valued reading because of the new information it provided but only 23.5 per cent valued reading because it was enjoyable.

We need to take a closer look. Is there really a decline in the propensity to read in Japan? Is the decline in the amount of reading the result of factors that discourage or even prevent pleasure reading, such as lack of access to reading material, the pressure of schoolwork, etc.? Milliner (2020) quotes Mori as saying that the pressure of "busy lives" is in fact, the cause of the decline in the amount of reading students report as they get older. However, in our reading of Mori, we did not find any claim that reading habits were related to "busy lives".

We must have more detailed and careful analyses before we conclude that young people in Japan do not like to read, and we jump to solutions such as reward and punishment (demonstrated to be ineffective and even counterproductive; Kohn 1999; McQuillan, 1997) as the solution.

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