As part of a multiphased research project looking at interest and its relationship with reading and learning, this paper highlights the introduction of Reading Circles as collaborative learning tasks in the classroom for an extensive reading project.

Introduction
During the Spring 2009 semester, students of Intermediate English classes at the Language Center of Kwansei Gakuin University (KGU, Uegahara campus) experienced extensive reading (ER) as a foundation for multiple-role group discussion activities. As part of an ongoing research project investigating levels of student interest and attitudes toward ER and Reading Circles, we had students read and discuss pre-selected graded readers believed to provide a range of qualities of interest. According to Interest Theory (Hidi & Renninger, 2006), situational interest refers to interest sparked by certain qualities of situations, activities, and texts. Drawing on information in the literature on situational interest in reading (e.g., Brantmeier, 2006), graded reader titles were chosen not only across genres but as ones that seemed likely to trigger a range of interest because they could be perceived as exciting, mysterious, romantic, heartwarming, strange, unpredictable, funny, scary, and easy to comprehend (Eidswick, Praver, & Rouault, in press).

Students
The Intermediate English courses at the KGU Language Center are intensive, allowing students who successfully complete the classes to fulfill their English requirements at an accelerated rate over only two semesters. Admission to the classes is competitive, determined by top scores on the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL ITP). Scores for the Intermediate course students generally fall within the range of 430-525 and each class is made up of 20-25 non-English majors.

Graded Readers
During the 2009 semester, an extensive reading project worth 15% of the final grade was incorporated into the syllabuses of four of the 15 intermediate classes of the Language Center. Development of the project was motivated in part by the intention of exhibiting its pedagogical value and thereby fortifying administrative support for ER and enabling its future expansion into other classes. Before assigning the reading project, we selected a set of books (see Table 1). As we wanted students to experience a wide range of book themes and styles, we chose six titles from various genres, ranging from adventure to romance to mystery. Previous experiences with graded readers in intermediate classes at KGU (see Rouault, 2009) led us to choose from Level 2 and Level 3 books.

Table 1. Titles, levels, and headwords of assigned graded readers
Using the rules of thumb for reading rate in ER from Waring & Takahashi (2000) and studies on vocabulary coverage for comprehension from Nation (2001), the idea of reading one book at these levels every 2 weeks (six English books in 12 weeks) seemed reasonable. To encourage students, we explained that the reading project with level-appropriate graded readers could be completed by reading only 10 minutes each day, or about an hour a week. In each class, the six titles were distributed randomly to form six groups of approximately four students, with each member of a group reading the same book. At the end of each 2-week out-of-class reading cycle, group discussions called Reading Circles were held.

**Reading Circle Roles**
Upon completing the reading and the role worksheets for homework, students gathered for a Reading Circle. In a typical Reading Circle, a Discussion Leader provides questions for the group and manages the discussion the questions inspire. An Illustrator draws a picture based on a particular scene in the text, describes the reasons for choosing this scene and manner of rendition, and engages others with questions on the drawing and imagery. A Connector describes and encourages discussion of connections between themes in the text and real life situations. A Character Sketcher provides and invites comments to examine what can be learned about certain characters through specific passages in the text. A Word Wizard presents new or interesting vocabulary from the text. In our Reading Circles, the Discussion Leader and Word Wizard roles were combined to balance the task preparation time. For a complete description of Reading Circles see Furr (2004, 2007). Most worksheets used in this study were adapted from Drummond (2009) with guidelines for discussion instructions drawn from Daniels and Steineke (2004). The Connector was adapted from www.abcteach.com (n.d.).

Students wrapped up the group task with peer- and self-evaluations. The evaluations provided scores for each person on discussion leadership for their
role, and served as a means of encouraging participation and successful completion of the role tasks.

**Conclusion**

Researchers on ER promote graded readers as an excellent way to improve English language levels, build reading skills, and enhance student motivation (Day & Bamford, 1998; Grabe & Stoller, 2002; Nation, 1997; Waring, 2001, 2009). What is seldom if ever taken into account is whether students’ perceptions of how interesting or boring a book is play a role in students’ attitudes toward ER and activities related to it (see Brantmeier, 2006; Eidswick, Rouault, & Praver, 2010). To address this gap in classroom practice, students in our ER program have been participating in several research projects related to interest and its relationship with reading and learning. Results have suggested that predictability may both enable and undermine interest, and hinted too that the ease of understanding occasioned by text simplification, such as available in many graded readers, might increase interest (Eidswick, Praver, & Rouault, in press). In future papers, we will report on further empirical and qualitative explorations into interest as well as Reading Circle enjoyment, self-efficacy in reading, and peer evaluations.

**References**


