Extensive Reading programs--How Can They Best Benefit the Teaching and Learning of English?

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The use of class readers has been a feature of the English syllabus of Hong Kong schools for many decades. In recent years, there has also been a growing interest in extensive reading programs. Kwan (1988), in a survey of the use of extensive reading schemes in Form/Middle One in Hong Kong, reported that of the 169 schools that responded to her questionnaire, 115 local schools claimed that they had extensive reading schemes in Form One. Hirvela (1991: 5) also observed "an openness to literature that did not exist throughout the bulk of the 1980s". In addition to extensive reading programs developed by individual researchers and schools, the Education Department (ED) has also set up an extensive reading scheme for lower secondary students. The ED Scheme, which is developed by the Institute of Language in Education (ILE), has been implemented in 19 schools in the academic year 1991-92. 30 more schools will join the program in September 1992 and the ED plans to implement the Scheme by phases in 200 schools by 1997.

Although most teachers now agree that extensive reading is beneficial to their students, many still regard it as an 'optional extra', a 'luxury' one can only afford when coursebooks have been 'covered'. There is therefore considerable reluctance towards spending class time on it. In this paper, a different point of view will be put forward: Instead of being given a low priority, extensive reading should become an important part of the curriculum if students are to fully benefit from it. Other suggestions that can help to make an extensive reading program a success will also be given in the paper.

Why Extensive Reading Should Be An Important Part of the Curriculum

Extensive comprehensible language through reading is an effective way to help students improve their English. As Nuttall (1982: 168) points out, the best way to improve one's knowledge of a foreign language is to go and live among its speakers. The next best way is to "read extensively in it". Krashen (1985), in discussing the Input Hypothesis, stresses that it is essential to provide learners with a large quantity of "comprehensible input" in their language acquisition process. Criper (1986: 10-11) further suggests that the language input a student receives in the English classroom is limited and insufficient to provide the learner with "an adequate language

environment", but extensive reading will "transform the quantity of input" dramatically.

The views put forward by these linguists are also supported by research studies. The best known of these is the 'Book Flood' Project for 11-12 year olds developed by Elley and Mangubhai (1983) in the Fiji Islands. After following a reading program for about 8 months, the children in these 'book flood' classes showed much greater improvement in English than the control groups using a mainly audio-lingual structure-based syllabus. This improvement was especially marked in reading— children in the 'book flood' classes improved their reading levels by 15 months in an 8 months' period, while the control group showed only 6.5 months' gain. After the second year of the program, book flood groups excelled in all tests of English proficiency, including reading comprehension, grammar, listening comprehension, vocabulary and writing.

Similar positive language gains were also reported in a nationwide extensive reading program for primary pupils in Singapore (Ng, 1988; Elley, 1988). Statistically significant gains were found in reading comprehension and vocabulary, and the carry-over effects on other language skills like listening comprehension, syntactic control of the language and written composition were also evident. Other extensive reading programs reported to be successful include the Reading Scheme in New Zealand for immigrant Polynesian children, the English Language Reading program in Malaysia for secondary school students, and the Extensive Reading Scheme Pilot Project conducted by the Institute of Language in Education in 9 secondary schools in the period 1986-1988. (A Report on the Extensive Reading Scheme Pilot Project in Hong Kong, 1988)

All the reading programs mentioned above had one major characteristic in common: the students were required to read a large number of books (hence the term 'book flood'). This, however, will not come about if extensive reading is only regarded as an 'optional extra'. In the survey on extensive reading schemes in F/M one classes in Hong Kong conducted by Kwan (1988: 250), it was found that many school teachers only expected their students to read 1-5 books per academic year. As Kwan rightly points out, this quantity is "hardly enough to develop a reading habit in the learner". The exposure to English that students can gain from reading such a small number of books is inadequate and therefore unlikely to lead to any marked improvement in English.

What, then, is the best way of encouraging students to read more? To simply dictate that they should read more books per term may not be effective unless the students already have the habit of reading extensively (in which case they will probably read voluntarily anyway without any requirements set by the teachers). For the majority of students who do not have a reading habit, such demands will only kill

off any interest in reading. It is not uncommon for students to resort to copying blurbs, introductions or somebody else's work when teachers ask them for book reports! Students need help guidance and encouragement from teachers if they are to develop a reading habit, and the most effective way of doing this is to incorporate the extensive reading program into the curriculum and allocate adequate class time to it. (This will be called 'a class scheme' in this paper.)

What are the advantages of a class scheme? Firstly, if the scheme is part of the curriculum and class periods are devoted to it, students will take extensive reading more seriously. They will no longer think of this as an extracurricular activity that they will only engage in when they have free time. Secondly, even though in an extensive reading program students are engaged in self-access learning, they actually need a lot of help if they are to successfully acquire the ability to read and work independently. They need an accurate assessment of their initial reading level so that they can choose books of the right level, help with developing the techniques of extensive reading, feedback on their comprehension and evidence of progress that gives them a sense of achievement. All these can be best achieved in class, when the teacher can monitor students' progress, advise on books and give help, encouragement, and feedback. Thirdly, if students are expected to read a large number of books they need to be given time to do it. The class time allocated to extensive reading will get them started on books, and once hooked on them, it is more likely that they will finish reading the books at home.

One can conclude by saying that a class scheme is usually more effective than a library scheme (that is, a scheme without allocated class time) especially at the upper primary and lower secondary levels. Without a reading program in the curriculum, many students' reading at these levels tends to be spasmodic, haphazard and unrewarding, with the result that they will eventually give up reading. On the other hand, a good reading program implemented under the guidance of a teacher in class will help students to gradually progress towards individualized reading and learning.

A good example of this is the ED (ILE) Extensive Reading Scheme mentioned earlier. The 19 Phase I schools all devote 2-3 periods per week to the Scheme in their Form One classes, and by December 1991, 2-3 months after the Scheme was implemented, many students had read up to 20-40 books. Even though the books at the lower levels are quite short this was still an amazing number considering that many of the students had never read an English book before! Although it is still too early to conduct any evaluation of whether the Scheme has led to improvement in English, some teachers did report anecdotes of students becoming more expressive and creative in their writing. There is also the feeling that students have become more confident in their ability to read in English.

Apart from the above, there are other sound pedagogical reasons for the incorporation of extensive reading into the curriculum,. The kind of reading that

students are used to in class is intensive reading of short texts. This, though important, cannot by itself develop fluent reading in a foreign language, and needs to be complemented by a program of extensive reading. "Intensive reading lessons provide students with training in the strategies and skills they need to become successful readers. Extensive reading provides opportunities for putting that training into practice independently, at an unsupported level of learning". The two are "mutually dependent" (Hedge 1985:68). A curriculum that emphasizes intensive reading only cannot produce fluent readers.

One can also view the curriculum from another perspective: The learning of English should comprise the development of students' capability to think and communicate for three purposes: interpersonal, cognitive and aesthetic. Extensive reading, which can be defined as reading aesthetic and other texts for pleasure, has largely been ignored at present, because in the fiercely practical, examination-oriented education system in Hong Kong, to read for pleasure is usually not regarded as 'work'. A valuable teaching resource is thus lost to teachers who take this view. There is substantial research evidence to prove that learning best occurs when the teaching methods provide "a great deal of comprehensible input in the second language in the classroom and aim for a low-anxiety environment" (Krashen 1985:15). Extensive reading programs satisfy both criteria, for they provide not only "a vast quantity of linguistic input" (Criper 1986: 10), but also a low-anxiety environment because students are reading for pleasure. In other words, students become unaware of learning the language but only of the pleasure of the book or story, but because they are using language actively to understand meaning in the process, vocabulary and structures are assimilated without conscious effort.

Ingredients of a Successful program

Merely incorporating extensive reading programs into the curriculum cannot guarantee success. There are many other factors that can determine whether an extensive reading program works or not. This section will be devoted to two important ingredients of a successful program—materials appropriateness and teacher orientation.

Materials appropriateness:

(1) The input must be 'comprehensible'

Many extensive reading programs fail to improve students' English because there is a mismatch between the students' proficiency levels and the difficulty levels of the books. In situations like this the input is not 'comprehensible' and learning does not take place because students are reading at a frustration level.

In Kwan's (1988) study, the teachers reported that the schemes in their schools were often more effective for students with better language abilities. It is likely that

the books selected in these programs were too difficult for students less proficient in English. Similar findings were reported in the Extensive Reading Scheme Pilot Project conducted in 1986-88. There was much greater progress in the reading competence of the more able students compared to students of equal ability in the control group. However, such progress was not observed in the low ability experimental group, and questionnaire findings revealed that teachers reported the books chosen to be too difficult for them. (A Report on the Extensive Reading Scheme Pilot Project in Hong Kong, 1988).

This, however, does not mean that low ability students cannot benefit from extensive reading, but only that books of the right level must be chosen for them. For example, for weaker students at lower secondary level, books for primary children can be included, provided that these are chosen with care and the content is not too childish. As Nuttall (1982:185) puts it, reading skills will develop much better if a student "reads a lot of books that are too easy rather than a few that are too difficult". In addition, bridging materials in the form of simple reading cards can also be provided for these students, as in the ED (ILE) Extensive Reading Scheme.

It must also be borne in mind that even students in the same class have very different levels of language and reading proficiency. Any extensive reading program provided for them should therefore consist of books graded into a number of reading levels to cater for the full range of ability in the class.

(2) The books supplied should be of varied interest

There are basically 2 ways of setting up an extensive reading class scheme. One is to buy multiple copies of a number of (e.g. 10) titles. Students will all read the same title at any one time, and follow-up work on the reader will be done after they have finished reading it either in class or at home. The other method is to include in the program book boxes consisting of a large number of different titles. Students select books according to their reading interests and abilities to read at their own pace.

In Kwan's (1988) study, teachers' responses showed that the latter method was more effective than the former in developing reading interest and reading habit. This is not surprising because, as Kwan points out, the latter method "allows the learner to gain access to more titles and a collection of books covering a greater variety of interests and of difficulty levels". Students in a class usually have very different interests—one enjoys thrillers while another likes love stories, and it is therefore important to give them as many choices as possible.

(3) The follow-up tasks should be short and easy

A question that has always baffled teachers is whether they should check how well students have understood extensive reading books. The argument against this is

that since extensive reading is intended to be enjoyable, any attempt to make it seem like school work is likely to discourage them from reading. In my opinion, this may be true of students who have developed a reading habit and are very confident of their ability to read and understand English books. The majority of students, on the other hand, would welcome some form of feedback that can indicate their progress. The important thing is to make sure that the tasks they have to do are short and will not take up so much time that they are distracted from their main job of reading as many books as possible. Furthermore, the tasks should be simple and easy to do so that these will not put them off the extensive reading program.

Apart from methods like book reports, quizzes and oral story telling, which are reported to be commonly used in Hong Kong schools (Kwan, 1988), a method that is useful is to provide each book with Question and Answer Cards. Students will answer a few simple questions that can provide a quick check on their understanding of the book and check their own answers by means of the Answer Card. They can complete such a task in 10-15 minutes and so can spend most of the lesson on reading.

To produce workcards like this is of course a daunting task and cannot be done by just one or two teachers. The whole English Department needs to be involved so that the work can be shared out. On the other hand, some publishers of readers also produce Question Cards or worksheets to accompany the titles. Workcards for each title are also available in some programs like the ED (ILE) Extensive Reading Scheme.

Teacher Orientation:

Educational innovations will not succeed if teachers who carry them out are not convinced of the value of the innovations, or only make a halfhearted attempt to adopt practices required by the innovations. This is also true of extensive reading programs. For a program to work, teacher orientation before implementation and teacher support during implementation are crucial.

(1) A team approach should be adopted

To ensure adequate teacher orientation and support, extensive reading programs are best introduced in the context of departmental policy within a school instead of as an activity adopted by only one or two teachers. A team approach ensures that work like designing workcards can be shared out and common policies and strategies can be formulated.

A teacher committed to extensive reading can be appointed as the Co-ordinator of the program in the school. His tasks will be, amongst others, to orientate the teachers, liaise with the school librarian who can help with jobs like inventory checking and supervising out-of-class borrowing of books, establish procedures for

operation at classroom level and school level, hold regular meetings with the teachers to obtain feedback and improve the program, as well as create a positive climate for extensive reading through disseminating the values of extensive reading to colleagues, students and parents in publications like school magazines and meetings like Speech Day and Parent's Day.

(2) The teacher should assume new roles in the classroom

An extensive reading lesson demands both the teacher and the students to change their classroom behavior. Unlike the usual classroom practice of the teacher firmly in control of all activities and the teacher's voice being the focus of attention, students will interact with the text without mediation through the teacher, work individually and at their own pace. In order to help students become responsible for and independent in their learning, the teacher should take on three new roles—the Monitor/Facilitator, the Motivator/Enthusiast and the Administrator.

The Teacher as Monitor/Facilitator:

Most of the teacher's time should be taken up with helping students develop independent reading and learning. He should monitor their progress through checking their reading records and more importantly, discussion with individuals about books they have read in teacher-student conferences. The conferences provide a wonderful opportunity for the teacher to get to know each student better. If 2-3 periods per week are allocated to extensive reading and if the teacher holds conferences with about 5 students every period, then it is possible for him to have a 5-minute discussion with every student of the class every month.

The teacher also needs to help students develop successful reading strategies. There are always some students in a class who have not acquired the techniques of successful reading and are plodding through texts word by word. The teacher's task is to help them process linguistic information more efficiently and build up confidence, which is "the key to fluent reading" (Hedge 1985: 33). (Ways to help students develop reading skills and strategies can be found in, for example, Grellet (1981), Nuttall (1982), Williams (1984) Hosenfeld (1984) and Bouman (1987).)

The Teacher as Motivator/Enthusiast:

"Readers are made by readers" (Nuttall 1982: 192). A teacher who does not read and never refers to or recommends books he has read cannot convince his students that it is important to read. If the teacher makes use of the extensive reading lessons to do marking instead of helping students with their reading, the students will not take the lessons seriously. On the other hand, if the teacher is enthusiastically involved in discussing the books with students, this will generate a good response from them. Moreover, students who have difficulty with reading need special attention and help from a teacher who is positive and encouraging, who comments on

what they have got right and helps them build on it rather than simply pointing out what they have got wrong.

The teacher also needs to be patient, and must accept the fact that even students who read a lot will not become fluent overnight. As Nuttall (1982:168) points out, "it may take a year or two" before the teacher can notice "any marked improvement in the productive skills; but then it often comes as a breakthrough that results in long term gains but will not have an immediate effect on students' performance, in, say, discrete-point tests that focus exclusively on lately acquired grammatical items.

The Teacher as Administrator:

The teacher also needs to supervise classroom procedures like borrowing, lending and filling in records. This, however, does not mean that he should take on the role of the librarian and spend all the time recording the loan of books, checking out students who have not returned books and filling in reading charts and records. To do so is wasting precious time. The way to achieve efficient administration is to set up a system for doing these before the implementation of the program so that students can work independently without referring to the teacher all the time. Moreover, student librarians can be appointed to help the teacher with these.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that extensive reading programs can only benefit the teaching and learning of English if they are taken seriously by the school, the teachers, and the students. If an extensive reading program is integrated into the learning process and is regarded as a relaxing and yet regular and necessary part of students' activities, the books chosen are interesting and carefully graded, the students are reading at the right levels and the teachers are committed to it, the program will develop a reading habit in the students and bring about marked improvement in their English in the long run.

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