

Creating a Successful Extensive Reading Program

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Abstract

Extensive reading (ER) has been demonstrated to help students learning English as a foreign language (EFL) in many aspects of English. However, EFL teachers interested in using ER in their classrooms may not understand how to do this since it differs in many critical respects from other ways of teaching and learning English. In this article, I discuss how teachers can set up and conduct successful ER programs.

Introduction

Research has shown that extensive reading (ER) has the potential of helping students of English as a foreign language (EFL) learn to read (e.g., Belgar, Hunt, & Kite, 2012; Iwahori, 2008; Judge, 2011; Nishino, 2007; Ro, 2013; Robb & Kano, 2013) and make improvements in other aspects of their English skills. However, EFL teachers may not know how to establish and conduct an ER program. In particular, they may not understand how to work with students who have not experienced the autonomy accorded by ER or do not understand the language learning value of reading easy, interesting material in a target language. The goal of this article is to discuss what teachers need to do to set up and conduct a successful ER program.

An Overview of Extensive Reading

The basis of ER is the well-established principle that we learn to read by reading. This is true for learning to read our first language as well as learning to read foreign languages. In teaching foreign language reading, an ER approach encourages students to read, read, and read. In ER, students read large quantities of easy material in the foreign language. They read for information and enjoyment, with the primary goal of

achieving a general, overall meaning of the reading material. Students select their own reading material and are encouraged to stop reading if it is not interesting or too difficult; over time, they are also encouraged to expand their *reading comfort zone*—the range of materials that can be read easily and with confidence. To capture these aspects of ER, Day and Bamford suggest that the motto of ER be “reading gain without reading pain” (1998, p. 121).

There are several reasons why it is beneficial to encourage language learners to read extensively. Studies show that students not only improve their reading fluency but they also build new vocabulary knowledge and expand their understanding of words they knew before (e.g., Kweon & Kim, 2008; Yamashita, 2013). Additionally, ER can help students improve their writing, as well as improve their listening and speaking abilities (e.g., Nishizawa, Yoshioka, & Fukada, 2010; Yamashita, 2008). And perhaps the best result of an ER program is that students develop positive attitudes toward reading in a foreign language and increased motivation to study that language (e.g., Nishino, 2005; Takase, 2007; Yamashita, 2004).

Setting Up an Extensive Reading Program

Starting an ER program requires a great deal of planning. In my experience, it takes at least six months. If an ER program is to be successful, among the decisions that need to be made are these:

1. What should students read?

Any text in the target language that is easy enough for students to read with overall comprehension can be used as ER materials. Depending on the foreign language abilities of the students and the resources available, such materials may include materials written for first-language readers (e.g., adolescent literature), comic books, or online texts. Indeed, the Internet has become a valuable source of reading material.

Additionally, a useful source of *language learner literature*—reading material written for an audience of foreign language learners, is graded readers. Graded readers are simply books, fiction and nonfic-

tion, specifically written for language learners; the content is controlled to match the language ability of learners. All the major publishers of English teaching materials have graded readers in English. Unfortunately, for learners of languages other than English, graded readers are scarce at best, so teachers have to be flexible and creative in finding books appropriate for their students. If this language learner literature is not available, carefully chosen children's literature may be suitable for beginners. (See, for example, Hitosugi & Day, 2004, who used books written for children in a second-semester Japanese foreign language course.)

When graded materials are not available, a side-by-side translation in the students' first language can help make more-difficult texts accessible. Teachers might also consider using prescaffolded material, such as stories that the students are already familiar with, like fairy tales or even books or movies they are likely to have already experienced in their first language.

Thanks to the Internet, a wealth of material is easily available. In English, for example, there are "easy English" news sites, such as those available through the BBC, Voice of America, and the *New York Times*; there is also a "simple English" version of Wikipedia with close to 100,000 entries.

Regardless of the source, teachers need to make sure their students have a wide variety of interesting books and materials. In addition to selecting high-interest materials, teachers must try to have available a wide variety of different genres, because students' tastes in reading also vary greatly. For example, some students might want to read mystery or suspense stories while others might enjoy reading romance or science fiction. Others might be attracted to nonfiction, such as biographies.

The reading material in an ER library should be subdivided into difficulty levels so that learners of various ability levels can find material that they can easily understand.

2. How much reading should students do (either encouraged or required)? If that reading is required, should students be given credit?

Generally, when students are required to do something and are given credit for it, they are more likely to do it. (See Thomas Robb's article in this issue of the *TESL Reporter* for additional ideas.) Hitosugi and Day (2004) set a reading target of four books per week for ten weeks, and awarded credit toward the students' final grades depending on how many books they read. This worked well, but they learned that the target of four books a week was too high for their students. The average number of books the students read was 3.2 per week, or 32 books during the ten weeks. An ER target can be expressed in books, pages, chapters, or even time—two hours a week, for example. ER targets are flexible and can be adjusted to fit the reading abilities and schedules of the students.

Setting personal goals can often be a strong motivational factor. This is especially true for reading! Teachers should advise their students to consider their schedules and to set aside time to read (at lunch, before going to bed, etc.). Teachers can help their students set a reasonable target number of books to read per week or month, according to the time that the students' schedules allow; teachers should then encourage their students to meet those goals. Having students complete a weekly ER journal helps them stay on track and helps teachers monitor their reading. Two samples of simple ER logs are provided in the Appendix. These can be easily adjusted according to the needs of the students and the extent to which their teachers integrate ER activities into the class curriculum. Some teachers have found it useful to monitor ER according to the weeks of a school semester (Appendix, Form 1); others require students to provide a very brief summary of each log entry so they can monitor general comprehension as well (Appendix, Form 2).

3. Where should reading be done—in class, out of class, or both?

Since an ER approach involves students reading a significant amount students will have to do most of their reading outside of class. Some

teachers also have their students read in class. Using valuable class time to read shows students how important reading is.

4. How should students' reading be graded?

As described above, some teachers use reading targets. Another possibility for grading students' reading is an Internet program, Mreader. This program has comprehension questions on a large number of books (in English), and is freely available for use by schools. See mreader.org for details.

5. How should the program be introduced and advertised to the students?

Teachers have an important role to play in helping their students get the most out of ER. As Day and Bamford point out, teachers need to introduce their students to ER and provide essential guidance as they read extensively (2002, p. 139). Students are unlikely to have any prior experience with reading easy and interesting foreign language material that they select themselves. It is very important to the success of an ER program for teachers to introduce their students to ER and then offer guidance during the program.

In introducing ER, teachers might begin by telling their students what happens when they read and read and read. Teachers could point out that research shows that ER

- helps students read faster and understand more;
- helps them to read in meaningful phrases, rather than word by word;
- increases their confidence in their reading abilities;
- increases their vocabulary knowledge;
- consolidates their grammatical knowledge; and
- helps improve their writing proficiency and oral fluency.

Another point teachers must stress while introducing ER to their students is that the material has to be easy. Unfortunately, many students (and

perhaps some teachers) are conditioned to believe that they must read books that are difficult, that the only way to learn to read in a foreign language is by reading material that is beyond their capabilities. Day and Bamford label this the “macho maxim of second language reading instruction: no reading pain, no reading gain” (1998, p. 92). This is the wrong approach. Reading several easy books, allows learners to become more fluent, effective readers. In addition, students are able to learn new words and phrases over time, while enjoying what they are reading. To help free students from the macho maxim, teachers should ask their students to reflect on their experiences of learning to read in their first language—what types of materials did they read at first?

Students should be encouraged to read material that they like. Because students need to read many books, it is important that they are interested in and enjoy what they are reading. If the learners are excited about their books, they won't want to put them down. Additionally, they will be more likely to attend to the content (meaning) of the text, rather than merely focusing on grammatical aspects. If their students do not find their books interesting or exciting, teachers should advise them to stop and find other books they may enjoy.

Teachers may want to consider having their students read the books they really enjoy a second time. This is useful for several reasons. Having already read a book once, students will be able to read it more fluently the second time. This helps build vocabulary knowledge as well as confidence, and this, in turn, leads to increases in reading rate.

Also, students should be told that it is not necessary to read for 100% comprehension. Teachers should instruct their students to read for general, overall understanding. This means that they should be able to follow the general storyline and grasp the main ideas of the text. In ER the aim is to read a great many books, so it is in the learners' best interest not to struggle over every detail or to worry about the exact meaning of every word or phrase.

To reinforce this idea, teachers could ask their students to think about reading in their first language (or, if they do not read much in their first languages, ask the students to think about watching television or movies).

Most likely, they do not worry about every detail in their first language, so they should do the same for ER in the foreign language.

Another way to encourage reading for general understanding is to remind students that they are reading for pleasure and for benefits such as increased fluency and vocabulary knowledge. Teachers might want to stress to their students that there is no penalty for not understanding every detail, as they will not be tested.

It is also important for teachers to tell their students to ignore unknown or difficult words, to skip those words and continue reading. Although ER material should be easy for students, they will inevitably encounter unknown or difficult words or phrases. Students do not need to understand every word. Often, they can ignore words they do not know and still maintain a general understanding of the passage. Sometimes they can guess the meaning of words depending on the context.

The teacher can be of particular importance here in helping learners get used to living with some ambiguity when they read. One way teachers can do this is to have students skim a page or two of their books, circling any words they do not understand. Next, the students should read those same pages, being encouraged to focus on the general meaning and ignore any circled words. After they have finished, the teacher should find out how successful the students were by asking general questions about their texts (e.g., Who are the characters? Where are they? What are they doing?). Most likely the students can grasp the overall meaning, despite encountering a few unfamiliar words. If a student is unsuccessful in understanding the overall meaning of the text, then it is likely the book is too difficult. If the book has more than three to four unknown words on a page, then it is probably too difficult for beginning- and even intermediate-level readers.

In guiding their students, teachers need to check what they read to make sure that they are reading at the right level. That is, as students read more and more, their reading fluency will increase, so they will be able to read books that were initially too difficult. Sometimes students continue to read at the same level, and fail to move to a higher level. Teachers can easily determine this by looking at their students' ER journals (if they are required). If a student has read a number of books at the same level for

three weeks or more, then he or she should be encouraged to move to the next level.

In addition to monitoring their students' reading levels, teachers can monitor their students' overall comprehension of their reading by incorporating ER activities in the classroom. One idea, suggested by Iwano (2003), is that teachers briefly interview their students individually about their reading while the rest of the class is reading independently. For other useful activities for monitoring students' ER, see Bamford and Day (2003).

Additionally, it is a good idea for the teacher to be familiar with the range of ER materials available to their students. Being familiar with ER materials and having an awareness of each student's reading level and interests will allow teachers to better help students as they expand their reading comfort zones; teachers will also be able to offer useful recommendations when students choose new books.

I should add a note of caution, however. Students can easily be confused about the balance between reading easy, enjoyable books and challenging themselves with books at a slightly higher level to expand their reading comfort zones. Because everyone has a desire to improve as quickly as possible, some learners might want to try to challenge themselves too much, too soon. Thus, it is important for teachers to pay attention to what their students are reading and to make sure that they are not struggling with texts that are too difficult. It makes more sense to help build learners' confidence and fluency with easier books, bearing in mind that books that were at one time too difficult become easier to read later.

The goal of teachers is to spark their students' interest in reading and find encouraging ways to make sure they keep on reading. If some students begin to lose enthusiasm, it might help if their teacher reads aloud to them from a book that is easy but captivating. A teacher's enthusiasm when he or she reads aloud can help the students to get back into a frame of mind where they want to pick up a book at every opportunity.

Conclusion

Teachers, above all else, must help their students do well in their courses and pass the required examinations. However, at the same time,

teachers can increase their students' competency in English and help them become fluent readers in English by engaging them in ER. It is important to realize that the increases in fluency, confidence, and motivation that so often result from reading extensively will help students in their academic endeavors, such as improving language exam performances.

I close with a tip for teachers: Be a role model as a reader. Day and Bamford claim that “effective extensive reading teachers are themselves readers, teaching *by example* the attitudes and behaviors of a reader” (2002, p. 140). Teachers who are first-language readers of English should consider reading extensively in their students' first language. If English is a foreign language, then teachers should read with their students. As Nuttall observed, “Reading is caught, not taught” (1996, p. 229).

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APPENDIX: EXTENSIVE READING LOGS

Form 1: Weekly Extensive Reading Log: Books (or pages) per Week			
Name: _____			
Week: _____		Target: _____ books / pages (circle one)	
Date	Name of Book	Number of pages read	Comments

TOTAL READING TIME THIS WEEK _____

Form 2: Weekly Extensive Reading Log: Hours per Week		
Name: _____		
Week: _____	Target: _____ hours per week	
Date	Name of Book	Time Spent

TOTAL READING TIME THIS WEEK _____