

# Integrating Extensive Reading with the Curriculum

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## **Abstract**

In the past Extensive Reading (ER) has been widely documented, with language journals reporting on the many claims and counter-claims of research. This paper will seek to review recent literature and clarify what is involved with Extensive Reading. It will provide reasons for its importance in a language programme, inform readers where reading materials can be located, and provide some hints and suggestions for the classroom. This paper will also aver that it is a critical misconception to view ER as a discrete component of language learning. In order for ER programmes to reach their potentials they must be fully integrated with other language learning skills and activities.

## **Introduction**

In the past decade Extensive Reading (ER) has been widely researched and documented in language journals and textbooks. One needs only to read a small selection of recent ER literature to find optimistic accounts of sweeping improvements across language skills. Every teacher has read of the many claims, counter-claims, and the inevitable 'top-ten' lists of approaches to ER. The purpose of this paper is to outline and review many of the important elements of extensive reading for teachers who are interested in trialing an ER programme for themselves, or as a refresher to those who are experiencing

difficulties realizing the benefits of ER for their students. This paper will seek to clarify what is meant by Graded Reading. It will provide reasons for its importance in a language programme, inform readers where reading materials can be located, and provide some hints and suggestions for the classroom.

This paper will also argue that in order for ER programmes to reach their potentials they must be fully integrated with other language learning activities and continually assessed. This paper will conclude by revisiting and outlining integrative steps that teachers can take to ensure the long-term success of both learners and ER programmes.

### **Revisiting Extensive Reading**

In Intensive Reading (IR), learners give a lot of attention to the vocabulary, grammar, and discourse of the text, under the supervision of the teacher (Nation, 2001). While the goals of this approach are similar to ER, in IR there is an emphasis on teacher-centred explicit learning. In IR the teacher decides the materials to be read, and what skills or strategies to teach. In contrast, with ER class roles shift as students have more control in the materials to be read, and teachers merely monitor the learning process.

ER is intended to develop good reading habits, to build knowledge of spelling, vocabulary (sight vocabulary), grammar, discourse structure, and to encourage more positive attitudes toward reading (Renandya & Jacobs, 2002).

By no means though is ER more important than IR. Rather, the two types of reading approaches are meant to compliment each other. The key to a successful reading programme is balance (Waring, 1997). Learners need IR to learn new vocabulary, to look at text organization and conventions, to help them learn and develop new reading skills, and so on. However, one of the problems with traditional IR approaches is that learners ultimately do not actually read that much (Bamford & Day, 1997). For students and teachers, ER is an ideal means to rectify this problem of balance.

While an IR course teaches learners some good skills involved in reading, an ER course can instil in them the joy of reading. By encouraging our students to read extensively we can then improve their second language literacy and proficiency.

A key feature of ER is that learners have choice in what they read and read at their own controlled rate. By allowing learners to set their own reading goals, such as selecting their own reading material (as forms of learning goals), extensive reading can enhance the quality of their learning experience, increase their self-confidence, and develop learner autonomy and self-motivating learner strategies (Dornyei, 2001).

## **Vocabulary**

Research has shown that ER is a very good approach to implicitly learn second language (L2) form and vocabulary. While reading for enjoyment, learners are exposed to words and language patterns that are made available for acquisition (Renandya & Jacobs, 2002). The focus on meaning through top-down processing strategies and the vast exposure to comprehensible input ultimately facilitates the unconscious acquisition of vocabulary (Nation, 1997).

Vocabulary learning is a gradual process of one meeting with a word adding to, or strengthening, the small amounts of knowledge gained from previous meetings. As such, this language knowledge is very fragile and will soon be lost if not encountered repetitively after learning. If the small amount of learning of a word is not soon reinforced by another meeting, then that learning will be lost. An average word must be met 15 to 20 times before it is 'known' (Waring, 2000). This amount of repetition may not be easily found in today's Graded Readers. It may be that a reader will have to read several books to encounter the same word more than once.

There is no reason to doubt the finding that learners incidentally gain small amounts of vocabulary knowledge from each meaning focused reading of an

appropriate text. But one must remember that essentially vocabulary learning from ER is very fragile. The implications of this finding are very important for managing ER. The figures on repetition indicate that teachers need to be serious about extensive reading programmes, particularly in ensuring that learners have appropriate opportunities to keep meeting words that they have met before. This can be done in three ways: (1) by doing large amounts of ER at suitable vocabulary levels, (2) by complementing the ER programme with the direct study of vocabulary, and (3) by integrating ER with other language skill practice (this will be discussed in more detail later).

Research shows that even small amounts of incidental vocabulary learning from (extensive) reading can become big if learners read large quantities of comprehensible text (Nation, 2001). However, the vocabulary learned through ER does not necessarily need to be incidental. Ideally, learners should be coming across most of the vocabulary they see in their IR classes in their out-of-class ER as well. Moreover, ER provides opportunities for noticing new language and coming to an understanding of the patterns in text and phrases (Waring, 2000). Also, these opportunities allow learners to make vocabulary gains.

Another advantage of ER, and a notion of reading for meaning and fluency, is improved knowledge of and practice with high frequency language “chunks”, or multiword units of language (McCarthy, 2004).

### **Options Available for Extensive Reading**

There are several options available for ER. Perhaps the most well known and developed material for ER is from Graded Readers (sometimes referred to as simplified readers, basal readers or simply readers). Graded Readers are books written specifically for language learners to help develop their language skills. In ER programmes each student chooses and reads different books that are well within their current reading ability. It is thought that reading books that are too difficult may cause learners to lose their reading confidence and motivation

(Waring & Takahashi, 2000).

To be effective as a means of building vocabulary and form, ER needs 95-98 percent coverage (known words) and 99-100 percent coverage to develop reading fluency. IR is classified as reading at below 95 percent coverage (Nation, 2001). One important consideration in determining a text's difficulty is the level of interest that students have in the material. Graded Readers are useful because they are written using vocabulary and grammar limited to specific graded levels (Waring, 2000). They are made easier to read by simplifying the vocabulary and grammar so that the learner can more easily understand the story. Graded Readers are leveled primarily by word frequency. For example, a graded reader at the 400 word level means that it contains only the 400 most frequent words (Nation, 2001). Most of the major publishers of English as a Second Language (ESL) material produce Graded Readers. Some of the most popular are published by Penguin, Oxford University Press, and Cambridge University Press.

Other possible options for ER include popular or simple Literature (for intermediate to advanced level learners), young adult Literature (relatively short and straightforward plots), comics (useful for their descriptive illustrations aiding in meaning-transparency), and translations of well-known L1 books into English (learners have the added benefit of knowing the story of Momotaro, or Peach Boy in the English translation, for example).

Other options include children's books. The major appeal of children's books is their relatively easy language, attractive layout, big print, and appealing illustrations (Day & Bamford, 1998). Children's books can be most useful for lower level learners.

Another source for ER material is newspapers. The attraction of newspapers, Day and Bamford (1998) point out, is they are cheap and widely available. Stories in newspapers tend to be short and learners can finish them in relatively little time. In Japan, upper intermediate to advanced learners can read the English versions of the Asahi, Mainichi, and Yomiuri or the English daily, The

Japan Times. These major newspaper companies also produce bilingual newspapers for ESL learners (the Shukan-ST printed by The Japan Times, for example). These bilingual versions can appeal to learners at lower levels as well.

For many of the same reasons mentioned for newspapers, magazines are a good ER source as well. Like newspapers, stories in magazines tend to be relatively short, if not a little longer than newspaper stories. And with the same appeal as children's books, children's magazines can be used for ER and are targeted at a variety of age groups, sometimes even including adults.

One of the most important aspects of an ER programme is providing as many reading options for students as possible. In choosing their own reading materials, students have the advantage of using their existing schema, or background knowledge of the topic or theme. Another benefit to yielding control over the topic is in improving student motivation. Giving students a choice in the topic that they will read about is a way of tapping into learners' intrinsic motivation. As learners become stimulated by the input, and are given autonomy in the form of language output, the resulting sense of 'ownership' may promote language acquisition (Hidi & Harackiewicz, 2000).

### **Organization of the Programme**

To be effective, ER programmes need to include large quantities of reading at the appropriate level (Nation, 2001). The effects of ER are both cognitive and affective (Nation, 2001). Simply put, learners make language gains by ER and they like it. But how can an ER programme be managed? This section sets out to answer that question.

First of all, how much should learners read? This, of course, depends on how much time learners have for reading in class or as homework. Beginners cannot read for as long as advanced learners (Day & Bamford, 1998). Day and Bamford have suggested at least 20 minutes for beginners, whereas advanced learners may be able to read for over an hour in one sitting. Reading targets do not have

to be based only on time. Targets can also be based on number of pages or books read over a specific time (a week, a month, a term, or a school year, for example) or they can be a combination of both time and number of pages/books. Students need to read what they can handle in terms of time, reading load and level. If the time and load is overwhelming or the level of the material is too difficult, the reading will become too intensive and ER will lose some of its purpose and benefits. A good rule may be to ask learners to read a book a week and at least 20 minutes a day. Waring (2000) recommends 90-120 minutes a week, or about 15 minutes or more a day.

Another essential question is at what level learners should read in an ER programme? Waring (2000) suggests that when students are reading they should not meet more than 2-3 unknown words per every 100 words, this is, they should be able to read 8-10 lines per minute (80-100 words per minute or better), and understand almost all of what they are reading with few pauses. One way the teacher (or learner) can check this is to have the learner choose some reading material (a Graded Reader, for example), and time the learner (or have them time themselves) over one minute. The learner can then go back to where they started and count how many words she read in that one minute. If the learner is reading too slowly for ER purposes, as Waring warns us, she will not be able to read smoothly enough to develop fluent eye movements, improve her level/reading speed, build the automatic recognition of words, and thus lose confidence and motivation to read.

## **Assessment**

A problem with ER is its lack of uniform student assessment. Student evaluation is made very difficult by the fact that students are all reading different materials. One way is to evaluate learners for the amount of reading they have done.

The outcome of many ER programmes is usually a book report. Learners can

easily record their reading activities by themselves (see an example in Appendix 1 - Reading Review). In such a reading review learners include their name, the name of the book, author, number of pages, date published, type of book, difficulty (their impression), the reading rate (sampling the number of words read per minute; conducted once or twice per book), what the book is about, the best part, if they would recommend this book to a friend and why/why not, and so on. Questions should not send learners back to the text to search for their answers (Day & Bamford, 1998).

Either in place of written book reports (or ideally in addition to written book reports), learners could do oral book reports (see Appendix 2 for a sample). This would give the learner a chance to reuse the language in the book and practice her speaking and listening skills. Such an oral book report would consist of simply “talking about the book”, including much of what they would write for the written book reports. These oral book reports could be done entirely orally or learners could take notes of their classmates’ comments in written form. At the same time, teachers should not burden learners too much by these reports as you want learners to be engaged in as much extensive reading as possible. Again, balance is the key.

While in many cases these reports are used for policing the programme they could in fact be used as the basis for interaction. Follow-up tasks involving interaction and discussion can help teachers better assess if reading has been done and understood.

### **Re-examining the Motivation to Read**

Central to the perceived success of ER in building language proficiency is the autonomous nature of the programmes. As mentioned previously, it is thought that as students gain control in the learning process they would in turn take on more responsibility for their own learning. It is this emphasis on the individual however that ultimately leads some ER programmes to fail to meet initial high

expectations. In order for ER programmes to reach their potentials they must be fully integrated and continually assessed.

It has long been argued that as students read self-selected materials they will develop a positive attitude towards reading, and want to read more. Krashen (1989) refers to the important role played by free, individual reading in facilitating second language acquisition and increasing motivation. These observations may well be true but overlook the reality of initial reading motivation. The fact that many students do not read for pleasure in their L1 translates to the fact that the initial impetus for reading in the L2 is necessarily external in nature. With a detailed explanation of the commitments involved and the benefits of ER it is easy to imagine that there would be some students who would take it upon themselves to read extensively. However, many more students might need initial external pressure (in the form of class and assignment requirements) to begin reading in their second language.

It is also important to also consider how many students, if any, continue to read extensively in English after a course of study has finished. Once reading starts to compete with other draws on students time and attention (many of which are realistically more intrinsically motivating to students), initial gains may be soon lost.

Assurances of the benefits of ER activities in fostering second language acquisition over the long term may not satisfy many learners' in the short term. ER therefore needs a purpose and goal that learners can perceive clearly to be of greatest effect. To be successful ER needs to integrate as seamlessly as possible with other components of the language curriculum.

### **Further Arguments for the Integrating of Extensive Reading**

The research indicates that ER can give students substantial gains. Not only are reading skills improved through the building of sight vocabulary and fluency, but also oral and aural, productive and receptive, skills through exposure to vast

amounts of accessible self-selected, meaningful, and enjoyable, input. As mentioned previously however, the gains brought on by ER are tenuous if not extended over long periods of study.

It is also interesting to note how similar current ER research compares to earlier SLA input trends. In many respects the arch of ER research seems to be mirroring Krashen's (1985) notions of extensive comprehensible input ( $i + 1$ ) leading to language proficiency after prolonged 'silent periods'. Despite early interest in these ideas it was soon discovered by researchers like Long (1985) and Swain (1985) that receiving comprehensible input alone is not sufficient, or at least not as efficient as involving interaction and output. Just as Long and Swain found that students improve faster when needing to produce language interactively it is argued here that programmes likewise need to incorporate extensive reading with opportunities for student interaction.

ER, if done in an integrative and interactive mode, provides classroom situations in which learners can recycle vocabulary, negotiate meanings, and implicitly revisit form features found in the texts. ER programmes that emphasize individual and largely unguided activity fail to fully exploit these interactive opportunities. For these reasons, it is vital to introduce ER within a focused and interactive framework.

### **Integration of Extensive Reading with the Curriculum**

It is a fundamental misconception to see ER as a 'stand-alone' component of language learning. The following is an outline of different tasks that can be used to allow students to share in the challenges and pleasures of reading in a foreign language.

### **Writing**

Reading Diaries are a place for students to record their insights and reactions

to the story as it unfolds. In reacting to the story, students may recycle some of the vocabulary from the original text. In reusing vocabulary, lexical chunks, or complete sentences, students may begin to notice and acquire word order, punctuation, grammar, and even spelling (Krashen, 1989). Students can be asked to write about certain characters, plot developments, or even recall similar experiences.

During weekly classes students should exchange journals with a pair partner. Students could read their classmates writing, offer feedback, and together discuss the story. Each week's journal entries could be collected in order to allow teachers an opportunity to monitor student progress.

Besides graded readers, learners can also read each others' writings. If they are in a writing class, they can bring their compositions, for example, to reading class and take turns reading them - extensively. Even short compositions, that take the average learner only about 5 minutes to read, would amount to 100 minutes in a class of 20 students.

### **Free-writing**

During class time students should also engage in timed free-writing activities. Free-writing activities allow students to write down a lot of their feelings about the story without the fear of evaluation (Seow, 2002). It is hoped that students will increase their fluency in writing as they focus on expressing ideas rather than form. Again, students can be asked to write about characters, plot developments, or similar real life experiences.

Some other ideas for integrating ER with writing are included below.

- Create an online discussion forum where learners can freely discuss what they have read.
- Have the learners write a short poem (or even English *haiku*) about a character in a book they have read.

- Have the learners write new and original endings for books they have read.

## **Group Work**

In an integrative ER programme, pair and group work activities would enable students to interact with one another, and for the teacher to monitor progress. Once a week students should be given a chance to work together and engage in journal sharing, discussions, and various other activities. Some ideas for Group Work are listed below.

- Have learners listen to a recording of the text while reading at home. This activity can help learners with reading speed and pronunciation.
- Have learners listen to a recording of the text without reading. This activity can help learners with vocabulary recognition and pronunciation.
- Discuss books with a partner. This can help learners motivate each other.
- Have learners read sections of book aloud to each other. This can help learners practice their speech and listening skills.
- Read to your learners so that they can practice their listening skills.
- Talk to your learners about books you have read. This can create learner interest in and motivation for reading.
- Have learners rate the books they have read on a numerical scale and make a class poster so that everyone can see it. You can also create Top 10 lists of the most popular books.
- Conduct interviews with learners to talk about the reading they are doing. These interviews can be 'casual chats' so that learners can develop confidence in talking about their reading in an anxiety-free environment.
- Have the learners act out a book or a part of a book they have read. This can allow learners to practice several presentation skills and have fun doing so!
- Have learners make a book and movie comparison if they have read and seen both.

## Skill Building

This is just a small sampling of some of the follow-up activities learners could do in combination with Extensive Reading. By no means is this list complete. A more comprehensive overview of ER follow-up tasks can be found in Bamford and Day (2004).

- Carry out periodical one-minute readings so that students can check their reading rates and have learners chart their progress. Showing progress can be motivational.
- Give the students a cloze test of a reading passage. One method is to take out every 10th word (or 7th, or 8th, etc.) and have learners put the missing words back into the text from a word list.
- Practice speed reading. Have the learners read a section of a text for one minute. Then have them read the same section again over one minute and see if they read more the second time.

## Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to outline and justify a model introduction to Extensive Reading. In this article, it is argued that large amounts of self-selected, easy and interesting reading should be the underpinning of all foreign language reading instruction. At the same time, Extensive Reading is not necessarily the entire answer to the teaching of reading. Some students have particular goals, for example, academic reading proficiency for which special skills must also be developed; others will need extra encouragement to read, and assistance in choosing enjoyable books at a suitable linguistic level.

Creating an Integrative Extensive Reading (IER) environment involves more time, work and resources than teaching from a reading textbook. However, as indicated in this brief paper, the results are encouraging. By encouraging our students to read extensively teachers can help learners towards improved

second language literacy and proficiency.

**Appendix 1**

WRITTEN READING REPORT

Your name: \_\_\_\_\_

Title of book: \_\_\_\_\_

Author: \_\_\_\_\_

Number of pages: \_\_\_\_\_

Date published: \_\_\_\_\_

Type of book: (circle one)

Fiction/Non-fiction/Essay/Article/Other: \_\_\_\_\_

Difficulty: (circle one) very easy - fairly easy - just right - fairly difficult - very difficult

Level: \_\_\_\_\_

Your reading rate: \_\_\_\_\_

What is the book about? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

What is the best part? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Would you recommend this book to a friend? Why or why not? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix 2

### ORAL READING REPORT

Student's name: \_\_\_\_\_

What is the title of the book? \_\_\_\_\_

Who wrote it? \_\_\_\_\_

What kind of book is it? \_\_\_\_\_

How was the level of the book for you? \_\_\_\_\_

How long did it take you to read it? \_\_\_\_\_

What is the book about? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Where and when does the story take place? \_\_\_\_\_

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What is the best part? \_\_\_\_\_

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How did you feel while and/or after reading this book? \_\_\_\_\_

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What didn't you like about the book? \_\_\_\_\_

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If you could change the book (and/or story) in any way, how would you change it? \_\_\_\_\_

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What did you learn from reading this book? \_\_\_\_\_

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Would you recommend this book to a friend? Why or why not? \_\_\_\_\_

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Note to teachers: The lines on this sheet can be taken out to make the activity more communicative or they could be kept in so that teachers can use this activity as a something that could be handed into the teacher for progress assessment.

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