

Extensive Reading: What Is It? Why Bother?

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In everyday life, to read extensively means to read widely and in quantity. In the early part of this century, extensive reading took on a special meaning in the context of teaching modern languages. Pioneers such as Harold Palmer in Britain and Michael West in India worked out the theory and practice of extensive reading as an approach to foreign language teaching in general, and to the teaching of foreign language reading in particular.

Palmer chose the term extensive reading to distinguish it from intensive reading (1968, p. 137; 1964, p. 113). The dichotomy is still a useful one. Intensive reading often refers to the careful reading (or translation) of shorter, more difficult foreign language texts with the goal of complete and detailed understanding. Intensive reading is also associated with the teaching of reading in terms of its component skills. Texts are studied intensively in order to introduce and practice reading skills such as distinguishing the main idea of a text from the detail, finding pronoun referents, or guessing the meaning of unknown words.

Extensive reading, in contrast, is generally associated with reading large amounts with the aim of getting an overall understanding of the material. Readers are more concerned with the meaning of the text than the meaning of individual words or sentences. Palmer, incidentally, saw the pedagogic value of both types of reading. For a graphic depiction of the differences between intensive and extensive reading, see the chart in "Introducing Extensive Reading" by Roberta Welch (My Share this issue).

Extensive reading as an approach to teaching reading may be thought of in terms of purpose or outcome: Beatrice Mikulecky, for example, calls it pleasure reading (1990). It can also be viewed as a teaching procedure, as when Stephen Krashen (1993) terms it free voluntary reading, or when teachers give students time for in-class Sustained Silent Reading (SSR) -- a period of 20 minutes, for example, when students and teacher quietly and independently read self-selected material.

From West in 1926 (2nd edition, 1955, p. 14) to Beatrice Dupuy, Lucy Tse and Tom Cook in 1996 (p. 10), it has been widely observed that a consequence of traditional, intensive approaches to foreign language reading instruction is that students do not actually read very much. This is a problem. In general terms, reading is no different from other learned human abilities such as driving, cooking, playing golf, or riding a bicycle: the more you do it, the more fluent and skillful you become. Automaticity of "bottom-up" (word recognition) processes upon which comprehension depends is a consequence of practice. (For more on this, see Why do graded reading? in Rob Waring's "Graded and Extensive Reading -- Questions and Answers" in this

issue.) No matter how sophisticated the teaching profession's understanding of and ability to teach the reading process, until students read in quantity, they will not become fluent readers.

There is a further problem stemming from lack of reading that has attracted less direct comment to date, but it is perhaps a more fundamental flaw in traditional reading instruction. Teachers are (rightly) concerned with developing in their students the ability to read, but how much attention do teachers pay to developing a habit -- indeed, love -- of reading in their students? And yet not to do so risks reducing reading lessons to an empty ritual, akin to, as David Eskey once memorably put it (1995), the teaching of swimming strokes to people who hate the water. Only by discovering the rewards of reading through actually engaging in it will students become people who both *can* and *do* read.

As Eskey's metaphor implies, skills-based and other traditional foreign language reading instructional approaches appear to have their priorities the wrong way round. The primary consideration in all reading instruction should be for students to experience reading as pleasurable and useful. Only then will they be drawn to do the reading they must do to become fluent readers. And only then will they develop an eagerness to learn new skills to help them become better readers.

Extensive reading is a prime means of developing a taste for foreign language reading. All it requires is a library of suitable reading material. For specifics of how to create such a library, see David Hill's "Setting up an Extensive Reading Programme," and "Graded Readers: Choosing the Best" in this issue. As to the form that extensive reading takes, this will vary according to student needs and institutional constraints. Extensive reading could be:

- *The main focus of a reading course* with a combination of, for example, work with a class reader (i.e., students reading a class set of books), SSR, follow-up activities such as students' oral book reports, and homework reading;
- *an add-on to an ongoing reading course* with, for example, the first half-hour of class devoted to SSR, and students reading self-selected books for homework;
- *an extra-curricular activity* with a teacher guiding and encouraging interested students who read books in their spare time and meet regularly to discuss them.

Characteristics of Successful Extensive Reading Programs

Summarizing the results of 80 years of first language reading research, James Moffett notes that "the more schools approximate the authentic reading and writing circumstances in which literacy is practiced outside of school, the more they succeed" (1992, p. 42). And yet, as Carlos Yorio observes, if one compares "classroom activities with real-life situations in which people are reading for various purposes or reasons . . . in most cases the degree of 'unreality' of the ESL reading classroom is striking" (1985, p. 151). As Dupuy, Tse and Cook explain, "For the most

part, students have only been exposed to intensive reading of short excerpts or passages in their ESL classes and tend to believe that this is the only way to read in a second language" (1996, p. 10).

An extensive reading approach introduces students to the dynamics of reading as it is done in real life by including such key elements of real-life reading as choice and purpose. Richard Day and Julian Bamford, in their forthcoming book *Extensive Reading in the Second Language Classroom* identify ten characteristics found in successful extensive reading programs.

- (1) *Students read as much as possible*, perhaps in and definitely out of the classroom.
- (2) *A variety of materials on a wide range of topics is available* so as to encourage reading for different reasons and in different ways.
- (3) *Students select what they want to read* and have the freedom to stop reading material that fails to interest them.
- (4) *The purposes of reading are usually related to pleasure, information and general understanding*. These purposes are determined by the nature of the material and the interests of the student.
- (5) *Reading is its own reward*. There are few or no follow-up exercises to be completed after reading.
- (6) *Reading materials are well within the linguistic competence of the students* in terms of vocabulary and grammar. Dictionaries are rarely used while reading because the constant stopping to look up words makes fluent reading difficult.
- (7) *Reading is individual and silent*, at the student's own pace, and, outside class, done when and where the student chooses.
- (8) *Reading speed is usually faster rather than slower* as students read books and other material that they find easily understandable.
- (9) *Teachers orient students to the goals of the program, explain the methodology, keep track of what each student reads, and guide students in getting the most out of the program*.
- (10) *The teacher is a role model of a reader for students* -- an active member of the classroom reading community, demonstrating what it means to be a reader and the rewards of being a reader.

Reading Materials: Simplified vs. Authentic?

Many foreign language students, certainly those in Japan, can already read in their first language, and may even have the habit of regular reading. The main barrier to foreign language reading for such students is exactly that: the foreign language. The students are in a Catch-22 situation. They cannot understand enough of the foreign language to make sense of most written material, and yet they must read the foreign language in order to develop reading fluency. One suggestion that has been made (e.g., by Brian Tomlinson, 1994) is to postpone reading until students have at least an intermediate-level grasp of the foreign language. Such a policy ignores the role that reading can play in foreign language acquisition, particularly in the all-important learning of new words. Students can benefit by making reading a part of their foreign language study from the beginning (see Paul Nation's "The Language Learning Benefits of Extensive Reading" in this issue).

For less than advanced students, the language barrier usually reduces reading to slow, painful decoding with a dictionary -- which is, of course, not really reading at all. The obvious answer is for students to read foreign language materials designed to be appropriate to their level of language proficiency. This, however, has become heresy since the advent of communicative language teaching in the 1970s. One of the great contributions of CLT has been the "authenticizing" of language instruction. Just as the use of real language for real purposes replaced much of the stilted, step-by-step focus-on-form that characterized traditional language teaching, so was it suggested that students read authentic texts written by and for native speakers. As was demonstrated in papers such as "Simplification" by John Honeyfield (1977), artificial, simplified texts for language learners lack features of authentic texts, and so simplified texts were considered a less-than-useful preparation for students learning to read in the real world.

Extensive reading can be considered a communicative meaning-oriented, "real reading" approach to reading instruction in contrast to form-oriented, discrete skills, or translation approaches. Paradoxically, however, it is the very communicative insistence on authentic texts that makes extensive reading all but impossible for less than linguistically proficient students. The insistence that students read authentic (i.e., real-life) texts is, in fact, based on both a confusion of means and ends, and a misunderstanding of what "authentic" means.

Henry Widdowson, who has probably thought longer and harder about authenticity than anyone else, early questioned the call "for the learner's immediate exposure to genuine instances of language use" which he saw as partly based on confusing "the ends of language learning with the means by which they are achieved" (1979, p. 151).

The Real Meaning of Authentic

At the same time, equating "authentic" with "written by and for native speakers" is itself a logical fallacy. What makes texts written by and for native speakers authentic is that they are instances of communication between writer and intended audience. Thus, when a writer communicates with an intended audience of language learners at a particular level of proficiency, the resultant text is authentic. Janet Swaffar clears up this point in no uncertain terms:

For purposes of the foreign language classroom, an authentic text . . . is one whose primary intent is to communicate meaning. In other words, such a text can be one which is written for native speakers of a language to be read by other native speakers . . . or it may be a text intended for a language learner group. The relevant consideration here is not for whom it is written but that there has been an authentic communicative objective in mind. (1985, p. 17)

The artificiality noted in texts that have been simplified or especially written for language learners appears when writers or editors are concerned less with communication than with, for example, using particular words, or with a need to reduce a complicated story to a few pages of text. Bad simple texts are still written, but there are now hundreds of excellent, fully-realized books adapted or written for language learners at all levels of proficiency. The quality and variety of such writing in English and other languages is such that it deserves to be called language learner literature, just as there is children's literature and young adult literature.

If language learner literature is available in the language you teach, it is the most appropriate material for extensive reading by beginning and intermediate learners. It is important to differentiate extensive reading from other pedagogic aims, for example, teaching students to cope with text that is above their linguistic level. In order for extensive reading to do its work -- build automaticity of word recognition, build vocabulary knowledge and develop positive attitudes toward reading -- the reading material must be *well within* the students' linguistic ability.

Conclusion

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 will need special help with certain reading subskills; others will need extra encouragement to read, and assistance in choosing enjoyable books at a suitable linguistic level. Some students have particular goals, for example, academic reading proficiency for which skills such as notetaking and skimming must also be practiced.

Creating an extensive reading environment involves more time, work and resources than teaching from a reading textbook. However, as Marc Helgesen, Paul Nation, Beniko Mason and Tom Pendergast, and Rob Waring report in this special issue of *The Language Teacher*, the results are most definitely worth it.

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