

Extensive Reading for Weak Readers

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INTRODUCTION

Research indicates the importance of reading in vocabulary and overall language development both in the L1 and in the L2 (Chall, 1987; Nation & Coady, 1988; Elley, 1991; Nation, 2001). Reading is the easiest and most practical way to expose learners to comprehensible input in the L2 due to the ready availability of printed materials. Yet foreign language learners may not take advantage of these important learning resources, especially if they are uncomfortable with reading in their L1. Learners who seldom read in their own language can be expected to find reading considerably more onerous in the L2. This is because they need to decode the individual words before they can consider the meaning in the text. This paper examines the nature of Extensive Reading programs to see if and how they motivate students to read more in the L2.

READING HABITS IN THE L1

In order to determine how much students actually read in the L1, the author surveyed the 1st-year students in the English Department in their first month of study. A total of 48 valid responses out of 64 were returned. The students had been divided into two groups according to their scores on the IP TOEIC BRIDGE test, a lower-level one-hour version of the IP TOEIC test. The maximum score of 180 attainable on this test is unrelated to the scores of the IP TOEIC test, so valid comparisons are impossible. What is clear is that Group A had a much lower average score than did Group B. The 17 students in Group A had an average TOEIC BRIDGE score of 95.4 while the 31 students in Group B had an average of 121.6. The average Group A score is not much higher than 80, the statistical average for someone who is guessing all the answers (private communication with the TOEIC office). The average Group B score is 26 points higher, indicating that this group has somewhat higher proficiency than the Group A students.

The results of the survey appear in Figure 1 (“ps” stands for “pages,” “dy” stands for “day,” and “wk” stands for “week”). Although we can infer that there is a positive correlation between the amount of reading in the L1 and proficiency in the L2, in this paper we are more concerned with the overall results. These indicate that only one-quarter of the incoming students read substantial amounts of text in their L1. If this is so, then it is likely that most students are slow readers in the L1 and as a result do not enjoy

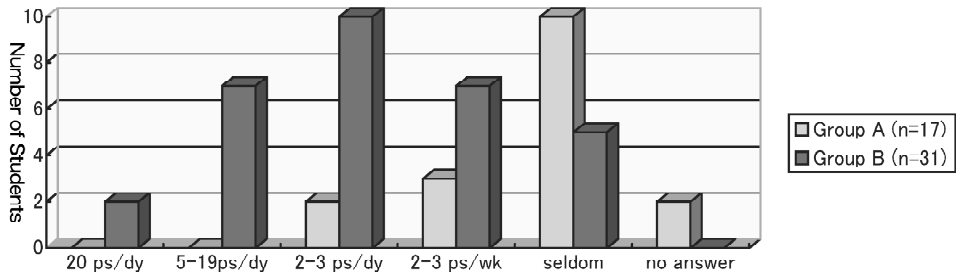


Figure 1: Reading Habits in the L1

reading.

These students can be characterized as weak readers based on their L1 reading habits and their L2 language proficiency. It is probable that, in the L2 at least, they are caught in what Nuttall describes as the “vicious circle of the weak reader.”

It doesn't matter where you enter the circle, because any of the factors will produce any of the others. Slow readers seldom develop much interest in what they read, let alone pleasure. Since they do not enjoy it, they read as little as possible. Deprived of practice, they continue to find it hard to understand what they read, so their reading rate does not increase. They remain slow readers. (Nuttall, 1996, p. 127)

Although they have taken English classes for at least six years, many of these students still lack basic language skills. What Waring says of beginning readers applies to them as well:

A learner beginning to read in a second language starts by looking at each letter of each word to decode the word, and keeps each word in working memory while the next word is processed. By the time she gets to the end of the line, the first word can easily be forgotten and very little meaning of the text is retained. (Waring, 1997, p. 9–10)

One of several goals of a reading class for our students should then be to get such learners beyond the laborious decoding of words to the point of processing language in chunks for meaning. This fits into Nuttall's “virtuous circle of the good reader” in which learners read more, and as a result they understand better. With a better understanding of the material, they enjoy reading. This leads them to read faster, and because they read faster, they can read more (Nuttall, 1996, p. 127).

READING PEDAGOGY IN THE L2

In foreign language teaching, reading is usually divided into two types: Intensive Reading and Extensive Reading. Intensive Reading has traditionally been the more common choice for teaching reading in a classroom situation. In Intensive Reading, short texts are used “...to learn new vocabulary, to look at text organization, to help (learners) discover and develop reading skills, and so on” (Waring, 1997,

p. 12). Nation points out that "...the procedures involved (in Intensive Reading) direct a lot of attention to the vocabulary, grammar and discourse of the text. This deliberate attention to language features means that intensive reading fits within the strand of language-focused learning" (Nation, 2001, p. 149).

As can be seen by its description, Intensive Reading is "deliberate," or, to put it another way, "slow." It is focused on the language at least as much as on the meaning of the text. It is a necessary part of language learning, but it is unlikely that this kind of teaching will be of any help in getting weak readers to break out of the vicious circle mentioned above. In fact, "...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" (Bamford & Day, 1997, p. 6).

Extensive Reading, on the other hand, "...is generally associated with reading large amounts of text with the aim of getting an overall understanding of the material" (Bamford & Day, 1997, p. 6). Bell, in an article describing an Extensive Reading program for elementary level learners in Yemen, makes the following 10 points about the role of Extensive Reading in language learning:

1. "It can provide 'comprehensible input'", a requirement for language acquisition according to Krashen (1985). This can be provided with reading materials such as graded readers that use a pre-selected limited vocabulary for each level.
2. It provides "...practice in automaticity of word recognition and decoding the symbols on the printed page." The use of leveled materials ensures that learners encounter the same vocabulary items a number of times within one text, allowing them to increase the speed of word recognition and, consequently, their reading speed.
3. "It increases the students' exposure to the language," an important condition for language acquisition in the L2-poor environment of a non English-speaking country.
4. "It can increase knowledge of vocabulary," giving the learner a more exact understanding of words by repeated exposure to them.
5. "It can lead to improvement in writing" according to research done in the UK, Pakistan and Japan (Hafiz & Tudor, 1989)(Robb & Susser, 1989).
6. "It can motivate learners to read" by providing easily-read materials that accord with the learners' interest. Many teachers who have used Extensive Reading recommend it precisely because of its motivational qualities (Waring, 2002).
7. "It can consolidate previously learned language" by reinforcing and recycling language.
8. "It helps to build confidence with extended texts", especially for students who have up until now only struggled through short, dense Intensive Reading texts.
9. "It encourages the exploitation of textual redundancy" so that learners learn not to spend too much time on decoding the less important textual features.
10. "It facilitates the development of prediction skills" (Bell, 1998).

Extensive Reading appears to be a more effective way than Intensive Reading of turning a weak reader into a good reader. Its emphasis on "motivation," "comprehensible input," and "building confidence" are essential for the weak reader who lacks the will to read and finds reading difficult. Extensive Reading can help the weak reader to improve reading speed and deepen understanding of what is read.

AN EXTENSIVE READING PROGRAM

There are several examples of successful Extensive Reading programs described in the literature (Elley and Mangubhai, 1981; Mason and Pendergast, 1997; Helgesen, 1997a). Success means first and foremost that an Extensive Reading program has able to motivate students to read on their own. It is not enough to provide the learners with books and tell them to read because most of Extensive Reading has to take place outside the classroom, well beyond the gaze of the teacher.

Teachers with experience in Extensive Reading programs agree on the need to first educate learners about the benefits of Extensive Reading. Many learners do not realize that these two kinds of reading exist in language learning or that both can lead to gains in foreign language acquisition. Welch, a teacher who used Extensive Reading in an elective reading class at Toyo Women's College, points out that many students consider "reading" to be Intensive Reading and are completely unfamiliar with the ideas behind Extensive Reading. She recommends drawing the following chart on the blackboard to show students the differences between the two approaches:

Extensive	READING	Intensive
General understanding and enjoyment	PURPOSE	Language study
Easy (graded readers)	LEVEL	Often difficult (material for native speakers)
A lot	AMOUNT	Not much
Fast and fluently	SPEED	Slow

(Welch, 1997, p. 51)

By emphasizing that the purpose of Extensive Reading is to improve the learners' proficiency in the L2 through enjoyment and general understanding, the teacher is making reading sound attractive. A further motivating force is the element of choice: students can read what they want to read (and that if they don't like the book, they can stop and choose another). It is also crucial for students to understand that they will be reading "easy" materials. Intensive Reading methods may have convinced them that unless it is difficult, reading won't contribute to their learning.

One of the biggest surprises for learners (and the most difficult to accept) will be the amount of reading required for the class. Welch (1997, p. 51) gives students a goal of 75 pages per week. Helgesen (1997a, p. 31) requires a minimum of 500 pages per semester. Mason and Pendergast(1997, p. 27) set as a goal 1000 pages per semester. As Helgesen says, "The high minimum count ensures that they won't be translating every word—they simply don't have time" (Helgesen, 1997a, p. 31). This ties in with Welch's notion of "fast and fluently," a big difference between Intensive Reading and Extensive Reading. Nation gives another reason for large amounts of reading. "Essentially, vocabulary learning is very fragile. If the small amount of learning of a word is not soon reinforced by another meeting, then that learning will be lost" (Nation, 2001, p. 55).

IMPLEMENTATION

Hill, who set up an Extensive Reading project in a secondary school in Malaysia and was involved

in the EPER (The Edinburgh Project on Extensive Reading), recommends carefully planning at the beginning stages of implementation. Initial decisions will need to be made on how to work in conjunction with other teachers, how to organize the library, and how to guarantee that the learners are comprehending and appreciating what they read (Hill, 1997a, p. 17). It is important to ensure that everyone involved understands the purpose and the challenges of Extensive Reading so that the program does not crumble under its own weight.

Creating a library is relatively easy if the necessary funding exists. EFL reading materials are plentiful, with at least one series of graded readers available from each major publisher. Hill gives an overall analysis of each series, including information on number of headwords, type of content, target readership, special features, quality evaluations and favorite titles; he also includes a comparison of levels between series (Hill, 1997b, p. 23, 26). Nuttall maintains that the library should have at least twice as many books and recommends four times as many as the number of students for the sake of adequate circulation of reading materials (Nuttall, 1996, p. 130). A greater difficulty lies in the actual operation of the lending library. The decision will have to be made on whether the “lending library” can or should be operated by the individual Extensive Reading teachers, the department, or through the existing library.

There must be a mechanism to determine appropriate reading levels at the beginning of the program. According to Waring,

In Extensive Reading, the material is self selected. One way for learners to determine their levels is to read a page or so from various books, and then use their own judgment. I ask my learners to assess their own levels, and then go down one level. This makes the reading more manageable for them. My guideline for difficulty is to check whether they can read a page in two minutes, understanding all but two to three words (not including proper nouns). (Waring, 1997, p. 11)

He points out that, “It certainly matters from an Extensive Reading perspective if the reader is too difficult. The reading becomes a decoding (intensive) task rather than an Extensive Reading task” (Waring, 1997, p. 11).

Because reading materials are divided into levels, and the first levels are the easiest, there may be a tendency for students to read only the easy books. Helgesen, who ran an Extensive Reading program at Miyagi Gakuen Women’s Junior College, suggests “weighting” the pages so that the higher level books have more value than the lower-level ones, a strategy that will satisfy the more proficient readers without unduly penalizing the beginning readers. He used the following scale:

Graded Reader Level	Value (x number of pages)
1	0.5
2	0.75
3	1.0
4, 5, 6	1.25

In other words, a student who reads 100 pages at Level 1 will be credited with 50 pages, while a student who reads the same number of pages at Level 4 will be credited with 125 pages. At the same time he cautions about being too generous.

When the program began six years ago, we had a more ‘generous’ weighting system. The result was the exact opposite of what we wanted. Rather than rewarding those who were able to read at a higher level, it provided an incentive for weaker students to attempt books that were simply too difficult for them in order to get more points. (Helgesen, 1997a, p. 32)

The final piece in the implementation of this program is to get the students to actually do the reading. In the best of all worlds, the learners would sit down and read on their own, but in the real world students will need to be monitored. Learners need to do large amounts of reading for fluency and vocabulary retention, and with each student reading a different book, monitoring their progress becomes difficult. Having students fill out charts showing their progress is one low-pressure method of monitoring students. Not only does it give the teacher a yardstick of their progress in terms of pages, but it helps students to realize how much they have accomplished.

Helgesen offers four in-class activities that can reinforce the students’ resolve to keep up with their reading: (1) the instant book report, where learners are given a form to complete about the book (its title, the characters’ names, etc.) and subjective information such as why the students liked or disliked the book. This becomes the basis of the student’s critique of the book which he or she can share with other members of the class; (2) student drawings which can be used as a jumping-off point for a summary of the book; (3) “story-telling sticks,” a technique adopted from the Silent Way in which students use toothpicks or chopsticks to help summarize the story; (4) a “how many questions” competition that can be used to encourage groups to ask large numbers of questions about a book through one of its illustrations (Helgesen, 1997b, p. 53–54).

CONCLUSION

If students read little in their L1 and are not very proficient in the L2, they are likely to be caught in Nuttall’s “vicious circle of the weak reader.” Unfortunately, their dislike of reading makes them shy away from one of the more available sources of comprehensible input in the L2. Extensive Reading seems to present the most effective way of changing their negative attitude towards reading into a positive one. In the process they also become more autonomous learners. Extensive Reading is not meant to be a replacement for Intensive Reading—it is by its nature an individual activity and must be done on an individual basis—but it requires careful planning and proper introduction. If successful it can change students’ attitudes towards reading in and outside the curriculum.

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