

Extensive Reading and Graded Readers

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Abstract:

This essay is an overview of extensive reading generally, and as it applies to the specific circumstances of Edogawa University. Extensive reading is defined and contrasted with intensive reading for second language acquisition. The means, graded readers, and the significant benefits of extensive reading are introduced.

Keywords:

extensive reading, intensive reading, graded readers

Background:

A great number of students arrive at Edogawa University having already given up on English. Why is this? At some point early in their English education they fell behind. Having done so, everything after that point was too difficult for them. So they convinced themselves that English itself is too difficult for them. This is not the case. The class, and the text associated with it, not the language, was too difficult for them, and hadn't the flexibility required to serve such students in a productive way. This is a dilemma that faces the university instructor when these students arrive in our English classes. Do we continue to leave them behind? Do we teach down to their level and leave the higher level students bored and underserved? Or, do we select a middle road where the lesson is too easy for some, too difficult for others, but serves the

segment in the center? This is a choice we face in a program where lessons are not divided into skill levels. Needless to say, none of the solutions are entirely satisfactory. So how can we best serve a class of students who, at the top end, can have an adequate conversation in English, and at the bottom, can't answer the simplest of questions such as "Where do you live?". It can be argued that an ideal solution is extensive reading.

Extensive Reading:

Extensive reading is exactly what the name implies. It involves reading a significant amount. In order for this to happen the learner must read books that are easy for them so that they might build reading speed and fluency. Students should be able to read books at an appropriate level, at a good rate, and without resorting to a dictionary excessively, if at all, in order that they may come to enjoy, rather than dread, the idea of reading in English. The Extensive Reading Foundation defines extensive reading as reading texts in which the learner understands 98% to 100% of the vocabulary. When a student reads at this level, they can read quickly, easily, and most importantly, enjoyably. Nuttall (1996, 127) describes the "virtuous cycle of the good reader" in which the student reads faster, thereby is encouraged to read more, and through more reading, their comprehension increases. One might question what learning is taking place if a student already has knowledge of such a significant percentage of the vocabulary involved. This is a legitimate question, which will be discussed later.

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Intensive Reading:

Extensive reading should not be confused with “intensive reading”, sometimes called “instructional reading”. These are two different types of reading, with different goals. Intensive reading, defined by the Extensive Reading Foundation as reading at a level of between 90 and 98%, is reading in which new words and grammatical structures are introduced. This is the type of reading that is usually encountered in language textbooks. A passage is intended to impart new vocabulary or grammar to the learner. Intensive reading is a fundamental component of language learning, however there are significant obstacles to its successful usage. Unless courses are exactly divided into skill levels, intensive reading can lead to what Nuttall (1996, 127) describes as the “vicious cycle of the poor reader”. This is a circumstance in which a reader understands little, therefore reads slowly, becomes increasingly frustrated and comes to dislike reading more and more. To illustrate simply: if a reader of this essay understood 90 percent of the vocabulary, that reader would have encountered more than 60 unknown words up to this point, and already 17 just in this section. Even if one were able to glean the meaning of a significant portion of those unknown words through the context, it would still be an almost overwhelming amount of new information, which will be lost if not properly reinforced with repetition. Finding a given text that will fit into the 90 to 98% range for the majority of students in a class is a challenge even with a small class of learners of a similar level. With a diverse range of levels of learners in a class, it is impossible.

“The density of a text is a property of the learner, not the text itself. Thus a given text could be easy for one learner but impossibly hard for another. The above clearly suggest that language EFL learners who are trying to read fluently (extensively) who have not yet

reached an advanced level (i.e. they know fewer than 5000 word families) should meet language which has been controlled and simplified so they are not overwhelmed by dense texts that prevent them from reading fluently.... Therefore, EFL learners would need to use graded readers initially to help even out the density issues by systematizing the vocabulary load. Only when the learners can cope with more advanced texts, should they be exposed to them.”(Waring, 99)

Instructors must take care not to overwhelm, frustrate, and lead language learners into the “vicious cycle”.

The Benefits of Extensive Reading:

“The best way to improve your knowledge of a foreign language is to go and live among its speakers. The next best way is to read extensively in it” (Nuttall, 168)

Extensive reading is not a new idea in second language instruction, but its popularity has been increasing rapidly in recent years as new research has confirmed a range of benefits. Firstly, it builds reading speed and comprehension.

“Although many learners are able to recognize words accurately, they spend excessive time and energy in the process of word identification, which may lead to a breakdown of comprehension. When learners are able to recognize words accurately and rapidly, they have greater capacity for attention leading to comprehending a text.” (Iwahori, 72)

Secondly it builds vocabulary in an organic manner. As reading speed increases, the number of words read increases. Therefore repetition is increased, boosting vocabulary and fluency in a natural way, with vocabulary always presented in context. Just as with vocabulary, the more words read the more grammar and natural linguistic forms are processed.

“Extensive reading causes to pass through our consciousness an endless chain of words, clauses, idioms and sentences, and at the same time an endless wave of sounds and rhythms. In studying a foreign language we vocalize innerly, pronounce mentally.... Through this continual inner speaking we win something which intensive reading and the careful study of grammar can produce but very slowly.” (Hagboldt, 295)

Perhaps more important than any of the academic benefits are the psychological ones. Extensive reading promotes confidence in students thereby motivating them to read more. This leads to Nuttall’s “virtuous cycle”.

Graded Readers:

The cornerstone of a modern extensive reading program is a wide variety of “graded readers”. Graded readers are books that are written at a specific level of vocabulary and grammar. In the past few years, there has been an explosion in the number of these books being published. This is primarily the result of the success of extensive reading programs internationally, most notably in South Korea, where these programs are being widely implemented at the secondary school (junior high and high school) levels. The success of these programs, not only in Asia, but throughout the world has motivated publishers, old and new, to focus on this segment of the ESL market. As a result the quality and variety of graded reader material has increased exponentially in the past few years, most importantly at the lower levels. In the past teachers would have to turn to children’s books to find an appropriate level for the lower skilled students. While they can be effective, there are some problems with using children’s books in the context of an extensive reading program. First, one of the primary attractions of extensive reading is enjoyment for the reader. Most university students will

not truly enjoy reading about a baby bear playing in his house, or a little girl looking for her lost kitty. Another problem is that children’s books are written for native speakers who are much more likely to know when a word is made up merely in order to rhyme, or if a word is an onomopopia, referring only to a sound. Trying to understand or look up such words in a dictionary could be fruitless and lead to even more frustration for the non-native English learner. “I can’t even read a children’s book” is not a good sentiment to provide a student who is already lacking confidence. Thanks to the efforts of Professor Michiko Joichi, Edogawa University has a fairly extensive, and ever expanding selection of graded readers of all levels. A twenty level color-coded system has been implemented in order to facilitate students in selecting appropriate books with a minimum of effort. This is important in that each publisher has a different system for assigning levels to their books, and even different systems for assigning levels in different series from the same publisher. A level one book from one series might be significantly different, i.e. 10 levels higher on the color chart, than a level one book from another publisher or series. In rating the level of the books, the “Yomiyasusa Level”, YL has been used. YL is a Japanese system developed in 1993 by the SSS foundation, and divides English texts into 100 levels from 0.0 to 9.9. Edogawa University’s collection contains books from over 25 different series, ranging from a level of 0.0, with total word counts below 10, to 7.0 with word counts of over 30,000. This range covers skill levels from one having no English ability, all the way up to native level skill. Of course, the vast majority of our students are somewhere in between, mostly in the lower ranges. When the student achieves the 100% comprehension point and is comfortable and reading at a good pace, they can move up one level on the color chart. Graded readers cover a wide range of genres, topics, and interests. These in-

clude original fiction and non-fiction, biographies, and abridged and simplified versions of classic fiction, popular movies, and fairy tales. The range is broad enough to include the interests of any potential learner.

The Teacher:

With such benefits as the research has shown, and given the fact that the idea and use of extensive reading as a tool is not new, why hasn't it been embraced more broadly until only recently? One answer to this question is the reluctance of language teachers. Teachers want to teach, instruct, actively help their students to understand something which the teacher him or herself already knows. A teacher wishes to impart knowledge. If students are reading books in which they understand 98% or more of the language, the teacher must cede some of this power to the texts themselves. The role of the teacher becomes that of a motivator, and a facilitator of learning. There is still much to do. Students will not automatically become motivated, just because they are reading at an appropriate level. The teacher must monitor progress, test reading speed, ask questions about the books, and generally keep the less motivated students on the right track. At the other end of the spectrum, the more ambitious students should be prevented from selecting texts above their appro-

priate level. Setting individualized goals is also important. While one student might not have the ability to read 10,000 words in a semester, their classmate might be able to do this in one week. Goals must be set in accordance with ability. Moreover and not insignificantly, through knowledge of the available library of texts, and the students' preferences and previous selections, the teacher can recommend, or help to steer students towards, books or series that might interest them.

Conclusion:

The circumstances facing an English instructor at Edogawa University, low skilled English learners, and mixed level classes, present a challenge. But they also make a strong argument for an expanded extensive reading program.

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