Extensive Reading: Why? and How?

Timothy Bell
timothy [at] hsc.kuniv.edu.kw
Kuwait University

Abstract

An extensive reading program was established for elementary level language learners at the British Council Language Center in Sanaa, Yemen. Research evidence for the use of such programs in EFL/ESL contexts is presented, emphasizing the benefits of this type of input for students' English language learning and skills development. Practical advice is then offered to teachers worldwide on ways to encourage learners to engage in a focused and motivating reading program with the potential to lead students along a path to independence and resourcefulness in their reading and language learning.

Introduction: The Reading Program

An extensive reading program was established at the British Council Language Center in Sanaa, Yemen. An elementary level class of government employees (age range 17-42) was exposed to a regime of graded readers, which was integrated into normal classroom teaching. Students followed a class reader, had access to a class library of graded readers, and had classes in the British Council library, which gave them access to a collection of 2000 titles. Questionnaires were used to examine students' reading interests, habits and attitudes, both prior to, and following the program. The class library contained 141 titles in the published readers of some major publishers (see inventory of titles in Bell, 1994). Familiar titles (e.g. popular Arab folk tales) were selected for both the class readers and the class library, so as to motivate the students to read. These titles proved very popular, as did the practice of reading aloud to the class.

Students' reading was carefully monitored; formal and informal records being kept both by the researcher, and by the students themselves. Reading diaries and book reports were used, together with a card file system to document the program and record both the titles read and students' written comments on the books. A wall chart acted as a focal point for in-class reading, discussion and exchange of titles. Reader interviews were conducted throughout the program, which ran for a period of six months over the course of two semesters. Students became actively involved in running the class library; tables were arranged and titles displayed attractively during the periods set aside for the reading program. Students were taken into the main British Council library for one lesson a week, during which they participated in controlled twenty-minute sessions of USSR 1 (cf. Davis, 1995).

With reference to research evidence, we now turn to the role of extensive reading programs in fostering learners' progress in reading development and improvement.

The Role of Extensive Reading in Language Learning

1. It can provide 'comprehensible input'
   In his 1982 book, Krashen argues that extensive reading will lead to language acquisition, provided that certain preconditions are met. These include adequate exposure to the language, interesting material, and a relaxed, tension-free learning environment. Elley and Manghubai (1983:55) warn that exposure to the second language is normally "planned, restricted, gradual and largely artificial." The reading program provided in Yemen, and the choice of graded readers in particular, was intended to offer conditions in keeping with Krashen's model.

2. It can enhance learners' general language competence
   Grabe (1991:391) and Paran (1996:30) have emphasized the importance of extensive reading in providing learners with practice in automaticity of word recognition and decoding the symbols on the printed page (often called bottom-up processing). The book flood project in Fiji (Elley & Manghubai: op cit.), in which Fijian school children were provided with

high-interest storybooks, revealed significant post treatment gains in word recognition and reading comprehension after the first year, and wider gains in oral and written skills after two years.

3. It increases the students' exposure to the language

The quality of exposure to language that learners receive is seen as important to their potential to acquire new forms from the input. Elley views provision of large quantities of reading material to children as fundamental to reducing the 'exposure gap' between L1 learners and L2 learners. He reviews a number of studies with children between six and twelve years of age, in which subjects showed rapid growth in language development compared with learners in regular language programs . There was a "spread of effect from reading competence to other language skills - writing, speaking and control over syntax," (Elley 1991:404).

4. It can increase knowledge of vocabulary

Nagy & Herman (1987) claimed that children between grades three and twelve (US grade levels) learn up to 3000 words a year. It is thought that only a small percentage of such learning is due to direct vocabulary instruction, the remainder being due to acquisition of words from reading. This suggests that traditional approaches to the teaching of vocabulary, in which the number of new words taught in each class was carefully controlled (words often being presented in related sets), is much less effective in promoting vocabulary growth than simply getting students to spend time on silent reading of interesting books.

5. It can lead to improvement in writing

Stotsky (1983) and Krashen (1984) reviewed a number of L1 studies that appear to show the positive effect of reading on subjects' writing skills, indicating that students who are prolific readers in their pre-college years become better writers when they enter college. L2 studies by Hafiz & Tudor (1989) in the UK and Pakistan, and Robb & Susser (1989) in Japan, revealed more significant improvement in subjects' written work than in other language skills. These results again support the case for an input-based, acquisition-oriented reading program based on extensive reading as an effective means of fostering improvements in students writing.

6. It can motivate learners to read

Reading material selected for extensive reading programs should address students' needs, tastes and interests, so as to energize and motivate them to read the books. In the Yemen, this was achieved through the use of familiar material and popular titles reflecting the local culture (e.g.. Aladdin and His Lamp). Bell & Campbell (1996, 1997) explore the issue in a South East Asian context, presenting various ways to motivate learners to read and explaining the role of extensive reading and regular use of libraries in advancing the reading habit .

7. It can consolidate previously learned language

Extensive reading of high-interest material for both children and adults offers the potential for reinforcing and recombining language learned in the classroom. Graded readers have a controlled grammatical and lexical load, and provide regular and sufficient repetition of new language forms (Wodinsky & Nation 1988).Therefore, students automatically receive the necessary reinforcement and recycling of language required to ensure that new input is retained and made available for spoken and written production.

8. It helps to build confidence with extended texts

Much classroom reading work has traditionally focused on the exploitation of shorts texts, either for presenting lexical and grammatical points or for providing students with limited practice in various reading skills and strategies. However, a large number of students in the EFL/ESL world require reading for academic purposes, and therefore need training in study skills and strategies for reading longer texts and books. Kembo (1993) points to the value of extensive reading in developing students confidence and ability in facing these longer texts.

9. It encourages the exploitation of textual redundancy

Insights from cognitive psychology have informed our understanding of the way the brain functions in reading. It is now generally understood that slow, word-by-word reading, which is common in classrooms, impedes comprehension by transferring an excess of visual signals to the brain. This leads to overload because only a fraction of these signals need to be processed for the reader to successfully interpret the message. Kalb (1986) refers to redundancy as an important means of processing, and to extensive reading as the means of recognizing and dealing with redundant elements in texts.

10. It facilitates the development of prediction skills

One of the currently accepted perspectives on the reading process is that it involves the exploitation of background knowledge. Such knowledge is seen as providing a platform for readers to predict the content of a text on the basis of a pre-existing schema. When students read, these schema are activated and help the reader to decode and interpret the message beyond the printed words. These processes presuppose that readers predict, sample, hypothesize and reorganize their understanding of the message as it unfolds while reading (Nunan 1991: 65-66).

Practical Advice on Running Extensive Reading Programs

1. Maximize Learner Involvement

A number of logistical hurdles have to be overcome in order to make an extensive reading program effective. Books need to be transported, displayed and collected at the end of each reading session. Considerable paperwork is required to document the card file system, reading records, inventories, book reports and in maintaining and updating lists of titles. Students should therefore be encouraged to take an active role in the management and administration of the reading program. In the Yemen program, students gained a strong sense of ownership through running the reading resources in an efficient, coordinated and organized manner.

2. The Reader Interview

Regular conferencing between teacher and student played a key role in motivating students in the Yemen to read the books. This enabled effective monitoring of individual progress and provided opportunities for the teacher to encourage students to read widely, show interest in the books being read, and to guide students in their choice of titles. By demonstrating commitment in their own reading, teachers can foster positive attitudes to reading, in which it is no longer viewed as tedious, demanding, hard work, but as a pleasurable part of their learning.

3. Read Aloud to the Class

In the Yemen study, reader interviews conducted with students revealed the popularity of occasions when the teacher read aloud to the class. The model of pronunciation provided acted as a great motivator, encouraging many students to participate in classroom reading. Students gained confidence in silent reading because they were able to verbalize sounds they previously could could not recognize. This resulted in wider reading by some of the weaker readers in the class. Often thought of as bad practice, reading aloud should play a full part in motivating the emerging reader to overcome the fear of decoding words in an unfamiliar script.

4. Student Presentations

Short presentations on books read played an absolutely crucial role in the program and students frequently commented on the value of oral work in class for exchanging information about the books. The reader interviews revealed that most of the book choices made by students resulted from recommendations made by friends and not by the teacher. This demonstrates that given the right preparation, encouragement, sense of ownership and belonging, an extensive reading program will achieve a direction and momentum governed by the learners themselves; a large step in the promotion of student independence and autonomy.

5. Written Work Based on the Reading

Effective reading will lead to the shaping of the reader's thoughts, which naturally leads many learners to respond in writing with varying degrees of fluency. Elementary level students can be asked simply to write short phrases expressing what they most enjoyed about a book they read, or to record questions they wish to ask the teacher or other students in class. With intermediate students, book reports may be used, with sections for questions, new vocabulary, and for recording the main characters and events. At this level, summary writing is also a valuable practice because it allows learners to assert full control, both of the main factual or fictional content of a book, and of the grammar and vocabulary used to express it. Advanced students can be asked to write compositions, which, by definition, are linguistically more demanding written responses to the reading material.

6. Use Audio Material in the Reading Program

The use of audio recordings of books read aloud and of graded readers on cassette proved very popular with the students in Yemen, and is advocated for wide application. Listening material provided the learners with a model of correct pronunciation which aided word recognition, and exposed students to different accents, speech rhythms and cadences. Student confidence in their ability to produce natural speech patterns and to read along with the voice of a recorded speaker is central to maintaining

their motivation to master the language as a medium for talking about their reading.

7. Avoid the Use of Tests

Extensive reading programs should be "without the pressures of testing or marks" (Davis 1995:329). The use of tests runs contrary to the objective of creating stress-free conditions for pleasure reading because it invokes images of rote learning, vocabulary lists, memorization and homework. Extensive reading done at home should be under the learner's control and not an obligation imposed by the teacher. By their very nature, tests impose a rigor on the learning process, which the average student will never equate with pleasure.

8. Discourage the Over-Use of Dictionaries

While dictionaries certainly have a place in the teaching of reading, it is probably best located in intensive reading lessons, where detailed study of the lexical content of texts is appropriate. If learners turn to the dictionary every time they come across an unfamiliar word, they will focus only on the language itself, and not on the message conveyed. This habit will result in slow, inefficient reading and destroy the pleasure that reading novels and other literature are intended to provide. Summarizing comments on the extensive reading done by his subjects, Pickard (1996:155) notes that "Use of the dictionary was sparing, with the main focus on meaning".

9. Monitor the Students' Reading

In order to run an extensive reading program successfully, effective monitoring is required, both to administer the resources efficiently, and to trace students' developing reading habits and interests. In the Yemen program, a card file system was used to record titles and the dates the books were borrowed and returned. Input from the monitoring process helps us to record students' progress, maintain and update an inventory of titles, and locate and select new titles for the class library. It therefore serves both the individual needs of the reader and the logistical task of managing the reading resources.

10. Maintain the Entertainment

This is perhaps the most important aspect of the program to emphasize. Teachers need to invest time and energy in entertaining the participants by making use of multimedia sources to promote the books (e.g. video, audio, CD ROM, film, etc.). They should also exploit the power of anecdote by telling the students about interesting titles, taking them out to see plays based on books, exploiting posters, leaflets, library resources, and even inviting visiting speakers to give a talk in class on a book they have read recently. In these ways, teachers can maintain student motivation to read and secure their full engagement in the enjoyment the program provides.

Conclusion

Tsang's (1996) study, carried out in Hong Kong secondary schools, provided further persuasive evidence of the effectiveness of extensive reading in fostering learners' language development. He found that "the reading program was significantly more effective than the writing program" (1996:225) . Extensive reading programs can provide very effective platforms for promoting reading improvement and development from elementary levels upwards. Although they do require a significant investment in time, energy and resources on the part of those charged with managing the materials, the benefits in terms of language and skills development for the participating learners far outweigh the modest sacrifices required. If such programs receive institutional support and can be integrated into the curriculum so that they become agreed school policy, as suggested in Davis (1995), they will likely be more readily and widely adopted, particularly in countries where material and financial resources are adequate.

Notes

1. USSR is uninterrupted sustained silent reading.

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