45th Annual TESOL Convention, New Orleans 2011

"The More They Read, The More They Can Read"
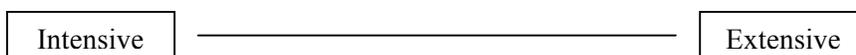Nolan Weil – Utah State University
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An Outline of the Session

Extensive Reading: What is it?

Extensive reading is often contrasted with intensive reading primarily in terms of its differing purpose, characteristics of texts read, speed of reading, and volume of reading. Other aspects may be mentioned, but I consider these the most salient.

It is useful to think of intensive and extensive reading as lying on a continuum.

| Intensive | ———————— | Extensive |

	Intensive	Extensive
Purpose:	Build foundation for reading	Read successfully
	• syntax & grammar	• content
	• vocabulary	• enjoyment, information
	• text structure	• develop reading fluency
	• strategies	• improve other aspects of language proficiency?
	• content?	• vocabulary!
Texts	Often over the readers head	Ideally, right at the reader's level
Speed	Slow, laborious	Faster, with growing ease
Volume	Generally low	High, growing all the time

Benefits

- attitudes towards reading
- general language proficiency (e.g., often reflected in listening, writing)
- reading fluency (general vocabulary, sight vocabulary, possibly linguistic knowledge (syntax, grammar),
- general knowledge (of the world, of particular topics, knowledge about texts)

Short-term studies do not always demonstrate measurable benefits, but long-term studies (one year or longer) almost invariably do (Renandya, 2007).

Vocabulary Connection

Many studies demonstrate small to modest incidental vocabulary learning from extensive reading, but researchers have reported widely varying estimates of pick up rate. Some researchers have claimed that pick up rates are too low to justify recommending extensive reading as a vocabulary learning strategy. However, Pigada & Schmitt (2006), in a case study using a methodology sensitive to partial vocabulary learning, have suggested that when knowledge is not defined as an all-or-none knowledge of word meanings, pick up rates may be dramatically higher than previously estimated.

The Case for Graded Readers

In theory, incidental vocabulary learning should be greatly facilitated when readers read materials in which not more than 2-5% of the running words of the text are unfamiliar thus making it more likely that readers will be able to infer the meaning of unknown words from context.

Graded readers are available from many different publishing companies although a greater variety of titles seem to be available in markets outside of the United States (e.g., Canada, the U.K, and Australia). Despite some limitations, the Oxford Bookworms series is my favorite as they are more or less uniformly well written. The quality of many other series is quite uneven. See Hill for a critical reviews of graded readers.

Extensive graded reading (EGR) is a term that has been introduced to refer to the fusion of the notions of extensive reading and graded reading.

Obstacles to the practice of EGR

Extensive graded reading seems intuitively appealing and its value is backed by empirical evidence. This raises the obvious question: why aren't we all doing it?
- lack of materials
- cost of setting up a library collection
- work required to set up a program
- finding time in a crowded curriculum
- "cult of authenticity" that reinforces doubts regarding value of "simplified" materials

Other reasons for the neglect of ER have to do with ideas related to beliefs about the teaching and learning of language…
- regarding the legitimate role of the teacher
- regarding the role of students
- presuming the superiority of skills oriented instruction, (especially in academic ESL programs)
- promotion of skepticism by administrators and teachers who may not always be up to speed on what research has to say about various practices

Other obstacles have to do with cultural as well as individual differences between and among learners:
- absence of a tradition of extensive leisure time reading in some cultures (Saudi Arabia)
- shift away from such a tradition in other cultures (U.S.)
- student resistance as a matter of personal if not cultural preference
- competition from digital media

How to fit extensive reading into the curriculum

Day and Bamford (1998) outline four broad ways:

- as a separate, stand alone course
- as part of an existing reading course   (This is what I do at USU.)
- as a noncredit addition to an existing course
- as an extracurricular activity

Extensive reading at Utah State University

The Intensive English Language Institute at USU offers a four level program of 5-course (18 semester hours). Every course is to some extent potentially an integrated skills course, but 4 of the courses have a primary focus on a particular skill (reading, writing, speaking, or listening). The 5th course in the suite is a topics course, and over the course of about 4 years teaching topics courses at levels 1, 2, &3, they have evolved into hybrids—one part text based reading/topics (introduction to literary commentary/discussion) and one part extensive reading.

For many years, I had been intellectually committed to the idea of extensive reading, but had found it impossible to implement due to lack of materials. For me, the key to success was finally getting around to examining the Oxford University Press Bookworms graded readers and being favorably impressed by their quality, acquiring a small budget from the department to start a lending library.

I now select 3-4 books each semester that students buy as their course books for Topics 1-2 and Topics 3. We read these, and I assign various tasks involving a combination of oral and written engagement. This is the topics side of the course. In addition, students must select from 6-9 items from the lending library to read on their own. This is the more purely extensive reading side of the class. Satisfaction on the part of students has tended to be fairly high.

Practical Advice

I am working on a longer paper dealing with my handling of this course, but here, in brief, is what I would recommend, based on my experience teaching a text-based reading/topics course in an Intensive English Program.

1. Start a collection of graded readers if possible
2. Educate students about:
   - extensive reading vs. intensive reading
   - the importance of reading as a vehicle for improving reading
   - how to evaluate the suitability of texts for extensive reading
3. Make students aware of how they read:
   - engage them in timed reading &
   - pushed reading
4. Wean students from excessive use of dictionaries (but don't prohibit dictionaries)
5. Teach techniques for noting new vocabulary, such as
   - underlining & returning to underlined words later for review
   - keeping a running list of new vocabulary
6. Teach basic elements of literary discourse (e.g., terms such as setting, plot, character, narrator, conflict, theme, mood, etc.)
7. Provide aids to understanding (background information on authors, settings, historical & cultural context)
8. Eschew exercises provided by the publisher
9. Keep literal comprehension questions to a minimum by, for example:
   - using story maps
   - focusing discussion questions on interesting literary or personal aspects of the story
10. Avoid round robin reading (esp. without preparation):
    - Read aloud to students
    - Try Readers' Theater
11. Read the book - Watch the movie when available and sufficiently similar
12. Keep the reporting on additional extensive reading lean by using
    - story maps
    - reading notebooks (brief entries)
    - small-group book talks
    - book ratings (liked it; didn't; easy; hard)
    - ads for the book (2-3 sentence endorsements)
    - one sentence summaries
    - before and after report (photocopy of page from middle of book)

    (See Bamford & Day, 2003 for other ideas.)

Final Remarks

1. We learn to read by reading, but improvement requires consistency and takes time.
2. Extensive reading is not <u>the</u> silver bullet. Multiple approaches are necessary to promote high levels of L2 reading proficiency, but extensive reading is a vital component.

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