

Extensive Reading - a Valuable Language Learning Opportunity http://english.unitecology.ac.nz/esolonline/teachers/prof_read/jeanette_grundy/home_e.php

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ABSTRACT

This report explores the language learning opportunities provided by Extensive Reading (ER) for ESOL students. It includes a literature review which is very positive about the role such an approach can play in both improving reading skills and developing learner language. It explores how extensive reading contributes to language proficiency particularly in the areas of vocabulary growth, knowledge of grammar and text structures, and writing. In addition, it reports on an investigation into student attitudes to ER and explores some of the implications this has for teachers in implementing effective programmes for ESOL students.

BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Researchers of extensive reading programmes are very positive about the role such an approach can play in both improving reading skills and developing learner language. It has long been claimed that 'we learn to read by reading' and teachers in New Zealand schools are well aware of the importance of wide reading in the language development of their students. Researchers also claim a significant role for reading in the learning of a second language. Nuttall (1996, p.128) states, "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."

Day and Bamford (1998, p.34) present a summary of the results of research into twelve extensive reading programmes. These represent both ESL and EFL situations, are from a range of countries and are across all levels from primary to university, adolescent to adult. They are overwhelmingly positive about extensive reading and report gains in all language skills but particularly reading and writing proficiency, gains in vocabulary, although these were not statistically significant in all cases, and also gains in positive affect.

Other more recent findings, Hayashi (1999), Renandya et al (1999) and Lao and Krashen (2000) confirm this view. Hayashi and Renandya both found a strong correlation between the amount of reading done and student gains. Lao and Krashen report significant gains in both vocabulary and reading rate made by students on a popular literature course compared with others enrolled in a traditional academic skills class. Their research also showed that students in the popular literature course had a much more positive view of the value of their course for learning English than the other group did.

What is extensive reading?

Extensive reading programmes encourage the reading of a wide variety of texts from a range of genre in the target language. It is important that the material read is well within the student's level of comprehension and that s/he can choose what is read. The

primary focus of extensive reading programmes is on reading, so that while there may be follow-up activities or monitoring by the teacher these do not deter the student from wanting to read.

How does extensive reading promote language development?

Reading is a complex task. Day and Bamford (1998, p.6) outline a cognitive view of reading. They talk about four interwoven strands which make up the reading process. First is the need for automatic word recognition which leads to the reader accessing her/his lexical knowledge. This information about the words is held in the mind long enough for comprehension to occur and the reader draws on the background experience they bring to the text to make sense of and build knowledge of what they are reading. But, "the mind has only a certain amount of processing capacity at one time. Thus, when fluent readers have to slow down and pay conscious attention to recognise words they find it difficult to understand the meaning of the sentence or paragraph in which the unknown or unfamiliar words occur." Day & Bamford (1998, p.15)

To be a good reader demands a vast sight vocabulary, a general vocabulary knowledge, an awareness of text structures and an extensive background knowledge to link into so that comprehension can occur. The most effective way of building that sight vocabulary, word knowledge and awareness of how text works is by reading. Repeated exposure to words in print builds familiarity and automaticity develops. Retrieving words in context builds up the knowledge of that word so that comprehension comes more readily and ultimately at a deeper level. Experience with text builds knowledge of how text works and if comprehension occurs knowledge increases. It is indeed a "virtuous" cycle. (Nuttall, 1996, p.127)

The key, however, is that the texts being read must be within the learners' competence. Day and Bamford (1998, p.16) refer to this in terms of Krashen's comprehensible input hypothesis and say "the materials must be at 'i minus 1' where 'i' is the student's current level of acquisition." Extensive reading at an i minus 1 level allows for multiple exposure to known words and syntactic structures, encouraging automaticity and faster processing of text which enables comprehension to occur. The importance of comprehensibility is emphasised in Nation's research. Hu and Nation's study, reported in Nation (2001), "suggests that with around 98% coverage almost all learners have a chance of gaining adequate comprehension ..(but).. at 95% coverage some gained adequate comprehension but most did not." Researchers also claim that learners can increase their general vocabulary knowledge through this kind of meaningful interaction with text. Day and Bamford (1998, p.18) refer to research by Paul Nation and James Coady when they say "Second language students must read and read some more, both to learn words from multiple encounters and to become better readers, so that incidental vocabulary learning becomes easier. An extensive reading approach .. ensures that students have the best chance to do this."

Vocabulary gains are not the only positive outcome from extensive reading programmes. Extensive reading also develops general knowledge which is a crucial factor in comprehension. Research has shown that students who have background knowledge of a topic have a much better chance of making sense of it than if they

read a similar level text on an unknown topic. But if learners are reading text on an unknown topic within their "i minus 1" range they are also building their knowledge of that topic. Peregoy and Boyle (2000, p.240) refer to this aspect, "Wide reading increases general knowledge, which in turn facilitates comprehension when reading texts of all kinds, including content area texts." This is valuable information for teachers in different curriculum areas. They should be aware that by providing extensive reading opportunities for their students and materials which are comprehensible to them they are more likely to build the vocabulary and background knowledge which will facilitate understanding of that topic.

Extensive reading encourages exposure to a wide range of text types. Explicit teaching of text types may help students recognise the patterns of different genre more easily, but learners need repeated exposure to a text type to build up their experience of how it works. "Familiarity with text types facilitates reading comprehension." (Peregoy and Boyle, 2000, p.240) Extensive reading helps students to recognise the format, internal text structure, language patterns and vocabulary associated with particular text types and it is this knowledge of how texts work gained by wide reading that enables learners to construct their own texts of that type. Reading and writing are directly linked.

Day and Bamford also refer to affective reasons why extensive reading extends language proficiency. Seven of the twelve reports into extensive reading, previously referred to, mention gains in positive affect. Extensive reading encourages learner autonomy and "there is substantial evidence that learners taking responsibility for their own learning helps them succeed in second language learning." (Day & Bamford, 1998, p.27) Extensive reading can develop positive attitudes and a strong motivation to read. Once again we are into a positive cycle.

This discussion shows the important role that extensive reading can play in extending language proficiency. There are gains to be made in vocabulary, reading and writing proficiency, development of knowledge which contributes to comprehension, and also gains in positive affect. Day and Bamford (1998, p38) quote Krashen who puts an extremely high value on the extensive reading approach. "Reading is good for you... Reading is the only way, the only way we become good readers, develop a writing style, an adequate vocabulary, advanced grammar, and the only way we become good spellers." If we accept this view, and it is well supported by research, there is obvious value in having extensive reading as a part of the second language curriculum.

INTRODUCTION

As a teacher of English to mainstream students in mostly low decile schools, where students have performed well below the national norm in standardised tests of reading, I have long valued the role extensive reading can play in improving literacy levels. More recently as a teacher of ESOL students I have used ER in my ESOL programme because I believe, and the research referred to above supports this view, that ER has wide ranging benefits for these students too.

I am currently teaching at a Catholic school for girls with a roll of about 580 students. This year, there are about 30 International students forming the bulk of the ESOL roll, but also 7-8 students who qualify for Ministry funding under the ESOL resource and

some exchange students. The students involved in my research come from predominantly Asian backgrounds and have varying levels of proficiency in English, most are in time-tabled ESOL classes. They have different reasons for studying in New Zealand but the majority are motivated to learn and aim to continue their education at tertiary level in NZ or other English speaking countries.

My usual practice is to have a wide reading focus in Term 1 where students are given time in class each lesson to read in English. I was interested in my students' attitudes towards their ER programme. My perception was that some students seemed to enjoy the opportunities to read in English and read widely, others were encouraged by teacher monitoring of progress and effort, but a significant group could not find time for reading in their daily struggle to keep on top of assignments and assessments. I became interested in whether extensive reading on a curriculum related topic would encourage students to read more and whether this impacted on their learning in that subject. I was interested in this focus firstly because it took ER beyond the narrower confines of reading mainly literature and magazines, towards reading a range of genre, and more particularly text types that are more relevant to the type of reading ESOL students encounter in academic study. But I was also interested in the opportunity this ER intervention gave for working with ESOL students on a specific and relevant curriculum topic, including working with some who did not normally receive ESOL support, and the opportunity it gave for targeted collaboration with staff members.

STAGE 1 EXTENSIVE READING PROGRAMME IN THE ESOL CLASS: research design- methods, sample, and analysis

Introduction

The first stage involved two surveys of students in ESOL classes before and after their participation in an extensive reading programme in Term 1 2003. The primary purpose of the surveys was to establish participants' attitudes towards reading and evaluate aspects of the extensive reading programme. Students also completed a reading log during the term.

The reading programme consisted of at least 3 sessions of 15-20 minutes of SSR in class each week for 10 weeks and encouraged students to read outside class during that time. Reading materials were readily available in the classroom, including a library of graded readers, Learning media and other resources, magazines and newspapers. Students were also encouraged to select their own reading material from outside the classroom and bring that to class and share it.

Twenty students completed the first survey and twenty-one the second. These students represented a range of Year levels, Y10-Y13, and levels of language proficiency, from Elementary to Upper Intermediate. They also represented a range of nationalities: Chinese (12), German (1), Iraqi (1), Japanese (2), Korean (4), and Thai (1).

As some of the data from the first stage was quantitative it was collated and counted and trends were determined. Other data was qualitative, so was coded and sorted using the Constant Comparative Method (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). Qualitative

data from this survey, for the four students who also participated in the second stage of the research was added to that analysis.

Outcomes

- Extensive Reading Programme in the ESOL class: Survey 1 (see Appendix I)

The purpose of the initial survey was to establish attitudes towards reading. Students were asked about their reading in both their first language and English. The majority (65%) indicated a positive attitude to reading and most (55%) saw themselves as better than average readers. About 45% indicated they read about 4-5 hours a week, although 20% read for significantly more time. Most of this reading was in English. They preferred reading books and magazines, and romance stories featured highly as the preferred genre. When asked about their reading in English although books were read most, textbooks also featured highly.

When asked about the difficulty of reading in English, most (70%) indicated it was more difficult than easy, 20% saying it was very difficult and none saying it was easy. Vocabulary was the major source of difficulty (90%), although 20% also indicated lack of understanding as a difficulty. The most frequently indicated reason for reading in English was "it helps me to learn English" (65%), but "it helps me understand subjects" (45%), and "I like reading" (40%), also rated highly.

- Extensive Reading Programme in the ESOL class: Survey 2 (see Appendix II)

At the end of the term, after the extensive reading programme had been operating, a second survey was given. The purpose of this survey was to evaluate the programme with a particular focus on reading habits and affective aspects. The results showed that on average students read 5 books, that books were the preferred reading type (45%), although textbooks were indicated by (20%) and a further 20% indicated they read a combination of books and textbooks. Short stories, love stories and classics were the preferred genre. When asked about the books available in the ESOL classroom for reading about 43% gave a positive rating but a significant 48% indicated "OK" only.

When asked about the amount of time spent reading, 35% indicated they read for 4-5 hours and a further 10% for more than that. Some students (20%) read mostly in the ESOL room, but 25% read a similar amount in class and at home, and 35% read more at home than school. When asked about time spent reading this term, compared with other terms a significant number (25%) said they read less, some (about 35%) read about the same amount and the largest group (40%) read more. Reasons given by the students for not reading more, were overwhelming due to pressures of study.

When asked how they feel about reading in English compared with before, 90% indicated a positive feeling, but only 14% were as positive about their effort in reading. The majority (62%) gave a negative response regarding their effort and a third of these gave the lowest ranking for effort.

Implications

The results confirmed my impression that the students I was working with had a positive attitude to reading and learning and revealed a positive self-concept regarding their ability as readers in their L1. Overall I felt satisfied with the results of the second survey which showed that generally students were reading, that most were making time to read outside the classroom and that the majority felt more positive about their reading in English than they had before. Observation and anecdotal evidence added to my view that the ER programme provided a useful and valuable language learning opportunity for my students.

However, the surveys also confirmed some concerns. The results suggest that some students (about 35%) spent less time reading in Term 1 than before and a significant number had indicated textbooks as the text type they read most (43%), and some (19%) had read only textbooks. In terms of ER, textbooks are unlikely to provide the type of reading that is required. When reading independently a 98% knowledge of text vocabulary is required to provide the ease of reading that enables comprehension and the advantages ER can provide. This level of readability is unlikely to be attained for ESOL students reading textbooks.

This concern was further highlighted in students' responses to the question, "Why didn't you spend more time reading?" Of the students who responded to this question 41% specifically referred to homework and study pressures. For example, "because I had to do my homework and prepare the lessons for the next day. I always spend a long time." And, "because I had too much homework and I spent lots of time in catching up on the subjects which I didn't do before." These findings highlight the reality for ESOL students that successful study takes considerable time and effort and in order to cope with these demands they prioritise. The "easy" reading recommended by the ESOL teacher may not seem as important as their preparation for an assessment task in a curriculum subject.

Where does that leave the ESOL teacher with a strong belief in the value of ER as a language learning opportunity? ER is not just about reading literature and for pleasure. Students are also engaging in extensive reading when they read in their subjects, so long as the reading material is at an accessible level for them. That is Nation's "98% reading accuracy level for independent reading" or Krashen's "i minus 1" concept.

The notion of readability and its importance in learning is a difficult concept for students to accept. Despite repeated explanations and use of strategies like the "5 finger" test I doubt that many of my students really adhere to my recommendations, even when selecting graded readers. I know that in subject classes they are constantly faced with material that is beyond their comprehension, even when it is presented to them with support. My concern was how to ensure that at least some of the reading material they were reading independently would be within their range. This led me to a second intervention.

IMPLICATIONS

Both the literature and the findings of this classroom research raise some interesting issues for teachers wanting to use ER effectively.

ER provides a valuable language learning opportunity so demands a commitment in terms of time, resourcing and energy. Making time within the programme where the primary focus is on reading for its own sake demonstrates to the student that the teacher values reading. The research clearly shows that there is a strong correlation between the amount of reading and student language gains. Students too must make a commitment to reading outside the classroom if they are to gain real benefit from ER. The teacher must also ensure there is a wide range of attractive, high interest, and relevant materials available, as student needs and interests are varied. In addition, teachers may need to work hard at selling reading to students and in particular the value of reading at a level which allows ease of comprehension.

This classroom research shows that not all students are motivated by reading books. Second language learners may not get the same enjoyment from reading in English as they do in their first language. The lack of empathy with characters and situations which are culturally different combined with the struggle of reading in another language may mean that there is little incentive to read literature in English.

Many ESOL students are highly motivated to pass exams so perhaps they are more likely to feel extensive reading on curriculum related topics is worth their effort. Such reading has the added advantage of building background knowledge, both of text and topic, which is such a vital part of the reading and learning process. Often this determination to succeed results in students persevering with very difficult texts. This may be due to difficulty in finding more accessible texts but also reflects students' belief that what they need to know is in the textbook and if they learn that they will pass. Teachers need to work hard to provide more readable materials for independent reading but must also ensure support is given during the reading process to enable more difficult texts to be understood.

To enable the amount of reading that can lead to language gains it is useful that teachers across the curriculum encourage extensive reading. Wide reading in a subject area is more likely to lead to vocabulary development, knowledge of text types used in that field, and to building the background knowledge of the topic that aids comprehension. Finding materials at levels appropriate for learners is not an easy task but subject teachers would be giving invaluable help to their ESOL students if they provided some reading materials on topics that are 'easy' reading for students. Searching for such material would be a worthwhile support that the ESOL teacher could give the classroom teacher.

Students themselves may need some time before they see value in extensive reading and also guidance to select materials that are at an appropriate level. There may be some adjustment as they become familiar with strategies that are effective in extensive reading like working out meaning from context. But teachers who value reading must encourage students to make an investment in reading. They can be confident in their belief that extensive reading provides a valuable language learning opportunity and should be explicit in explaining the benefits to students. When

students themselves recognise the value of ER for their language development they are more likely to be motivated to read more and consequently learn more.

WHERE TO FROM HERE?

While this research project clarified my thinking about ER and highlighted some areas for development in my current practice it also raised other issues worthy of investigation.

In particular I am interested in exploring more productive ways of working with subject teachers to develop effective programmes and practices with ESOL students. One of the rewards of this research was collaborating with the economics teachers to support student learning. This intervention provided benefits for all participants. The teachers felt supported in their work with ESOL students, the students felt more confident in approaching the task and results indicated they had some success with it, and the ESOL teacher felt her work was more focused to student needs.

As well as clarifying effective ER practices this research suggested other strategies that are useful for ESOL students. The issue of teacher talking is an important one. Students found value in talking about the task and readings. They recognise this as an effective way of building their knowledge of a topic. Students agreed that reading together and talking can be a valuable way of supporting them through difficult texts and in explaining key ideas. However, they also expressed some concerns about teacher talk that is not helpful. This is another area in which ESOL teachers and subject teachers could work together to produce better outcomes for ESOL students.

POSTSCRIPT

Since writing this report the students surveyed in the second stage of this research project have received their bursary results. Of the eight students originally interviewed, seven sat the exam and of these only one did not pass the economics paper. Of the students who were successful in economics, two gained an A grade, two a B grade, and the others achieved above 50%.

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Appendix I

Reading: Student Survey – Economics

1. How would you describe yourself as a reader?
2. How would you describe yourself as a reader of English?
3. How do you know?
4. What do you think makes a good reader?
5. Do you find reading difficult or easy?
6. What makes reading easy or difficult?
7. Do you think that you understand most of what you read?
8. What do you do when you come across a word you don't know?
9. What do you do if the text doesn't make sense?
10. What are the sort of things that help your reading?
11. How might your teachers help you with your reading?
12. Have you done any reading recently that you found extremely difficult?

13. What made it that way?

14. Is there a lot of reading to do for economics?

15. Do you read more or less than what the teacher expects you to do in Economics?

16. What sort of reading do you do for economics? (textbooks, worksheets...)

17. How does reading in economics compare with reading in other subjects?

18. What is more difficult about reading in Economics - understanding economics words and ideas or understanding the other language used?

Appendix II

Follow up Survey - Economics Reading

Thinking about the work you did to prepare for your economics assessment last week:

1. Did you do some reading to prepare for the assessment? Yes / No
What did you read? Tick the ones you read.
Which did you read most of? Number 1 for read most - 5 for read least.

	Tick	Number
textbook		
newspaper articles		
information from books		
magazine articles		
information from web sites		

2. How would you rate the difficulty of the texts you read?

	Easy	Difficult
textbook	_____	_____
newspaper articles	_____	_____
information from books	_____	_____
magazine articles	_____	_____
information from web sites	_____	_____

3. What made them easy or difficult?

4. Was the material

_____ easier?

_____ more difficult?

_____ about the same as for other economics topics?

5. Where did your texts come from? Tick the sources you used:

_____ economics teacher

_____ ESOL teacher

_____ School Library

_____ Other libraries

_____ Own searching

6. Where did you find information?

7. During this topic did you read:

_____ more

_____ less or

_____ about the same amount as usual?

8. What motivated (made you want) to read for this assessment?
Rank from most important to least important. (1-5)

_____ I had to - it was an assessment

_____ Reading more helps me to understand better

_____ My teachers expected me to read

_____ I could understand the reading materials

_____ The reading material was easy to find

9. Did the reading help for your assessment? Yes / No

10. Why?

11. During your preparation for this assessment what things helped you most?

Look at the list below:

Were they useful? Tick if yes

Rank them from the most helpful to the least helpful: Number from 1-6

	Useful	Helpful
reading material in the library		
extra reading material provided		
list of key topic vocabulary		
definitions of key vocabulary		
discussion in economics class		
discussion in ESOL class		
Other		

12. What do you think are the best ways for teachers to help your learning?

In the economics class

In the ESOL class

13. What do you think are the best things you can do to help your learning?
