

CHANGING TIMES, CHANGING READING HABITS

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Abstract: *Linguists have written a lot about reading a foreign language and especially about reading as a foreign language, though most of it does not relate to the reading of a foreign language. This why we will give a try to move away from the classroom into the private world of reading for our own interest or hobby. The concern is now on what the student can do for himself. The teacher still has a part to play: has to make sure that books are available and that as many students really discover the ‘whole world’ in them. The paper looks at extensive reading for students attending English courses. A basic methodological distinction is drawn between intensive reading and extensive reading, and the different phases of a working extensive reading programme are described. After reporting on some classroom research and student data, questions of strategy training and bridging techniques are addressed. In this, broader connections are made to applied linguistic research, before conclusions are drawn.*

Keywords: *graded readers; reading confidence; reading fluency; extensive reading; student documentation.*

A great deal has been written about reading a foreign language and particularly about reading as a foreign language, though most of it does not relate to the reading of a FL. We will try to move away from the classroom into the private world of reading for our own interest. The concern is now on what the student can do for himself. The teacher still has a part to play: has to make sure that books are available and that as many students really discover the ‘whole world’ in them.

We may think of a certain cycle of frustration: students who don’t enjoy reading don’t read much or if they don’t understand, they read slowly so, they don’t enjoy reading and don’t read much. Somehow or other we must help him to get out of this cycle of frustration and enter a cycle of growth. Speed, enjoyment and comprehension are closely linked with one another and with the amount of practice a reader gets. Any of the factors could provide the key that will get them out of the vicious circle and into the virtuous one. The most hopeful thing is *enjoyment*, closely followed by *quantity*.

What we want is our students to be able to read better, fast and with full understanding. The solution is: they need to read more. To solve this we can either require them to do so or tempt them. Tempting them leads us to the factor of enjoyment. *Needing* to read books, for study or other purposes is also an incentive for students; but wanting to read books because you enjoy them is an incentive for everybody.

Provided the books are well chosen, it is not as difficult as you might think to establish the reading habit. In any class there are a few students who respond slowly or not at all to the attractions of reading, but there are always many others who quickly develop a real appetite for books. To develop fluent reading it is more useful to read a lot of easy books than a few difficult ones.

When I mentioned that creating the reading habit was not very difficult I thought of the fact that the books offered must be enjoyable. This is more powerful than any other motivation. Extensive reading materials should be appealing, easy, short and varied. The books must appeal to the intended readers, supplying what they really want. The appeal is greater if the book is attractive in appearance, well printed and with good coloured illustrations.

The language must be easier than found in the current FL course book. We cannot expect students to read from choice, or to read fluently, if the language is a struggle. Reading improvement comes from reading a lot of easy material. The length of the book must not be intimidating; elementary students need short books that they can finish quickly without a sense of strain and without getting bored. There also must be a wide choice suiting the various needs of the readers in terms of content, language and intellectual maturity.

Organizing a reading programme could be very effective but first of all, we must assess linguistic levels. When we get a new class, one of the first things we want to know is their level of reading ability. If we teach students for the first

time and have no record system, it is desirable to find out their ability by means of a test, because to wait for experience to supply then information would take too long. For complete beginners, testing them would be pointless. There are, of course, a lot of commercially produced reading tests but these are not suitable for learners of English as a foreign language, because of assumptions about the structures and vocabulary that will be familiar, as well as because of possible culture bias. You might want to devise your own test.

What kind of reading experience have first-year students of English had in their pre-university education?

Striking elements of this pre-university experience include memorization; reading aloud; reading difficult text; sentence-level comprehension; weekly tests. Given the nature of the university entrance examination, it is neither surprising nor particularly remarkable that many students come to university as slow readers of English who use word-by-word translation and who lack confidence in reading in a foreign language. These are hardly, though, the characteristic skills of a fluent reader. How can we help students become more fluent readers of English? One part of the answer may lie in including extensive reading as a core component of first-year English courses.

What is extensive reading? Reading has traditionally been divided into two types: intensive and extensive. In broad terms, intensive reading may be described as the practice of particular reading skills and the close linguistic study of text. Extensive reading, on the other hand, can be defined as reading a large quantity of text, where reading confidence and reading fluency are prioritised. Although this twin categorization of reading into two basic types can be found in many teacher resource books for the teaching of English as a foreign language, it is not the whole story, as the student’s learning history clearly pointed out. We need to extend the categorization. We can do this by adding, first, oral reading, or reading aloud in class, where considerable focus is put on correct pronunciation of the text - and, second, text translation, where correct translation of the foreign language text into the learners’ mother tongue is emphasized in tandem with the study of an array of grammatical, lexical and phonological points. This creates a four-way methodological categorization of reading in a foreign language, summarised in the following table.

With regard to the first term of a first-year English reading course, ‘reading a lot of text’ centres on the use of graded readers so that the students read or are involved in reading-related activities for most of each lesson. It also means that the students spend at least one hour a week outside class reading. This principle of independent reading shapes the course objectives in the first term. These are:

- to increase student confidence in their English reading ability;
- to increase student motivation in their English reading;

- to increase student reading fluency, specifically;
- to decrease dependence on word by word comprehension;
- to increase reading speed;
- identify and record key/interesting points in a narrative;
- write and discuss in English their own ideas and opinions about what has been read, and their own reading progress.

As the course progresses through the second half of the year, these objectives hold still true, but are elaborated and become specific.

In the real world, we exercise choice over the books that we read: we browse through different titles when we go into libraries and bookshops; we take time to choose something of personal interest to ourselves. The same is true when learners use a class library for extensive reading.

The focus throughout the first semester is on fluent reading. Since this is the overriding aim, most phases of the lesson are organised to nurture this. Thus, the first part of the lesson - social English - involves the students standing up face-to-face in pairs and holding free conversations in English for a couple of minutes with one or two different people. This helps the students to switch into English for the lesson, and create good group dynamics at the start of the lesson. Next, the students are asked to focus their attention on what they have achieved in their reading that week. This phase of the lesson involves the students in pairs first asking and answering, then writing questions such as:

- What book(s) did you read this week?
- What did you find particularly interesting?
- How many pages did you read?
- How much time did you spend reading?
- What are your reading goals this week?

Then, the students turn their tables face-to-face in pairs, and using the notes they have made on what they have been reading, they report to their partner and discuss their books in a more detailed way with each other. Now the reading record sheets are given out, and students start using the library. While some students are browsing and choosing books, the rest of the class continues its pair discussions, reads, or make notes. Finally, the reading record sheets are collected in before the whole class is taken through a relaxation and visualisation sequence. These fluency phases are summarised in the following table.

Throughout the term, the students are required to document their reading in different ways. Such documentation provides ample material for the teacher to assess each student's individual achievement over the term, as well as enables the students not only to record their ideas and responses but also to see their own progress for themselves.

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Weekly reading goals

These are incorporated in the performance review, as a way of nurturing a positive attitude to reading in terms of a *plan-perform-reflect-plan* learning cycle. At this stage in the course, this goal setting remains general in many cases without any particular support strategies being articulated. That is, students can express personal learning goals, but do not yet identify specific actions by which they can achieve such goals. Other commonly expressed goals in the first term include: wanting to read more quickly; guessing words from context / imaging.

Book reports

Students can be asked to write summaries and reports about the books that they read. This can be done as a regular activity, or left to the end of term. There are many possibilities here for integrating the skills further: see Greenwood 1992 and Hedge 1984 for further suggestions. On the one hand, such reports provide one assessment tool for the teacher; on the other hand, they indirectly enable the students to review and recycle key ideas and vocabulary from what they read.

Mid-term reports

It is important to be able to determine how students are coping, and which students may be in need of extra guidance. This can be done through collecting in mid-term reading reports.

End-of-term self-assessments can take place based on the students' response to the following questions:

1. What is the total number of pages that you have read this term?
2. What was the most interesting book that you read? Why?
3. How do you think your reading has changed this term?
4. What are your personal goals from now on?
5. What are your reading goals from now on?

This report provides a summary for the teacher to make a subjective judgement of each student's achievement for their evaluation.

CONCLUSION

This paper has raised the problem of options and solutions in the organisation of an extensive reading course. First, this analysis has argued that graded readers should form the initial core of a first-year reading course in order to raise reading confidence and fluency in students so that they can be prepared both to tackle higher level text and to develop more effective reading strategies later in the year. Opinions in the field support this argument both in terms of reading development, and in terms of core vocabulary development. Second, this analysis has argued that an exclusive focus on the extensive reading of narrative text, though necessary and effective as a primary base, is however insufficient through the rest of the year. Attention also needs to be paid to the simultaneous development of extensive reading and vocabulary at the same time.