

EXTENSIVE READING THROUGH GRADED READERS - A PRACTICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Effective reading is essential for success in foreign language acquisition. After all, reading is the basis of instruction in all aspects of language learning: using textbooks for language courses, writing, revising, developing vocabulary, acquiring grammar, editing, and using computer-assisted language learning programs. Reading instruction, therefore, is an essential component of every foreign language curriculum.

Extensive reading involves students reading long texts or large quantities for general understanding, with the intention of enjoying the texts. It is usually done with graded readers. Graded Readers are books (both fiction and non-fiction) written especially for language learners to build their reading speed and fluency and to give them chances to practice 'real' reading for pleasure.

A plethora of activities can be designed based on these graded readers starting with basic vocabulary exercises and finishing with projects or longer pieces of work carried out in connection with the book which can obviously increase enjoyment and thus, motivation.

Key-words: reading instruction, extensive reading, graded readers, activities, language learners

“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) [8]

Reading is one of the important skills for learners to expand their knowledge of the language, cultures and the world. Learners can get more information that they need through reading different materials, such as magazines, newspapers, novels, books, journals and so on. With strengthened reading skills, EFL readers will make great progress and attain greater development in all academic areas [1].

Effective reading skills are especially vital in the EFL context because exposure to spoken English is scanty, and reading is very often the only source of comprehensible and meaningful linguistic input that helps unconscious acquisition of the language (Krashen 1981). In addition to gains in a range of language skills, students experience delight in language learning and positive feelings as reading motivates them for further study and reading. R. W. Gee (1999) argues that the more we read, the more competent language learners we become, and the more we enjoy reading; the more we enjoy it, the more we read, and the more competent language learners we become [7].

Extensive reading (ER) has been defined in various ways by educators, researchers, and reading specialists. The first person to apply the term ‘extensive reading’ in foreign language (FL) or second language (L2) pedagogy was Harold Palmer (1936), one of the most prominent applied linguists in British twentieth-century language teaching, who defines the extensive reading as rapidly reading book after book where the reader’s attention should be on the meaning, not the language of the text. He chose the term ‘extensive reading’ to distinguish it from intensive reading. Michael West, who designed the methodology of extensive reading, calls it ‘supplementary reading’ (1926). W. B. Elley (1981) calls it ‘book flood’ while B. S. Mikulecky (1990) calls it ‘pleasure reading’ and S. D. Krashen (1993) terms it ‘free voluntary reading’. Although different terms are made, they have the same basis in theory as the first term used.

Another definition of extensive reading is that it is a ‘style’ or ‘way’ of reading in language-teaching terms. The four suggested styles are skimming, scanning, intensive, and extensive reading (E. William and C. Moran) [10].

Sometimes called by alternative terms such as pleasure reading, sustained silent reading, free voluntary reading or book flood, ER “means reading in quantity and in order to gain a general understanding of what is read. It is intended to develop good reading habits, to build up knowledge of vocabulary and structure, and to encourage a liking for reading” [14].

J. Bamford and R. R. Day (2005) also assert that extensive reading is reading large amounts of material to get an overall understanding while focusing on the meaning of the text than the meaning of individual words or sentences. In other words, the immediate focus is on the content being read, rather than on language skills.

Extensive reading may be done in and out of the classroom. Outside the classroom, extensive reading is encouraged by allowing students to borrow books to take home and read. In the classroom, it requires a period of time, at least 15 minutes or so to be set aside for sustained silent reading, that is for students – and perhaps the teacher as well – to read individually anything they wish to [10].

There are many reasons why extensive reading is good for language development. Extensive Reading allows students to meet the language in its natural context and see how it works in extended discourse beyond the language met in textbooks. Extensive Reading builds vocabulary. When students read a lot, they meet thousands of words and lexical (word) patterns time and time again which help them master them and predict what vocabulary and grammar may come next. Extensive Reading helps students to build reading speed and reading fluency which allows them to process the language more automatically leaving space in memory for other things. Extensive Reading builds confidence, motivation, enjoyment and a love of reading

which makes students more effective language users. It also helps lower any anxieties about language learning the students may have. Extensive Reading allows students to read or listen to a lot of English at or about their own ability level so they can develop good reading and listening habits. Extensive Reading helps students get a sense of how grammatical patterns work in context. Textbooks and other study materials introduce language patterns but typically they don't appear often enough in a variety of contexts to facilitate a deep understanding of how the patterns work.

When students read extensively, they read very easy, enjoyable books to build their reading speed and reading fluency. Extensive Reading is usually done with graded readers [6].

Graded Readers are books of various genres that are specially created for learners of foreign languages. They may be simplified versions of existing works, original stories or books that are factual in nature [5]. They are short books and audio books, encompassing both fiction and non-fiction genres, which have been specially written or adapted with the language learner in mind, so they will find them quick and easy to read [13]. They are 'graded' in the sense that they are written in simple language which has been controlled to fit precise linguistic criteria [3]. The language is graded for vocabulary, complexity of grammar structures and also by the number of words. They are made to cater for all levels from beginners through to advanced [12].

In these ways, learners have an experience of reading which is close to their experience of extensive reading in their mother tongue - without constant reference to a dictionary or the frequent need to re-read certain passages in order to understand them [3]. Finishing a novel in another language will give your students a real sense of achievement, and will motivate them to go on reading more and more. Then, of course, the more they read, the more their language proficiency increases, the more confident they feel and the more motivated they are [13].

But what is the ultimate reason behind writing special novels for language learners? When reading a text in another language, we know that learners can face certain difficulties. According to Scott Thornbury these include:

- ✓ complex or unfamiliar vocabulary or grammar, or a lack of context for unfamiliar items
- ✓ unfamiliar content
- ✓ complex text organisation
- ✓ unfamiliar text type [11].

Graded Readers can overcome these problems by controlling language and content and, as their name suggests, by being graded into levels of difficulty.

Graded Readers are based around a general core vocabulary that learners at each level should have met in their regular coursework. The amount of new and unfamiliar vocabulary is controlled, and new items are repeated and recycled so that they become familiar to the learner. The illustrations (such as photos, drawings, maps, family trees and diagrams) can give the student extra help in understanding difficult words and events in the story.

Much of the reading our learners do in the EFL or ESOL classroom is based on individual sentences, paragraphs and short reading passages from coursebooks or exam practice papers. These are generally used as a focus for language: students are asked to concentrate on vocabulary – whether individual items or collocations – or structure, and possibly to practise or develop specific reading skills and sub-skills such as scanning, skimming or guessing the meaning of words from context.

This kind of reading is known as intensive reading, and is important in preparing students for the extensive reading they can do outside the classroom, as well as for many of the internationally recognised qualifications in English, such as Cambridge English: First or TOEFL. Extensive reading, on the other hand, is about content and meaning, and refers to the kind of reading learners may already do in their own language, e.g. reading a great variety of longer texts such as novels, non-fiction or reference books, and internet articles for pleasure, to increase their general knowledge or to think about issues raised [13].

According to Lindsay Clandfield and Jo Budden there are four basic answers to the question *Why use graded readers*:

1. There is a lot of research that shows that extensive reading improves all aspects of language learning (Krashen, 1993). This includes vocabulary, speaking skills, fluency and writing skills. It also includes reading comprehension of course. In sum, people who read in English learn more English quicker than people who don't read.
2. Reading is a way of learning English without classes, without studying and without a teacher. It is perfect for learner independence.
3. Successful reading leads to more reading. This is what Ch. Nuttal (1996) calls the 'virtuous circle of reading'. The more you read, the better you become at reading. The better you become at reading, the more you want to read. The more you want to read, the more you read. And so on.
4. Reading can be a negative experience if you don't understand the majority of what is written. If you are reading extensively, you should not do this with a dictionary. Readers grade the language for the level, so that learners don't have to run to a dictionary every sentence [2].

Graded readers help learners in three ways - firstly by providing *language practice*, secondly by giving *language extension* and thirdly (and perhaps most importantly) by giving learners *psychological encouragement*. *Language practice* takes the form of reading and understanding the meaning of known or partially-known language. Each time the learner reads and understands a word, the learner's knowledge and understanding of that word is reinforced and extended. Each time the learner reads and understands a structure, the learner's knowledge and understanding of that structure is reinforced and extended. A learner who is reading a graded reader is not just enjoying a story but also practising both vocabulary and structure. Graded readers also provide a limited amount of *language extension*. Because of the grading process, learners should not encounter too many new words or new structures when reading. However, in every graded reader, the learner is likely to meet some unknown words. The meaning of these words is normally made clear through the use of illustrations or language within the text. Learners reading graded readers may also be introduced to structures which they are not yet able to use, yet can understand in their written form. Many Readers are also available on audiocassette or CD. This means they can be used for extensive listening comprehension while relaxing or travelling. If learners listen to the recording while reading the text, they can greatly increase their eye-reading speed without sacrificing comprehension.

Many experts believe that regular reading of graded texts in a foreign language also benefits the learner's writing. Regular reading adds to the 'bank of language' stored in the learner's memory, giving the learner access to words and phrases which may not have been studied in standard lessons. Whilst reading, the learner is also sub-consciously aware of the rhythms and patterns of the language which can also be transferred in written work.

Many foreign language learners lack confidence. They have a very negative image of themselves as successful foreign language learners. They fail to learn because they do not believe that they are capable of learning. Successful understanding of graded readers at a suitable level can give these learners enormous *psychological encouragement* - a sense of achievement which is more value than all the new words or structures which they may learn [3].

There are currently thousands of these books available from dozens of publishers worldwide. A comprehensive list of graded reader series is available on the Extensive Reading Foundation website (www.erfoundation.org) [6].

The books themselves come with exercises nestled amongst the chapters and, for Penguin at least, a project idea at the end. These can be used by the teacher or the student during self study. There are many, many more activities the creative teacher can use to exploit a Reader beyond a ten minute class filler or homework self study task [9].

Post-reading activities aim to get students thinking about what they have read and sharing their ideas and opinions. Apart from enabling learners to recycle language through speaking and writing activities, post-reading activities allow students to consolidate their learning without being tested. They can give personal feedback, work on a group project, recommend and generally feel like part of a reading community. All these factors add to motivation and

encourage learners to read more and more. Furthermore, they will be able to observe their own progress and refer to the descriptors laid out in the CEFR, where appropriate [13].

Here are some activities:

Make a glossary (post-reading)

1. When students have finished a Reader, ask them to write down at least eight new words that they have learned.
2. Ask them to add a definition and to write an example sentence using the word. If you have been working with a class Reader, when students have finished, put them in groups of about four people to compare their words and definitions and to compile a group glossary. You may wish to use the students' sentences later on as the basis for gapped sentences in a vocabulary review quiz [13].

Book reviews

The most obvious post-reading task is a book review. Get students to give the book a star rating from one to five. Before doing this it would help to look at the style and language of book reviews. Have a look on the websites of the publishers of your reader. They have lots of simple book reviews that can be used as models for the students' work. For children's classes take a look at www.kidsreads.com for some ideas [12].

Story Innovation

Story innovation can be a teacher-led or small-group activity. Using the original story as a basis, key words are changed to make a new story, while retaining the underlying structure. For example, students could change the characters in the folktale The Elephant and the Mouse to a whale and a little fish. While the central meaning of the tale should remain the same (the weak helps the strong and they become friends), key words and events are changed to fit in with the new characters. As the changes are made, the story is written up on a large sheet of paper.

Innovating on the Ending

Write a new ending to a story, in groups or as a whole class [4].

Research project using the issues that come up in the book [12].

In conclusion, we must mention that numerous studies have reported that extensive reading benefits language learners in a variety of ways. These studies claim that effective readers noticeably improve their reading proficiency, reading habits, reading fluency, and vocabulary retention, as well as writing and spelling. The key is to follow the principles of extensive reading: students select books that interest them, they read at their own level and pace, and they do not let unfamiliar vocabulary or expressions derail the pleasure of reading. Also, it is important to mention that using graded readers in the EFL classroom allows students to meet lots of comprehensible language, to 'step-up' their reading ability gradually level by level, provides motivating interesting reading materials and is a bridge to the eventual reading of native-level reading materials. With clear guidelines and objectives, extensive reading and graded readers offer students the opportunity to actively participate in their learning process.

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