Extensive reading in theory and in practice

Phil Keegan offers some opinions on the benefits of extensive reading programmes and Kevin Stein describes the impact on his own classes.

Richard Day gives a comprehensive definition of extensive reading that I don’t think I can improve on, so I will start with that:

“Extensive Reading (ER) in the EFL/ESL context is an approach to teaching reading whose goal is to get students reading in the English language and enjoying it. ER is based on the well-established principle that we learn to read by reading. This is true for learning to read our first language as well as foreign languages. In teaching foreign language reading, an ER approach allows students to read, read, and read.” (Day, 2011:10).

I first came across the concept of ER in educational settings from the work of Stephen Krashen (1993). It appealed to me immediately, but it was a long time before I realized it could be used in an EFL setting. Much has been written on this subject in recent years, and to get a thorough picture of the methodology, I suggest the aforementioned Day as well as Bamford and Day (1998).

Perhaps the most important principle of ER is that the students read for overall understanding and pleasure. The students do not examine any language in detail and there are no comprehension questions or tests. However, I feel strongly that follow-up tasks and extension activities have considerable value, as long as they do not in any way resemble an exam. As Kevin discusses in part two of the article, this aspect can cause teachers and school managers considerable anxiety, but it really is essential to the success of ER programmes.

Closely connected to the pleasure principle is the requirement that the reading material must be easy, which means it must be well within the comfort zone of the reader. In practice, this means there should be no more than one or two unknown words per page. Clearly for the vast majority of learners, this means using simplified texts, and graded readers are probably the best source of these. Dictionary use is discouraged in ER as it interrupts fluent reading.

Another very important principle is that students get to choose what they read and no particular reading material should be forced on them. Schools or teachers need to provide a good selection of books to choose from, both fiction and non-fiction, and which are within the students’ comfort zones as mentioned above. All the major publishers and some local ones publish graded readers, which are an excellent resource, with many titles also available in digital formats.

Many teachers experience resistance to reading from their students, who may not read much for pleasure in their first language and therefore don’t see any value to reading in a foreign language. For many teenagers, reading is simply not ‘cool’. In this respect, it is important the teacher finds ways of encouraging reading. In addition to providing a wide variety of books, the teacher must also serve as a role model and mentor. As a mentor, the teacher can recommend books to individual students and encourage them to go to a more difficult level if they feel the students can manage it. As a role model, in the event that ER takes place during class time, the teacher must lead by example and read for pleasure along with the students. However tempting it might be, the teacher should not use student reading time to catch up on marking papers or admin work. This is really very important. I firmly believe that students pay far more attention to what the teacher does and how the teacher is than to what the teacher says. Extolling the virtues and benefits of reading is all well and good, but actually doing it yourself and allowing the students to see you reading for pleasure is more meaningful. A Canadian friend of mine experienced SSR (Sustained Silent Reading) as a high school student in Vancouver many moons ago. When the signal for silent reading came, everybody in the school had to start reading silently for the designated period. And it was literally everybody, not only the students, but the teachers, admin staff, the principle, maintenance and cleaning staff, etc. Now, that’s what I call setting a good example.

In previous issues you may have read how Oxford University Press has been promoting ER. In Italy, for example, the Read on! extensive reading programme was launched in 2011 in collaboration with the British Council and the British Embassy. There are now over 15,000 students on the project reading more than 20 books every year with 900 schools and 1,000 teachers.

In Turkey, the Oxford Big Read has been running for five years. Teachers sign up their classes and their students are given a variety of tasks related to graded readers. These tasks are intended to be
creative and they include designing a photo album, a book jacket, a comic strip or a newspaper, or writing a diary entry for one of the characters. The teacher submits the students’ work and an independent panel of judges awards prizes. During the whole period the Competition has been running, about 100 000 children in Turkey have taken part and we have had the feedback from teachers that it has helped a lot of students experience the pleasure and value of reading.

I asked my colleague Kevin Stein in Japan to describe his personal experiences of implementing ER programmes.

**Kevin’s observations**

In my experience, Extensive Reading works. Aside from the fact that my high school students in Osaka, Japan routinely rank ER reading sessions as one of their favourite class activities, I have some numbers to back up my beliefs. In the past year, my students’ average reading speed went from 128 words per minute to 185 words per minute. The average number of words they could hold in working memory based on a simple read / think / write exercise (Stein, 2014) jumped from 4.21 to 6.63 words. I’m a believer in ER. But it is perhaps just that certainty that ER is a worthwhile aspect of my school’s language programme that sometimes obscures the fact that getting an ER programme in place and keeping it running has included a fair number of difficulties. While the administrators in my school never showed outright hostility towards ER, they whittled away at the amount of class time dedicated to sustained silent reading before the programme was even instituted. The problem was really never about the educational value of ER, but rather how sitting quietly in a classroom for three or more fifteen-minute sessions a week could be explained to parents who, the administrators believed, wanted nothing more than their children to be actively taught. The compromise was that for each and every period of sustained silent reading, we would have the students engage in a productive, written extension activity. Only after the administrators’ anxiety had been diminished after seeing piles of notebooks filled with writing (i.e. real work), were we able to keep the, what we believed to be minimum, three reading sessions per week.

But it’s not just administrators who get a little nervous about ER. I think that language teachers, perhaps all teachers really, see their role as an active facilitator of learning. By its very nature, ER, with its focus on helping students become autonomous learners, removes the teacher from what they might see as their central role in the classroom. When I first implemented ER in my classes 5 years ago, I came down with a mild case of T-DAD or Teacher Dereliction Anxiety Disorder, the strange feeling of guilt you get when you look at a class of students all bowed over books reading and, for at least a few moments, you truly have almost nothing to do except read yourself. I had to remind myself over and over again that my students, in reading simplified and level appropriate texts – and enjoying themselves – were doing the hard work of language learning and that, in this context, I needed to stay out of their way.

There is often a sense that once students have gotten used to the basic book keeping of ER, things will mostly take care of themselves. But I find that this is far from the case. Students go through phases of interest and disinterest, passion and dispassion. Students are fainickly about what they read in the same way any reader is fainicky. Sometimes they cannot, regardless of the number of books on the shelves, find anything to their liking. When something shifts in the classroom atmosphere and students do not seem to want to read, I set aside some time to find a way to help expose students to new books. For example, I ask all the students to pick out one of their favourite books and put it down somewhere in the room, then the whole class goes on a ‘book walk’, in which students browse the books which have been placed around the room. This can change the dynamic of a reading period and can help take students out of a dissatisfied personal space and place them in a wider community of readers in which reading can once again be fun and interesting.

**Extension activities**

I agree with Phil that tests and comprehension questions have no place on an ER programme, but that extension activities, especially creative ones, most definitely do. Here are some of the extension activities that I use.

### 1 Semantically grouped poetry

In this activity, after finishing a book, students are encouraged to find a set number of vocabulary items which they feel have something in common. I usually have the students pick 10 words. Since a large number of books in most ER libraries are genre fiction or non-fiction, the finding of 10 vocabulary words which are semantically similar or linked words is usually not too difficult. Once students have their ten words, they are encouraged to rearrange them on a new piece of paper and add any function words necessary to give the piece cohesion. These ‘poems’ are then placed around the room while the books the words were taken from are placed on a table in the centre of the class. Students read the semantic poems and try and guess which book they go with. Students are then encouraged to start their next reading session with one of the books on the table.

Here is an example from one of my female students from third year high school (18 years old):

**After the Love Story**

Red roses
White roses
Guitar on the balcony
A pink face
Thinking about
A bunch of roses
The smell of roses
Beautiful pink roses
She cannot forget
She can always smell roses
Outside on the balcony

*Semantically linked words from Red Roses by Christine Lindop, Starter Level Text, Oxford Bookworm Library series.*
2 Did you read it or not?

Students pick a book off the bookshelf. It can be a book they have read or not. They give a short summary of the book and the other students can ask up to three questions. The class has to figure out if the student who introduced the book has actually read it or not.

3 The sequel

After finishing a book, the teacher explains that a publisher is interested in hiring them to write the sequel. Before they will be awarded the contract, they must come up with three first sentences for the book as well as write a short paragraph (which can be in the first or second language depending on the level of the students) explaining what parts, or storylines, of the original book will be continued in the sequel.

4 Before and after

Students open up to a random page in their book and write what happened just before that point in the story and what happened just after. For lower level students, the before and after can be written in the students’ first language. Students can then use this summary to introduce and recommend the book to a class member.

5 Stick-figure comic summary

There are many extension activities which require students to engage with a text in a creative fashion. Making movies posters (Farrell, 2004) or drawing a picture of your favourite scene are just two examples. Unfortunately, my students often obsess over small issues of design and colour choice, so any serious drawing activity, unless I’m willing to use an hour of class time or more, only really works well as a homework assignment. For a shorter, in-class activity, I have the students draw four-panel stick-figure comic summaries of the story (or even their favourite scene in the story). The point of the activity is to give students a visual aid when they are talking about the book and introducing it to other students. This activity is especially effective when combined with a gallery walk. Simply have each student tape their four-panel comic to a wall of the room. Students, in pairs, wander about the room and discuss the comic style summaries. You might need to remind them that, as opposed to commenting on the artistic merits of the comic, their conversation should stay focused on the book content: whether they or their partner would be interested in reading it, and why.

6 Hieroglyphics

Students are encouraged to find one sentence each from the beginning, middle and end of the story. The sentences should contain phrases or words which the student has a particular desire to learn. The student then creates a sentence and translates each and every word in the sentence into one simple symbol or hieroglyphic. These three sentence hieroglyphics can then be stapled to the inside back cover of the book and added to as more students read the book. In addition to providing an opportunity for students to identify and remember vocabulary, the hieroglyphic sentences also serve as a type of comprehension check. While the hieroglyphic sentences often defy easy translation, they work well as a reminder of a particular scene. Once the scene has been identified, students must then skim through the scene in order to find the specific sentence, allowing the student to engage with a text multiple times and engaging in various types of reading. The reasoning behind this activity is that when students are forced to transform words into images and back, there is a greater chance that they will remember them (Fanselow, n.d.a).

Conclusion

As my students continue on their journey as readers, I realize that what allows ER to work over not just one, but two or three years, is not any particular idea I have, but the fact that my students and I are engaged in a process of building our programme from day to day and week to week. In the long run, ER works because ER is what a teacher and a group of learners make of it. What makes ER work is how we make it our own.

Footnotes

1 For more information, please see Read On! – an Extensive Reading (ER) project in Italian schools by Nina Prentice: MET Volume 23, Issue 4 p43.

References

Day, R. et al (2011) Bringing Extensive Reading into the Classroom. CUP.
Fanselow, J.F. (n.d.a) Neve rpxaln gaammr relus or aks yuor sdutends to: tapping the richness of sketches/images/icons for generating language.

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Kevin Stein has a MFA in creative writing, 14 years of teaching experience in Japan, and is currently studying for his dipTESOL. When not thinking about about ER, humanistic language teaching, and creative writing in the language classroom, he likes to make up silly songs with his wife and daughter.