

Why Extensive Reading should be Part of a School's Language Program

Steve Cornwell

なぜ学校語学教育に Extensive Reading(多読)をいれるべきなのか

スティーブ・コーンウェル

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to make a case for adding an extensive reading component to English language programs. It will first briefly review some of the extensive reading research that has been conducted in Japan and abroad before looking at some of the major concepts (language threshold, text coverage and frequency, simplified texts and graded readers, and meeting words and comprehensible input) that need to be understood to fully appreciate why extensive reading should be a part of a school's language curriculum. Finally, it will look at some of the common objections to extensive reading before outlining one way extensive reading could be worked into a reading program.

Key words: extensive reading, comprehension, vocabulary, curriculum

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抄 録

本稿は、英語の教科課程に extensive reading (多読) を加えることの意義を論証することを目的とする。まず国内外でおこなわれた extensive reading に関する研究を簡略に紹介し、さらに extensive reading の、語学カリキュラムにおける有効性を十分に理解するために必要な概念について論ずる。さらに、extensive reading に対する一般的な反対論を検討し、最後に extensive reading を reading の課程に効果的に組み込む方法を概観する。

キーワード: extensive reading、理解、語彙、カリキュラム

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The best way to improve one's knowledge of a foreign language is to go and live among its speakers. The next best way is to **read extensively** in it. (emphasis added)

Nuttall (1982: 168, cited in Renandya, Rajan, & Jacobs, 1999)

The purpose of this paper is to make a case for adding an extensive reading component to English language programs. It will first briefly review some of the extensive reading research that has been conducted in Japan and abroad before looking at some of the major concepts that need to be understood to fully appreciate why extensive reading should be a part of a school's language curriculum. Finally, it will look at some of the common objections to extensive reading before outlining one way extensive reading could be worked into a reading program.

My enthusiasm for extensive reading first began when I learned it is one of the best ways for students to accomplish incidental vocabulary learning of high frequency vocabulary¹ which in turn leads to an increase in their reading fluency and comprehension. (Nation, 2002) This enthusiasm increased this year after seeing the response of students to an integrated reading assignment made during our five week introductory unit whose purpose is to acclimate students to OJJC's demanding English curriculum.

This year each integrated class (Discussion, Reading, Academic Writing) assigned students the task of reading a graded reader² and writing a report summarizing it. Almost all my students were successful in reading their three books (one per subject) during the introductory unit. Furthermore, the reports the students wrote showed real understanding and several students went as far as to say that although they used to hate reading, now they liked it.

In addition, one of my first-year advisees has been borrowing books all semester and after finishing them, she has been coming to my office to discuss them. Moreover, during summer vacation another student emailed me and then came to borrow several books. Finally, at the end of our summer semester when I offered to lend some books to students to read voluntarily during the break between semesters, almost all the students in my writing class came up and borrowed one. Seeing students' newfound enthusiasm for reading has made me even more enthusiastic for extensive reading.

Making the case

This paper does not argue that extensive reading and extensive reading alone is the only way to teach reading. What it does do is make the case extensive reading in some form should be a part of a language program. Extensive reading has been around for a long time and a lot has been written about it. It is a term Harold Palmer used in the early

1900s to refer to "reading large amounts with the aim of getting an overall understanding of the material." Extensive reading has taken varied forms in language programs ranging from being the main focus of a reading course to being an add-on to an ongoing reading course, and even to being an extra-curricular activity (Day and Bamford, 1997).

In Japan research on extensive reading has been going on since at least the late 1980s when Robb and Susser (1989) examined the effectiveness of an extensive reading program when compared to a skills-based program. Today one can find numerous descriptions of different extensive reading programs. (Helgesen, 1997; Hill, 1997; Mason & Pendergast, 1997)

Furthermore, extensive reading research is easily available through an annotated bibliography with over 200 entries that is available online (Bamford, et al. 2002) Research covers such areas as adapting texts to the language class room (Young, 1999; Hirsch & Nation, 1992), extensive reading's effect on motivation and attitudes toward reading (Gee, 1999; Mason & Krashen, 1997); and the use of class readers (having the whole class read the same book) (Jacobs & Gallo, 2002; Powell, 2002).

Extensive reading has also been investigated as a source of comprehensible input for L2 acquisition (Lightbown et al, 2002; Krashen & Cho, 1995; Mason & Krashen, in press); as a way to incidentally acquire grammatical competence (Lee, Krashen & Gribbons, 1996; Stokes, Krashen & Kartchner, 1998); as a way to improve reading ability and work on academic reading (Bell, 2001; Carrell & Carson, 1997; Eskey, 2002; Grabe, 2002; Zimmerman, 1977) In addition, research has looked at extensive reading's effect on incidental vocabulary learning (Bamford & Day, 1998; Day, Omura & Hiramatsu, 1991; Nation & Wang, 1999) and writing ability in L2 (Constantino, 1995; Elley, 1991; Lai, 1993a; Lai, 1993b). Finally, a great deal has been written about setting up and running extensive reading programs (Day & Bamford, 2000; Dupuy, 1998; Edinburgh Project on Extensive Reading, 1992; Jacobs, Davis & Renandya, 1997; Waring, 1997)

Key concepts

In the next section, I want to provide some key concepts that help provide a good rationale for having an extensive reading component in a language curriculum.

Language Knowledge Threshold

There has been a lot of research on the concept of a language knowledge threshold. (Hu and Nation, 2000; Laufer and Sim, 1985; Laufer, 1989) Language knowledge threshold refers to the idea that there is "a boundary between not having and having enough language knowledge for successful language use." (Nation, 2001, p. 145) A lot of the research seems to indicate that if a learner has not crossed the threshold the probability of

comprehending a text is low. Furthermore, the same research has shown that coverage needs to be about 95% for adequate comprehension.

Text Coverage and Frequency

Text coverage refers to how many words a learner knows in a given text. For example, 80% coverage means the learner knows four out of every five words. This is an important concept as text coverage helps determine how well a learner can comprehend a text. Frequency refers to how often a word appears in English, and it is an important concept because as mentioned earlier words can be grouped into four types. For example, there are high frequency words (the 2000 most frequent words) which cover about 80% of the running words in English; academic words which cover another 8 to 10%; technical or specialized words which cover 5%; and low frequency words which cover the remaining words. (Nation, 2001, pp. 11–21)

The most frequent word in English is the word “the.” If you know the word “the,” then you know 7% of the words you will encounter in reading a running text. In fact it doesn’t take knowing as many words as you might think to reach 80% coverage. The 2,000 most frequent words in English are considered high frequency words and will provide learners with 80% coverage. High frequency words are important because learners will encounter them over and over again in both reading and listening. Unfortunately, as seen above high frequency words alone are not enough. Learners need to know more than 80% for adequate comprehension of a text.

Simplified texts and graded readers

A graded reader is a complete book that has been specially prepared with limited vocabulary.

Graded Readers (sometimes called Readers or Basal readers) are books written specifically for language learners to develop their reading ability. They are made easy to read by simplifying the vocabulary and grammar so that the learner can easily understand the story. Graded Readers are not children’s books (although some are written for teenagers and children), but in general they are books for adult language learners. (Waring & Takahashi, 2000)

Graded readers are available from many companies and are usually arranged according to levels. For example, Oxford University has a graded reader series called Bookworms that has six levels. Level one uses 400 different words and each subsequent level increases the number of words used until you reach level six which uses 2500 words.

Each graded reader usually has several thousand words.

Meeting words and Comprehensible Input

Much research says that a learner needs to see a word anywhere from six to twenty times. (Nation, 1994; Waring & Takahashi, 2000) This is why some say that teaching vocabulary is a daunting task as there are so many words to learn especially if learners need to encounter each word multiple times. (Nation estimates there are 120,000 words in English (personal communication),

Related to meeting a word is the concept of comprehensible input. A lot has been written on comprehensible input (Krashen, 1980, 1981, 1982; See Larsen-Freeman & Long (1991) for a critical analysis) and its role in improving language ability. The main idea is that learners need to encounter language that they can understand in order to develop and improve their language ability. Immersion program and sheltered-English programs are two types of curriculums that have developed out of this concept. EFL learners, such as learners in Japan, who do not live where they can immerse themselves in the target language, must find their comprehensible input somewhere. Renandya, Rajan and Jacobs (1999) quote Nuttall as saying that next to living in a foreign country, the "next best way [to improve your language ability] is to read extensively in it." Nuttall (1982, p. 168, cited in Yu, 1993)

Why Extensive Reading is Helpful

We have looked at some key concepts such as language threshold, text coverage and frequency, simplified texts and graded readers, and meeting words and comprehensible input. Extensive reading is one type of program that addresses the various challenges these concepts present. (Waring & Takahashi, 2000, pp. 7–8) list five reasons why extensive reading is good:

1. When done at the appropriate level, learners start processing words quicker and is able to begin recognizing words automatically. (Note: this is related to text coverage and graded readers; appropriate level refers to reading texts where they know 95% of the running words)
2. Research in Japan shows that extensive reading makes students more confident and motivates them to read since they can comprehend what they are reading
3. Extensive forms the habit of reading regularly which is useful in an EFL situation where opportunities to encounter the target language are not so plentiful. (By reading regularly, learners will meet the words they need to develop the vocabulary necessary to read fluently with comprehension).
4. Extensive reading helps learners notice new language and work out patterns in the

text and phrasing. (Note: this is often considered the realm of intensive reading; extensive reading can help with reinforcement.)

5. "Extensive reading provides opportunities to [revisit language] because the learner is *meeting massive amounts of language and is being repeatedly exposed to meaningful occurrences of words and grammatical structures* that are in the process of being learned." (Waring & Takahashi, 2000, p. 8) Note: this is related to meeting a word many times through reading high frequency texts where the words occur naturally as a function of frequency).

Common Objections to Extensive Reading

Reading is often taught intensively and/or by translation in EFL situations like Japan. Therefore, it is not unusual to sometimes hear objections when trying to add an extensive reading component to a language program. The following section attempts to address some common objections.

Extensive reading uses books that are too simple and too short.

One objection to extensive reading is that it uses books that are too simple and too short. In order to read for comprehension, students must understand 95% of the words they encounter. The best way to achieve this is by using the appropriate level of graded reader. Based on some pilot tests at my school, students have a basic understanding of most of the first 2000 words in English. Therefore, graded readers with a word range approaching 1800–2000 words would be appropriate.

In addition, most graded readers are 40–50 pages long and have 8,000–10,000 running words in them. If we compare this to the average reading text which uses one page readings, we can see that graded readers offer much longer reading opportunities. For example, *Ethan Frome*, a book from the Oxford bookworm's series is 53 pages long and has approximately 8500 words. And as levels go up, so do the lengths of the books.

Extensive reading asks students to do too much.

In programs where there is a lot of homework across the curriculum, it might look as if asking students to read 30 to 40 pages in a week is too much. However, if the books are at the appropriate level, students will not need to look up many words in their dictionary. Instead, they can read for comprehension and they can do it at a faster pace than if they are constantly encountering words they do not know.

Extensive reading doesn't prepare students for analyzing texts.

Some teachers worry that extensive reading does not teach students about paragraph

structure, topic sentences, transitions, etc. The focus of extensive reading is not on analysis. Studies have shown that to become a proficient reader, students need to work on both bottom-up and top-down approaches. Extensive reading is a bottom-up approach that helps student improve both fluency and accuracy, the two main components necessary for comprehension.

Extensive reading allows students to read anything.

One perceived problem with extensive reading is that when students self-select their reading material, it may run the gamut from story books for five and six year olds to juvenile fiction like "Black Beauty" and "Anne of Green Gables." This is easily compensated for by having students select their books from an appropriate group of books, or even selecting the books for the students.

Extensive reading is difficult to do if teaching literature is not your specialty.

Extensive reading does not require you to be a literature expert. In fact, you can teach the same basic reading skills that you teach when you are not doing extensive reading; skimming, scanning, reading for gist, tracking one's speed and comprehension, etc.

Extensive reading makes it difficult to check what students are reading.

It should not be any more difficult to check what students are reading when doing extensive reading than when they are doing a different type of reading. Most graded readers provide worksheets and pre-, during, and post-questions. In addition, it should be quite easy to develop Wh questions (who, what, where, why, when, how) for each chapter in a graded reader.

Most of the objections or concerns are addressed if one understands the key concepts mentioned earlier, and is aware that one has a lot of flexibility when setting up an extensive reading program. The next section describes how a program could be set up within the context of my school's first year introductory unit.

A possible program

Any school incorporating extensive reading into its program will have to do it in a way appropriate for its setting and context. This section describes one way an extensive reading program could be integrated into my school's introductory unit. As was alluded to earlier, the goals of the introductory unit is to provide students with a transition from the type of study they did in high school, to intensive English study in an environment that is full of English. As such, the introductory unit discussion classes work a lot on classroom language, circumlocution, and how to have a conversation in English culminating with a

final project that is a self-introduction.

Academic Writing works on having students produce a variety of writings with the emphasis not on any one rhetorical pattern but rather on building confidence in writing through producing many pieces. Cornwell and McKay (2000) found in their research on writing apprehension that 75% of first year students had never written beyond the sentence level when in high school so confidence building through self-expression is warranted.

Extensive Reading could form the basis of the Introductory unit's Reading Program. In choosing books we must remember that a key component of extensive reading is having learners read at an appropriate level. Appropriate refers to a level that is not too hard, nor too easy. Hirsh and Nation (1992) feel that readers should only encounter one or two unknown words in 100 running words.

OJJC could select 5 or 6 books for each level with input from teachers. The appropriate levels can be determined by a combination of Vocabulary Levels Tests (Nation, 2001) and consulting with students before the semester as to which level they feel comfortable with. Although most graded readers are stories, there is no reason that these stories could not be connected to themes in the OJJC curriculum (For a description of the OJJC curriculum, see Kim and Cornwell, 2000) like peace, science and religion, human rights, or crises of life. For example, *A Christmas Carol* deals with issues of character; *Kidnapped* deals with a boy thrown into slavery; *Ethan Frome* looks at poverty. All three books are classics and are found in level three of the Oxford Bookworms series. All three could be connected to issues that are studied in the first year curriculum.

Learners could be required to read 5 books over the five weeks. Nation (2001) suggests that reading a book every one or two weeks will allow learners to encounter a new word "... before the memory of it is lost." (pp. 169) Book reports or summaries could be required of each book with an oral summary being given in discussion class each week. As mentioned earlier many publishers also publish worksheets and even quizzes so that there are ways to monitor what it is being read without placing too many demands on the teacher. The worksheets, of course, could be something that are done in class which is the topic of the next paragraph.

One question that often comes up is what to do during the actual class? While some reading in class is fine, having the entire period devoted only to reading in class is not acceptable in rigorous language programs such as ours. But, there are many activities beside reading that can be done in class to complement extensive reading. Timed reading activities and dictionary use activities along with activities that formally teach reading skills such as reading for gist, skimming, and scanning should be developed for use in class. In addition higher level skills such as predicting what will happen next can be introduced in class and then practiced with the book the learner is currently reading. There are also a lot

of resources available that provide guidelines on how to manage an extensive reading program in class. See Waring's extensive reading support page. (Waring, 2002)

Finally, vocabulary learning techniques can be taught in class during the five-week introductory unit. If students need to know the 2000 high frequency words and the 570 Academic Word List words in order to be able to read fluently with adequate comprehension, then we should do every thing possible to help them. It is not enough to leave vocabulary learning up to the learners given the important role it plays in proficiency. There are many ways to learn and practice vocabulary and we can introduce some of the techniques during the introductory unit.

At the end of the five weeks, teachers can remind learners that extensive reading is something they can continue on their own. Forms to monitor their reading can be distributed and, if teachers desire, some type of extra credit based on extensive reading can be devised. The extra credit work could be monitored by book reports or comprehension quizzes. After the intro unit is over, reading classes will continue (during units 1–4) with the current system that combines unified textbooks with practice activities in skimming, scanning, etc.

Conclusion

This paper has made a case for adding extensive reading to language programs. It has presented key concepts that are addressed by extensive reading and has also looked at some objections that are commonly raised. Finally, it has briefly outlined how extensive reading might be incorporated into OJJC's introductory unit. Almost any school can benefit from extensive reading along with a comprehensive vocabulary program (See Cornwell & Bramley this volume). As students read texts at the appropriate level they will develop higher comprehension which in turn will lead to higher proficiency. As proficiency goes up, students can increase the number and types of texts they attempt to read. Such an upward spiral is a win-win situation.

One final specific example may help make the above point clear. Up to this point this article has 2857 words. Over eighty six per cent (84.49) of the words are from the first 1000 most frequent words (1–1000) and 4.39% are from the second 1000 most frequent words (1001–2001). Academic word list vocabulary makes up another 7.74% of the words. There are only 111 (3.38) words which do not fall into any of these categories. The point I want to make is that if a student knows her high frequency and academic word list vocabulary, she would have 96.62% coverage of this text. That is more than enough for her to read and comprehend this academic paper. Isn't that a goal worth aiming for?

End notes

- 1 Vocabulary can be divided into four categories; low frequency, high frequency, academic, and technical. These categories will be discussed in greater detail later in the paper.
- 2 Graded readers are books written with a limited vocabulary usually chosen on the basis of frequency.

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