

Selecting Extensive Reading Materials

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Abstract

This article offers guidance to teachers and students in selecting materials for extensive reading (ER). First, the article explains characteristics of ER and reviews some of the potential gains for students who do ER. Second, the article considers criteria for teachers to bear in mind when selecting ER materials. Third, the article then suggests ways that teachers and students can find ER materials. Fourth, guidance is provided to students for when they select what to read from among the ER materials available to them. Finally, advice is given on integrating ER with course textbooks.

Keywords : Extensive reading, reading, reading materials.

Introduction

Understanding spoken and/or written communications in a language comprises an essential path towards proficiency in that language (Ellis, 2005). “Comprehensible input” (Krashen, 2011) is a well known term used as part of this concept, with the idea being that learners build their language competence when they understand communications in the language. Reading provides a means of obtaining such comprehensible input. To promote reading, many approaches to language learning include what is called Extensive Reading (ER) (Day & Bamford, 1998; Extensive Reading Foundation, 2011; Jacobs & Farrell, 2012).

Table 1
Displays Characteristics of ER

Characteristic of Extensive Reading	Explanation
The difficulty level of the reading materials is such that students can understand what they are reading with little or no assistance.	Students may not necessarily know all the language items, such as vocabulary and grammar structures, in the reading materials, but they are able to and motivated to figure out the main ideas. Sometimes, students read materials that are at or below their current level of language competence.
Students read large quantities of reading materials.	This contrasts with intensive reading in which students usually read short passages, such as reading passages in a textbook. Instead, in ER, students read entire books, short stories, articles and collections of articles, including both non-fiction and fiction.
Students often have some choice in what they read	While sometimes an entire class will read the same ER material, more often, individual students or small groups of students choose their own reading materials.

After students finish a book or other work, they may do activities, but these activities are designed to enhance thinking and enjoyment and promote further reading. Care is taken to avoid activities that may discourage reading.	Too often, post reading activities have discouraged students from reading more. With ER, sometimes there may be no post reading task, other than encouragement to read more. In ER, when post reading tasks are used, they tend to be short and involve student in advertising to peers what they have read.
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Research suggests that ER boosts overall language competence, including vocabulary, grammar and spelling knowledge, reading skill, and writing ability, as well as overall knowledge of the world (Krashen, 2011; Renandya, 2007). The remainder of this article first looks at characteristics of ER materials. The next and longest part of the article provides ideas of how to find such materials. Then the article offers guidance to students in selecting from among the ER material available to them. The final section makes suggestions on how ER can be a well fitting part of general courses on reading or on

Characteristics of Extensive Reading Materials

Appropriate reading materials constitute an essential foundation of any ER program. Students need a large quantity of engaging, approachable, readily available materials if they are to read extensively. This section of the article discusses some points to consider regarding the type and quantity of ER materials.

Materials' Reading Level

As suggested in Table 1 above, ER materials should most often be at students' independent reading level. Reading level can be divided into three categories: frustrational, instructional, and independent. Students find frustrational level materials too difficult to understand, even with assistance from teachers and other resources. Instructional level reading

materials can be difficult for students, but can become comprehensible with significant assistance from teachers, peers, and other resources, such as online dictionaries.

Normally, students find ER materials to be at the third reading level: their independent reading level. In other words, students can comprehend the materials with little or no outside assistance. Students make such materials comprehensible by using clues, such as contextual clues, and their knowledge of the content area. Furthermore, some language items need not be understood in order to comprehend and enjoy a reading text.

Day and Bamford (1998) suggest that reading materials below students' independent level can also be suitable for ER. Reasons for the potential suitability of such easier materials include:

- a. Less challenging materials build students' confidence. Students reading in a new language may lack confidence.
- b. When students understand the language of what they read, they can devote more cognitive resources to other activities, such as considering how ideas and information in the reading connect to their own lives.
- c. Language challenge can be introduced to easier-to-read materials by adding additional activities. For instance, during or after reading, students can take part in peer speaking activities in which they discuss ideas from the reading in groups of two to four.

As stated above, an ER program needs materials at and perhaps below students' independent reading levels. This becomes complicated because in every class, even in programs that use streaming to group students according to language level, students in any one class will probably be reading at somewhat different levels, and students' levels are likely to rise as they read more. Thus, materials should be at a variety of reading levels, so that all students have

materials at their independent reading level. Students may turn away from reading if the materials are too difficult.

As a side point, when students are keen on a topic, an author, or a particular book, they will put in the effort necessary to comprehend materials above their independent reading level. For instance, students can bring instructional level materials down to their independent level by rereading or by consulting online dictionaries and peers. This leads to a second point about characteristics of ER materials: interest level.

Interest Level

Students may hesitate to read unless they find materials that interest them. Two areas in which students' interests may diverge are topics and text types. As to topics, some students enjoy reading about our fellow animals, while others enjoy materials about food, fantasy, Facebook, or families. The list of interests is long and growing. In addition to topic, students also vary as to the types of text they prefer to read. For instance, some students prefer mysteries, while others are keen on adventure. Furthermore, students' interests can change. Indeed, one role for teachers and peers in an ER program involves introducing new topics and text types.

Several means exist for teachers to learn what students want to read. First, teachers can observe what their students past and present read in various languages. Second, the International Reading Association's website offers lists of books popular among different age groups and their teachers (International Reading Association, 2014). However, books enjoyed by first language readers may be at the frustrational level of students of the same age reading in a second language. Third, teachers can consult librarians. Last but not least, teachers can collaborate with students to create, administer, and analyze a survey of reading interests.

Ideas for Finding Extensive Reading Materials

For an ER program to succeed, students need materials that they are capable of reading and want to read. Below are 16 ideas for finding such materials, in addition to the standard route of schools and other educational institutions purchasing the materials. No doubt, readers of this article and their students will have more ideas.

1. Online materials are becoming increasingly available. These materials often come with audio accompaniment. Unfortunately, any list of sources of online materials quickly goes out of date. Consult colleagues, librarians, and students for the latest information. One source is Extensive Reading Central (n.d.). Of course, online resources require reliable hardware and internet connections.
2. Students can become keypals, i.e., internet friends, with students their age in other locations. These locations can be other classrooms, schools, cities, or even countries. Social networks offer a related source of reading materials. Of course, especially with younger students, care must be taken, as the internet can be a dangerous place.
3. Former students can donate materials that they no longer want.
4. Similarly, graduating students can donate books as farewell gifts to the school and as a way to leave a bit of themselves behind. They might also want to write a message to future readers of the books and include their name in the books they donate. For example, in their notes to future readers, graduating students could explain why the books meant something special to them when they were younger.
5. Teaching and administrative staff can contribute books. Maybe after a thorough spring cleaning, they have books that they no longer have space for. Some adults use the “Ten

Year Rule,” i.e., if they have not read a book in ten years, it is time to pass it on to someone more likely to read it.

6. Students’ family members may have reading materials to donate. As with any donation solicitation, it is important to specify the types of books requested; otherwise, many of the donated books will not be appropriate to your students.
7. Old magazines, yearbooks, etc. can also become ER materials. Anything that students might enjoy reading is fine.
8. Civic organizations, foundations, embassies and consulates, and companies are eager to help education, and almost everyone agrees that reading is fundamental to education.
9. Teachers can exchange ER materials with colleagues. After one class has read many of the books in one classroom’s collection, why not exchange some of all the books with another class?
10. Subject files can be compiled with articles from newspapers and magazines. Such files allow students to pursue their interest in particular topics. Students can help find and bring in new articles for a particular file, and then can suggest new files on different topics.
11. Second-hand book shops and families’ moving sales can be treasure troves of reading materials.
12. Students can swap books with each other. To facilitate the swap, they can draw numbers to decide who can choose which book or who swaps with who. If Student A receives a book that Student B wants, Student A can bring the book for the next swap session. After students read the book they received in the swap, they can give their reaction to the person with whom they swapped.

Swapping can be a regular affair to encourage students to think ahead about which books they might want to swap with classmates. A good time for swapping is just before a school break, to help students gather reading materials to enjoy during the break.

13. Student writing, after it has been polished and suitably published, and teacher-written materials tailored especially for students offer rich veins of ER materials.
14. Libraries and bookstores. For instance, some public libraries periodically have book sales. What the public libraries in one town do is to invite teachers to shop one day before the sale is open to the general public. That way, teachers have the best choices in order to stock their class library. Bookstores often have special bargain sections with reduced-price books.
15. Some bookstores will give students a tour – highlighting areas of the store of specific interest to a particular class or to particular students - and a special discount after the tour. Some students, even older students, have never been to a bookstore, may not know how they are organized, and may not feel comfortable spending time reading and browsing.
16. On students' birthdays, students and their families can donate books to the class library. These can be a new or gently used, but they should be ones that students believe will be enjoyed by classmates. Students whose birthday falls on a date when school is not in session can donate on their "half birthday," i.e., the day six months before their birthday. Along the same lines, students or others can donate a book to honor:
 - a. a friend, relative, teacher (such as on the teacher's birthday or a holiday).
 - b. a favorite author's birthday, e.g., Roald Dahl.

If students cannot afford to purchase even a used book for the class library, some options are:

- a. The students tell the teacher the title of a favorite book, and the teacher purchases it using money from special funds, such as a budget for purchasing books or money from the school's Parent Teacher Association.
- b. These students select from donated books, read a few, and then choose the one that will have their name on it.

Helping Students Choose ER Materials Wisely

As noted in Table 1, normally, in ER, students choose their reading materials. The following questions and suggestions guide students to choose well.

1. What types of books do you enjoy – fiction, non-fiction, comic books, encyclopedias, joke books? Look for that type of book.
2. What topics do you enjoy? Look for more books on those topics.
3. Who are your favourite authors? Can you find more books by them?
4. What is a tv show, video game, or movie that you enjoy? Can you find books that are connected to them?
5. Does the book have pictures, drawings, and other visuals? Do they help you understand and enjoy the book? Are you comfortable reading a book that does not have many visuals?
6. What length of book do you like to read?
7. What about the size of the print? Is it too big, too small, or just nice?
8. What books do your friends and other classmates enjoy?
9. What books do older students and adults say that they enjoyed when they were your age?
10. If you have already read a book, would you enjoy reading it again? Sometimes, you can enjoy a book just as much or even more the second or third time you read it.

11. Spend about five minutes reading a book before you decide to choose it. Is the book interesting? Is it understandable?
12. Try the “Five Finger Test.” Open the book to any page and start reading. Every time you meet a word or term that you do not know, put a finger on that word. If you run out of fingers on one hand before you finish the page, the book may be too difficult for you to enjoy. To say the same thing another way, if there are five or more unknown words on a page, you may want to wait a few months before you read that book.
13. It is okay to change your mind. Maybe after you have read a book for a while, you will change your mind about it. Maybe when you are choosing books, you think you like a particular book, but after reading it some more, you change your mind. That is okay. Stop reading that book and start reading another. Therefore, choose more than one book. Then, if you decide that you do not like a book you chose, you have other books to read.

Incorporating Extensive Reading with Other Types of Reading

Once ER materials have been obtained and students know how to choose among the ER materials on offer, finding time for ER becomes a key challenge. Courses dedicated solely to ER do exist; however, more often ER is a component (sometimes an optional component) of an overall course on reading or even a four skills (speaking, listening, reading, and writing) course. The problem becomes finding time in the curriculum for ER. Brown (2009) listed some reasons why administrators, teachers, students, and other stakeholders may be reluctant to set aside class time for ER.

1. The positive effects of ER may not emerge on exams until after a year or more (Davis, 1995).
2. ER represents a move away from teacher-fronted direct instruction. Stakeholders may not be comfortable with this (Renandya & Jacobs, 2002).
3. It can be difficult to monitor whether students are really reading the ER materials.

When considering the place of ER in the curriculum, a key point to understand involves the interdependence of ER and IR (Intensive Reading). In IR, students read short passages, seldom more than two to three pages and, in the case of less proficient students, often less than a page. IR materials are at students' instructional reading level, i.e., they need assistance provided by teachers to understand the materials. (See Table 1 near the beginning of this article to contrast these IR characteristics with the characteristics of ER.)

IR and ER fit together well for a few reasons. First, in IR, students receive explicit instruction in reading skills, such as guessing meaning from context, understanding the roles of topic sentences and headings, and self-questioning while reading. Second, IR can also be a time for explicit instruction in grammar and vocabulary. All this skill and knowledge can aid ER by

enhancing the comprehensibility of materials that might otherwise have been too difficult for students. At the same time, IR needs ER, because to really master skills and information learned via explicit instruction, students need time for more natural language use (Ellis, 2005). Toward this end, ER offers a range of topics and genres well beyond what any textbook can hope to do. Furthermore, while textbooks are often seen as work, ER strives to be a more enjoyable path to language competence.

Brown (2009) proposed ways that textbooks, a learning vehicle most often associated with IR, can also foster ER. Below are some of his suggestions.

1. Textbooks can specifically recommend ER. Helgesen, Brown, and Mandeville (2004) is one reading textbook which does that.
2. Textbooks can suggest generic post reading activities for ER, such as logs in which students record information on and reactions to the books they have read.
3. Graded readers are books that are specifically written or simplified with language learners in mind. Textbooks can promote specific graded readers relevant to topics in the textbook. Excerpts from those graded readers can be included in the textbooks, along with activities that go with the readers.

Returning to the links between IR and ER, additional suggestions for combining textbooks and ER include:

1. As students learn conversational skills, such as asking for clarification, they can practice those skills by discussing the ER they have done, e.g., students in groups of four taking turns to tell each other about a book they have read (Jacobs & Gallo, 2002).
2. Similarly, as students learn writing skills, those skills can be practiced when writing about the books they have read or are reading.

3. More and more ER books come with audio, which can be combined with reading in various ways. (For more on Extensive Listening, join the Extensive Listening list at <https://groups.yahoo.com/neo/groups/extensivelistening/info> or see Renandya, 2012.)
4. Doing ER can be a sponge activity, i.e., something students do to soak up extra time near the end of an activity, lesson, or day.

Conclusion

This article has explained characteristics of ER, discussed considerations in selecting ER materials, offered ideas for finding appropriate materials, provided guidance to help students choose wisely from amongst the available ER materials, and proposed means of incorporating ER into courses on reading or overall language skills learning. Despite the strong support for ER from research, theory, and many teachers' and students' successful personal experiences with ER, ER programs do not always succeed. Teachers' enthusiasm constitutes a key ingredient of successful ER programs (Renandya & Jacobs, 2002). This article has described ways that enthusiastic teachers can compile ER materials and guide students to select from and read these materials. Perhaps equally important is teachers' role as models of enthusiastic reading of materials in whatever language, because as Nuttall (1989, p. 192) very aptly wrote, "Reading is like an infectious disease: it is caught not taught."

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