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Extensive Reading in Low-Level ESL: Can It Be Done?

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Abstract

Extensive reading (ER), or free voluntary reading, refers to frequent reading of self-selected material for pleasure, understanding, or information, which is done on the learners' own time, separate from academic reading. Research shows the effectiveness of extensive reading in bolstering reader confidence and fluency in English, building vocabulary, and allowing the reader to notice sentence structure (Bamford & Day, 1998, 2004; Krashen, 2004a). After having observed extensive reading used effectively in a low beginning-level ESL (English as a second language) class that included LESLLA learners, the author was intrigued to see for herself if ER was feasible in her adult ESL class consisting of students with varying levels of education. Three basic questions came to mind: Can it even be done? Why do it? How would one implement it in such a class when graded readers are too difficult? The author turned to children's literature and to fiction, nonfiction, and biographies that are of interest to adults. She found that her adult LESLLA students enjoyed the benefits of reading books. In this paper, she shares examples of how she adapted and evaluated ER for her ESL class, offering guidelines and advice to others who may wish to implement a similar program at the lower levels of language proficiency.

Introduction

Even with research evidence in its favor, Extensive Reading is not normally pursued as an activity in the adult ESL classroom for many reasons, the main ones being the difficulty of finding suitable reading material, the time commitment, and skepticism regarding how LESLLA learners might benefit from such a program. These LESLLA students come to ESL classes with a dual purpose: to learn English and to acquire literacy. These adults are often just beginning to connect meaning with print (Vinogradov, 2008).

The author believes that ER can be incorporated into ESL programs for beginning and intermediate-level students, which include LESLLA learners, and that the power of ER will become evident. She was curious if she could implement an ER program into a class that included low-educated second language literacy acquisition (LESLLA) learners. Is ER even feasible in such a context and for these learners? Why do it? What are the benefits to the learners? What are the steps and cost to set up ER? How could ER materials be adapted to a multilevel class? The purpose of this paper is threefold: to answer these questions; to show how, using her own class as a test case, the author evaluated the feasibility of implementing an ER program and met with success; and to share pedagogical advice. The question of “Can it be done?” was answered with a resounding, “Yes, it can!”

The author will first provide a review of relevant published literature on the use of extensive reading: its defining characteristics, why it is thought to be so important to language learning, and some potential limitations and criticisms. Evidence will be offered from the author’s observations and personal experiences. The remainder of the paper gives guidelines, advice, and resources for teachers interested in implementing ER in their own ESL adult classes that include LESLLA learners, which is followed by the author’s conclusions.

A Review of Relevant Literature

The characteristics and benefits of extensive reading for ESL learners at intermediate and higher levels have been discussed a great deal in published literature over the past two decades, but little work has been done on its benefits for emergent readers with intermediate language proficiency. In this literature review, the author will highlight some of the main points to provide rationale for ER's importance to second-language literacy development. This will be followed by key scholarly suggestions for the implementation of an ER program.

What Is Extensive Reading?

Extensive reading, also known as ER and free voluntary reading, in the ESL/EFL student's own free time is defined by Bamford and Day (1998) as an approach to the teaching and learning of second-language reading in which learners read large quantities of interesting books that are at their reading level, with an emphasis on the enjoyment of reading, not detailed comprehension, language study, or instruction in reading skills. According to many scholars (Bamford & Day, 1998; Krashen, 2004a; Vinogradov, 2008; Young-Scholten & Maguire, 2008), ER refers to the practice of students' frequent reading of a variety of self-selected books or other materials, with a focus on understanding the overall meaning. Maley (2009) summarizes the benefits of ER as discussed by Bamford and Day (1997), Krashen (2004a), and Waring (2009), including promotion of learner autonomy while reading extensively: learners can start and stop at will, read at their own speed, visualize and interpret what they are reading, and notice language and vocabulary. Extensive reading is only one of several terms used to describe this type of reading practice. Krashen (2004a) uses *free voluntary reading* or *recreational reading*, while others refer to the activity as *Sustained Silent Reading* (SSR). He has also used the term *compelling input* to refer to the type of input or reading material that is so interesting that one forgets it is in another language.

Why is extensive reading important to L2 literacy development?

What are the benefits of ER to ESL learners in general and to LESLLA learners in particular? Research (Bamford & Day, 1998, 2004; Maley, 2009; Chen & Squires, 2011) has shown that those who recreationally read a lot of books in the second language show improvement in reading, writing, grammar, and vocabulary. Mason (2005) stated that L2 learners who are thoroughly involved with books on a frequent basis also show evidence of improvement in comprehension and sentence structure. Extensive reading may increase reading fluency and confidence, since the learners are reading at their own reading level as they build new vocabulary and sight word recognition in the context of the everyday language of interesting stories (Krashen, 2004a). ER can lead learners to want to read more and more books.

Good things happen to students who read a great deal in the new language. Research studies show they become better and more confident readers, they write better, their listening and speaking abilities improve, and their vocabularies get richer. In addition, they develop positive attitudes toward and increased motivation to study the new language. (Bamford & Day, 2004, p. 1)

The benefits of ER in an ESL class are shown to be numerous, but what would be the impact of extensive reading on LESLLA learners, for whom reading is often laborious? ER offers comprehensible input through print awareness and repeated exposure to vocabulary in context to help build language competence. Krashen (2004a) has argued emphatically that recreational reading results in L1 and L2 language and literacy development, which should also be true even at the lowest levels of education within an adapted ER program. A study by Greenberg, Rodrigo, Berry, Brinck, and Joseph (2006) discussed the benefits of extensive reading courses for adult ESL students. "Students increased their reading ability in the target language, developed positive attitudes toward reading, increased motivation to read, and made gains in various

aspects of proficiency in the target language, including vocabulary and writing” (Bamford & Day, 1998, as cited in Greenberg et al., 2006, p. 82). It seems that these resulting benefits of ER could apply to all levels of emergent readers, assuming that easier-to-read materials can be found.

Limitations and criticisms of extensive reading in ESL classes—and some answers. One of the limitations of extensive reading in general is that interesting books for adults at the lower literacy levels are in very short supply. Vinogradov (2008) wrote that key to the development of literacy in LESLLA learners is the quantity of books necessary for ER to be common practice in low-literate L2 adult programs. Some teachers may feel that their students could not successfully utilize an ER program. Bamford and Day (1998) argue that reading should not be put off until the students can understand the language. “ER is appropriate at all stages of language learning: it is never too early—or too late—to learn to read in a second language” (p. xiv). Another criticism against ER is the work involved to set up a new ER program and the perceived insufficient time given an already crowded curriculum, combined with skepticism concerning ER’s benefits. According to Rodrigo et al. (2007), it is true that little time is devoted to any sort of ER in L2 classes. Vinogradov and Liden (2009) stated that teaching LESLLA learners is different from teaching learners with strong first-language literacy. There is often a mismatch between the oral skills of a LESLLA learner and his or her very low skills with the written word, making ER seem impossible. Another deterrent is the cost of books to fund an adequate library. However, Bamford and Day’s (1998) answer is just to start small and “let the positive results of ER prove itself” (p. 46), because the importance of ER in the curriculum will outweigh these issues as the teacher realizes the resulting benefits.

What about the lack of ER books at the lowest levels? Young-Scholten and Maguire’s (2008) article on the topic of extensive reading for very low-literate immigrant adults concluded that the lowest-level adult L2 readers are not well served: “ER cannot be considered without a much better supply of fiction than currently exists for LESLLA readers”

(p. 155). Can easy-to-read books be developed to serve these adult ESL learners? Young-Scholten's undergraduate students developed and wrote books specifically for LESLLA learners at different morpho-syntactic stages and at several reading levels, with a goal of six books per reader. After visiting with particular LESLLA students, the ESL program writers wrote and rewrote their books with these students in mind. They field-tested their books as they considered features common to children's literature to which adults can relate: cohesion; narrative voice; patterned repetition; relating pictures to text; standard literacy devices of plot, characterization, and setting; sophistication level; interest; appeal; and cultural sensitivity (Young-Scholten & Maguire, 2008, pp. 149–151). This program is an example of how the need for more literacy-level books can be fulfilled.

So, does extensive reading, a key to the development of literacy for ESL learners, have to wait? Perhaps not, if teachers can persevere and turn to sources besides the scarcely available graded readers at the “starter” stage.

Possible Reading Texts for LESLLA Learners

Graded readers or graphic readers are written with second-language learners in mind, but they are still too difficult for LESLLA learners. The search for other texts can be challenging. Like Young-Scholten's graduate students who wrote books for a neighboring ESL program, ESL teachers can write their own books. Vinogradov (2008) suggested the Language Experience Approach (LEA) to use classroom experiences to create texts in students' own words, accompanied by pictures. The texts tap into the oral strengths of students and are later printed and shared, which creates ownership of the stories since the learners created them. Another suggestion comes from scholars (Reid, 2002; Chen & Squires, 2011) who recommended children's literature for native speakers of English. This literature provides entertainment and information on a wide variety of

topics for all age groups, including adult ESL emergent readers, to help them get “hooked on books” (Bamford & Day, 1998, p. 61).

This leads into the subject of this paper: how ER was implemented into an ESL class with 75% LESLLA learners. Guidelines and reflections will be offered for other teachers interested in starting ER in their classes.

Implementing and Evaluating the Success of Extensive Reading

The central aim of this paper is to explore through research the possibilities of adapting an ER program to even the lowest level of emergent reading. Where LESLLA learners are concerned, the teacher should first consider how reading develops with adult learners of reading in an L2 program and then try different approaches (Vinogradov & Liden, 2009). Think about how the procedures and materials should be adapted so that an ER program will have a successful outcome in a multilevel class with emergent readers and LESLLA learners. The author’s observation of a successful pilot ER program in a low-level beginning ESL class provided some answers to the research questions mentioned above.

Extensive reading in low-beginning ESL classes with LESLLA learners. An ER pilot program was developed in two noncredit open-enrollment low-beginning ESL adult classes at a community college. The classes met five days per week. The learners were of mixed gender and ages, ranging from the twenties to the seventies, and mostly came from Spanish-speaking countries. The two classes were chosen because of the high number of LESLLA learners with a low level of education from their native countries. The exact education level of the class members was not recorded, but suffice it to say that many of the students had less than an elementary sixth-grade level of education. The author observed 20 of the 20-minute extensive-reading sessions out of approximately 26 hours of extensive reading over 16 weeks.

The teacher's goals and implementation steps for the pilot project shed light on the logistical challenges, such as getting the timing for the ER portion of class on a workable schedule and obtaining books. The core idea was that, as the learners' extensive-reading opportunities increased, their language and literacy development would progress. To convince the students of this, one teacher introduced ER by saying, "Reading every day is one of the best ways to learn vocabulary. English has so much more vocabulary than most languages. When you read, you will learn lots of new words to help your English" (personal communication, April 19, 2012). Daily ER time of 20 minutes was provided for each class period, during which the students chose a book from about 50 graded readers on display within the classroom. Students did not take books home because of the scarcity of books at the starter level. The teachers had *oral literacy events* once a week, during which the students interacted in pairs or groups and discussed their books. The students kept a reading log and were proud of their reading accomplishments. They reported that the ER program helped them learn new vocabulary and enabled them to share book reading with their children. The students said that their reading confidence increased. Because they loved to read the books so much, they wanted more time to read in class. These observations convinced the author that ER was not only feasible in a low-beginning ESL class, but that it was also extremely beneficial in stimulating the students' language development and oral communication skills.

Extensive reading in an ESL adult class with LESLLA learners.

The author implemented extensive reading in her ESL one-day-a-week women's class, which consisted of 15–20 adults in their twenties to fifties, all native speakers of Arabic from the countries of Yemen or Morocco. A third of the students were preliterate, while others were LESLLA learners who had little or no primary language education and little experience with the Roman alphabet. The class was multilevel English, with the majority of the students at a very low level of reading and writing, although a few students had an intermediate level of listening to and speaking English.

The author became intrigued with the idea of piloting an extensive-reading program into her curriculum based on her observations of its success in the low-beginning class. Since ER had never been done before with this group, the author wondered if it would boost these students' language and literacy development in English. A bit of experimentation was needed: find books at an easy enough reading level, present the idea to the students, and then let the students borrow the books. In the end, the author discovered that, yes, ER can work with LESLLA learners, even one day a week and for only a short period of three to six months. Any interested ESL teacher can start an ER program in his or her low-beginning or LESLLA-learner class.

Guidelines for Implementing and Evaluating Extensive Reading in an Adult ESL Class

The remainder of this paper provides guidelines and steps based on the author's research, following the key points for implementing ER given by Bamford and Day (2004) and Maley (2009). Examples will be given from the author's own experience with adapting ER for her class.

1. **Gain support from the ESL program director/coordinator to start extensive reading.** Speak with the director of the ESL program about implementing a balanced literacy program to include top-down and bottom-up approaches to reading (Vinogradov & Liden, 2009) by teaching *intensive* reading skills and strategies and introducing *extensive* reading to improve reading fluency and confidence. Waring (2009) suggested that ER should fit within the goals, aims, and objectives of the larger ESL curriculum. When making a case for an ER program, it is important to explain that ER would complement the existing intensive instruction and enable students to practice their reading skills independently. Vinogradov (2008) contended that although

the Whole-Part-Whole method of going back and forth between top-down and bottom-up activities is critical ... emergent readers need the constant engagement and high interest of top-down learning, as well as the systematic and building-block approach of bottom-up learning. We have to keep going up and down the ladder. (p. 10).

2. **Search for books at or below the learners' reading abilities.** Since graded readers were too difficult for her class, the author searched a popular online bookstore for easy-to-read whole books or "reading readiness" books of children's literature. According to Krashen (2004a), easy books provide a taste for reading and a background knowledge that will lead to and facilitate the reading of other books. Both Krashen (2004a) and Mason (2005) have called ER a bridge to heavier reading that leads to more-advanced stages. Mikulecky (2011) concurred: "Readers will not stay with light and easy reading as their tastes develop and broaden" (p. 20). Price becomes an important factor. Some ESL programs may fund the books for the extensive reading program, which keeps the cost burden off the teacher. In this case, the author self-funded her own ER book collection fairly inexpensively.
3. **When selecting books for the ER library, look for "chapter books."** Obtain a wide variety of whole books at various reading levels, starting with the very early basic level (preschool or kindergarten) and moving on to more-advanced, longer books with chapters (in the second- to third-grade range) and of different genres that are culturally appropriate for the student population of the class. Reid (2002) and Mikulecky (2011) stressed the importance of a student's not just reading magazines, newspapers, and short stories for ER experience, but of his or her reading whole books by one author whom the student self-selects. These "chapter books" will help the students feel a sense of accomplishment as they read them. Think about what your adult ESL students might enjoy reading.

Studies have shown (e.g., Krashen, 2004a) that the more interesting the texts are to the readers, the more the readers will enjoy them and begin looking for more to read on their own. Again, Krashen (2004a) called this *compelling input*, or input that is so interesting that a reader forgets he or she is reading in another language and is in a state of “flow,” which happens when the reader is “lost in a book” (p. 1).

The author looked for reading books starting at the lowest elementary grade levels, ones that provided good picture support (no comprehension questions or lists of vocabulary). She ordered books at the earliest beginning reader level on up to higher levels, because her multilevel class was populated by preliterate, LESLLA, low to beginning, and higher readers. As some fiction titles can be childish, it was necessary to carefully select titles that would be appropriate for and interesting to adults. The author successfully found books at these lower levels by turning to reading-readiness or step-into-reading books in children’s literature with a variety of titles in the genres of fiction, nonfiction, and biography.

4. **Introduce extensive reading to the class.** Explain to the students the benefits of ER, and say that they will be reading for their own understanding and enjoyment. Reading books extensively is a new experience for most ESL students, not only LESLLA learners. The author explained to her students that they would be able to choose real books to benefit their reading, learn new vocabulary, and acquire information. The purpose of reading for pleasure and information involves no tests, no exercises, and no dictionaries (Bamford & Day, 2004).
5. **Read aloud from the books to the class, modeling how to read.** Reading aloud to ESL students helps motivate them to read independently. Model how to read, paying attention to concepts of print—such as where to start reading in a book, the page numbers, and the main events and ideas—and prediction, and demonstrating

pronunciation, expression, and emotion. This intensive reading practice “helps build sound/symbol correspondences and helps students feel comfortable in the alien print environment” (Bamford & Day, 1998, as cited in Greenberg et al., 2006, p. 85).

When the author introduced the ER program to her class, she read aloud, with emotion and expression, *A Girl Named Helen Keller* (by Margo Lundell), a book in Scholastic’s Growing Reader category, level 3. The students were mesmerized and touched by the story. Who does not enjoy listening to a story read with great expression? Rodrigo et al. (2007) included reading aloud with feeling and expression as a main component of an ER program. Krashen (2004a) claimed that read-alouds are a powerful means of motivating reading and providing growth in second-language literacy. New readers need to know that when they are enjoying an interesting book, their emotions may be touched. Without even realizing it, they will be learning and building their language skills. The author found that the books she read aloud to the students became the most popular to take home.

It is also important that the teacher model a love of reading by reading silently along with his or her students (Mason, 2005).

6. **Assess the students’ level of reading.** Research suggests using a guided approach to help students assess their own reading level and choose an appropriate book. One way is to listen to students read part of a page aloud. A text needs to be about 98% comprehensible (Krashen, 2004b). Ask the student to try a book at a lower or higher level (go by printed levels on books or color-coded levels) until a suitable book is found. Emergent readers will be interested in books with short sentences and lots of pictures. It is important to the students’ autonomy that they learn to find their own reading-level books.

7. **Set up and explain the book checkout system. Explain the care of books.** Print checkout cards if you allow learners to check out books to read in class or to take home. Make decisions with the class about book care responsibilities. The students in the author's once-a-week ESL class used a checkout system to take books home, using "library" checkout cards with the title of the book, author, and level, and with space for the student's name, the student's phone number, and the date of checkout. The class discussed the responsibility of caring for books and the cost of a book if brought back damaged. Some of the students renewed books, some borrowed more than one, and a few did not take any books home.
8. **Make time for follow-up accountability and assessment through interaction.** Hellermann (2006) contended that interaction is the key to negotiating meaning with peers and teachers in *literacy events* around their extensive reading. A literacy event is "any occasion in which a piece of writing is integral to the nature of participants' interactions and their interpretive processes" (Heath, 1982, as cited in Hellermann, 2006, p. 380). Literacy events are integral to implementing extensive reading in any ESL class.

Teachers can be creative in the interactive event when students discuss their books with each other in English. Book discussions in pairs or by way of group interaction should be modeled using simple questions. Examples: What is the name of your book? Is it easy or hard to read? What is the book about? Do you like it? More advanced students can choose to give short summaries and opinions about a book they have read.

9. **Ask students to keep a reading log.** Reading should be its own reward, but learners are encouraged to keep a reading log for accountability, a feeling of accomplishment, and teacher assessment. Ask students to keep a log of books they have read on a form on which they can write the date finished; book title; if the book was easy, hard, or so-so; and whether they liked it or would recommend

it (yes or no). Some students have never read a whole book before, so it is imperative to congratulate them on their accomplishment when they finish one.

10. **Know the teacher's role in ER instruction.** The teacher's role is to help the students find interesting, comprehensible texts; provide some ER class time to read and introduce new books to the students; and have read-alouds from the books to catch students' interest. Teachers can also provide background information about book topics to build on prior knowledge before students read. It is important to help students express themselves verbally about their book reading with other students.

Evaluation of ER from Students' Testimonials

In the low-beginning class observed by the author, the students reported that they learned new vocabulary from the context of the ER books and that they learned about new topics of interest from the variety of books available. The ER helped their reading fluency, and their confidence improved.

In the class taught by the author, after only three months of meeting one day a week but with students' taking a book home each week, all of the students reported that they benefited from the ER program; even the lowest-level LESLLA students enjoyed those books with lots of pictures and little writing. All the learners, including the LESLLA students, reported learning new vocabulary from the stories and said that ER helped them read faster, with more confidence and understanding. This way, their reading fluency improved. They liked the variety of books about people and places, and they appreciated being able to borrow the books to take home and read over and over. They liked to read the books to their children, which benefited the parent and child alike. The students enjoyed reading the books so much that they wanted to continue ER in their next classes and were excited by their gains in reading skills.

Conclusions and Reflection

Research still does not sufficiently address the issue of successful ER programs for adult LESLLA learners with emergent literacy needs. Further research on the results of reading extensively and the benefits of ER to such learners is needed to determine whether and how ER programs should be expanded in the future, and the kinds of materials such programs would need.

The author discovered that by adding ER into her ESL class curriculum, her students not only benefited from reading, but also enjoyed books at their reading level on topics about which they had no previous knowledge. It was immensely interesting to watch the learners' excitement when it came to choosing books to read. It would be advantageous to their success in literacy and language development for students to continue ER experiences over a longer period of time.

Other ESL teachers who implement ER in their low-level classes may find similar results. This small study found that ER increased students' reading confidence, fluency, and vocabulary. ER inspired them to read more and more, and to read to their children. The students discovered a whole new world through reading interesting books at their reading level. And most importantly, the author discovered that ER *can* be done successfully in a program involving LESLLA learners. Even though this program was a short trial period, it made a difference in the students' lives. It is the author's hope that the experiences and advice shared here will encourage other teachers to try out ER in their ESL classes—and also find that ER is indeed worthwhile for their LESLLA learners.

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