

EXTENSIVE READING - A BIG PICTURE

S. Seethalakshmi

Research Scholar, Queen Mary's College, Chennai

Introduction

Reading has been the skill most emphasized in traditional FL teaching, and even today is the mainstay of EFL instruction in many countries. English instruction at the university level is usually the "intensive reading procedure," which implies close study of short passages, including syntactic, semantic, and lexical analyses and translation into the L1 to study meaning.

Such a pedagogic practice--of focusing on the language of a text--may be justified as a language lesson, but it may very well be counterproductive as a *reading* lesson. Often what is known as "intensive reading" (as traditionally opposed to "extensive reading") is actually not reading at all: the lesson consists of a series of language points, using texts as points of departure. Reading texts, in other words, are sources of language exercises, rather than reading exercises.

Today, FL/ESL/EFL reading instruction is moving increasingly, in Haas and Flower's phrase), from teaching texts to teaching readers. Specifically, we now teach learners reading skills/strategies for understanding such elements as content, textual features, rhetorical elements, and cultural background. "Skills building" emphasizes skills/strategies for text comprehension. This has been the mainstay of reading instruction in the United States, and ESL/EFL reading textbooks with words like "skills" or "strategies" in their titles are now common. Further, there has been much research on skills-based teaching procedures, including basic skills (finding the main idea, skimming, inferencing) and advanced skills (schema-building, meta cognitive skills).

A serious problem is that these so-called reading comprehension skills do not exist, or, as Rosen shine more cautiously states, "there is simply no clear evidence to support the naming of discrete skills in reading comprehension" 2). Alderson and Urquhart repeated this in 1984 Barnett found that teaching FL students reading strategies "did not significantly improve their reading comprehension". She calls these results "confusing," but they are consistent with the idea that skills do not exist.

If it is not meaningful to talk about discrete reading skills (and to our knowledge no one has published a refutation of Rosen shine's assertion), then what are and textbook authors talking about when they use the terms "skills" and "strategies" Gardner has suggested that these "skills" are better regarded as activities involving comprehension than as categories of abilities" In other words, when reading, we engage in activities such as recalling word meanings, inferring, drawing conclusions, and so on, but these are all aspects of the act of comprehending (i.e., reading). They cannot be separated into discrete skills, either statistically or by task-specific testing. Whatever problems there might be

with "intensive reading" and "skills building" as procedures for teaching reading, they represent the mainstream of FL/ESL/EFL reading instruction today. The "extensive reading procedure," on the other hand, while often used, has attracted comparatively little research interest. As a result, we know little about either its pedagogical aspects or its effectiveness. In this paper we review the literature on extensive reading, examine its nature as a procedure for teaching ESL/EFL reading, and present a model for an extensive reading component of an ESL/EFL curriculum. While most of the specific examples are drawn from the EFL situation in Japan, but the argument applies generally.

Background to Extensive Reading

There is a large body of research on L1 extensive reading, called "pleasure reading," "sustained silent reading" [SSR], or "uninterrupted sustained silent reading"] However, in a survey of the literature on FL extensive reading, Brumfit noted: (a) the role of the extensive reader in the curriculum has been surprisingly little studied and (b) "the discussion of teaching methods is conducted at a low theoretical level if it is conducted at all). MacLean's bibliography of reading in a second or foreign language lists only four items on extensive reading. Zvetina's survey of research on L2 reading does not even mention extensive reading. None of the 99 items in ERIC computer search, "Reading Strategies in Second Languages") is about extensive reading. Swaffar's (survey of FL reading research mentions only one article on extensive reading out of 221 items. Oddly enough, one conclusion Swaffar reaches after examining 220 items not about extensive reading is that teachers in the future "may well be asking students to do extensive reading on a longer text or in a particular field of study"

What literature there is on extensive reading is of limited value. Most general works on FL reading that discuss extensive reading do so in terms of book selection and course administration.

Definition of Extensive Reading

Our working definition of "extensive reading" as a language teaching/learning procedure is that it is reading (a) of large quantities of material or long texts; (b) for global or general understanding; (c) with the intention of obtaining pleasure from the text. Further, because (d) reading is individualized, with students choosing the books they want to read, (e) the books are not discussed in class

Large quantities are essential for this procedure to be "extensive," but there is no agreement on how much "extensive" is, as the following examples show: (a) thirty pages an hour (Hill and Thomas, 1988, p. 50); (b) three pages an hour (Matsumura, 1987, p. 120); (c) an hour per evening (Krashen, 1981, p. 105); (d) five hours by a specified date (Bowen, Madsen and Hilferty, 1985, p. 239); (e) an hour of extensive for every hour of intensive (Williams, 1986, p. 44); (f) one page per day and three pages per day during summer vacation (for Japanese high school students)

This variety suggests that quantity of reading is not an absolute number of hours or pages but depends on teacher and student perceptions of how extensive reading differs from other reading classes; this will vary according to type of program, level, and other variables. In an EFL situation such as Japan, a typical university "intensive reading" class might "read" fewer than 100 pages a year (in one 90-minute class weekly for 26 weeks). These students and teachers would perceive 1,000 pages as extensive. Of course, quantity by itself does not make the extensive reading procedure. It has specific techniques, practices, and activities (described below). Consequently, there is no hard and fast rule for the amount of reading to be done extensively, but a good rule of thumb is offered by Light the assignments should be of sufficient length "so that neither teacher nor pupils will fall for the temptation to talk them through in class"

By aiming at general comprehension, this procedure reduces both teacher demands on the student and student demands on the text to attain the objectives of fluency and speed as well as comprehension. Broughton et al.'s comment that extensive reading must imply a "relatively low degree of understanding" must be taken in context: we want students to achieve a degree of understanding sufficient for pleasure reading. If the student finds the book too difficult to enjoy, the extensive reading procedure requires that the book be changed, and not that the student be made to study it more closely. The level of global understanding required varies with the student's language proficiency, the nature of the text, and other factors.

The third aspect, pleasure, may seem dubious, because, after all, the reading is an assignment, and most of us do not take pleasure in assignments. However, pleasure, like quantity, is relative. The procedure assumes that students will enjoy reading books that they have chosen on topics of interest to them more than they will enjoy assigned readings from a reader. If they have chosen correctly, the book should be easy to read for general understanding. Nell, in his interesting study of the psychology of pleasure reading, argues (anecdotally) that one cannot read for pleasure in a foreign language before mastering it but any EFL reading teacher can supply anecdotal counter-evidence. Further, even learners who are far from fluent derive pleasure from the very experience of reading a book in a foreign language. Students in extensive reading courses regularly comment on their joy at having finished whole books in the target language.

A few other points on the definition of extensive reading should be clarified. Some writers see extensive reading as just another reading sub skill such as skimming or scanning. This confuses the whole with its parts. We see extensive reading as a teaching/learning procedure, not a reading sub skill. Further, the implication in many works that extensive reading is *by definition* the reading of graded readers has no basis in theory or practice. There is no reason extensive reading should be confined to graded materials.

Transfer of L1 Ability

Extensive reading as a teaching procedure cannot be considered without reference to the transfer of L1 reading ability. So far, the only explanation of why extensive reading is effective is that it replicates the process by which we learn to read in our native language, that is, "prolonged practice" or learning "to read by reading" If so, then an understanding of how and how much L1 reading ability transfers to L2 would help us build a model of extensive reading.

The Extensive Reading Procedure in Practice

Although the literature is inconclusive or contradictory on many points, extensive reading in practice is simple enough. Here we describe the procedure as implemented for English majors in a Japanese university. Richards and Rodgers define "procedure" as the "techniques, practices, and activities that operate in teaching and learning a language according to a particular method" This is described in terms of (a) "techniques and tactics used by teachers"; (b) "exercises and practice activities"; and (c) "resources in terms of time, space, and equipment" (p. 165). Our description follows this definition.

Techniques and Tactics

The teacher's role in the extensive reading procedure is to encourage and help the students with their reading, by conferences during or after class time, and by checking and commenting on written summaries that students do of their reading Oral or written summaries give students an opportunity to demonstrate that they are, in fact, doing their reading. They also allow the teacher to determine if students are understanding their books at an acceptable level. If not, the teacher's task is to guide them to more appropriate books.

Frequent, albeit cursory, review of students' summaries is important particularly at the beginning of the course because many students have not had training in summary writing. This review can be done by the teacher circulating among the students while they are engaged in independent activities, or by periodic collection of notebooks for inspection at the instructor's leisure. Additionally, record sheets maintained by the students allow both teacher and students to keep track of reading progress.

Exercises and Practice Activities

The students' main task is reading, but writing summaries is valuable not only to provide a means for teachers to check comprehension, but because the writing of summaries improves comprehension In addition, this practice helps students improve their writing ability. Another task that can be adapted for extensive reading is the "standard exercise," a set of open-ended questions that can be designed to suit most books available to students in a course Students also have some responsibility for determining the appropriateness and comprehensibility of the books they are reading. One means of doing

this is checking dictionary use: too much *necessary* use shows that the book is too difficult. Too much *unnecessary* use shows that the student's approach is not appropriate for global reading.

Resources

The primary resources required are a collection of books and magazines, and a place to house them. Without such resources, students must purchase their own books or use public libraries, often difficult in the EFL situation. Financial or logistic problems are the main obstacles to implementing the extensive reading procedure.

Merely providing books is not sufficient. The emphasis in extensive reading is on quantity, so some standard unit of amount is useful for students to measure their own progress, and for teachers to compare students and to assign grades. Because difficulty, format, type size, and number and size of illustrations vary widely, we use the "weighted page" as a standard unit.

The ideal collection will contain books, magazines, and other materials that match students' interests and abilities. Because of the varying quality of graded (not to mention ungraded) books, and the elusive nature of authenticity, teachers are advised to build varied collections that include graded materials, children's literature, high interest-low vocabulary books, Literature for young readers, and popular writing. Several guides to building class libraries and using this literature have been published. In any case, a poor or inappropriate book is not the disaster it would be in a translation or skills-building course because in the extensive reading procedure reading is individualized: if a book proves to be uninteresting or too difficult, the student simply abandons it for another. In other words, readability or comprehensibility is an element of the lesson rather than a precondition, and is determined by the techniques of this procedure.

Conclusion

The purpose of this article has been to clarify what the extensive reading procedure is and to describe how it might be used in EFL/ESL reading instruction. Readers must have been struck, as we were, by how contradictory, inconclusive, and generally unhelpful the research on this topic is. Although a general critique is beyond the scope of this paper, it might be useful to suggest why this is so.

First, of course, much of this "research" should not have been published or presented in the first place for a description of a classic example). However, even "good," or at least "well-intentioned" research in this field is not reproducible and yields results that apply only to specific cases and are not applicable beyond the conditions under which they were obtained. A final reason published research has not been helpful is that some theoretical concepts underlying it are themselves dubious. What can we make of the results of studies based on the Input Hypothesis, now under attack or what can we do with studies on metacognitive skills if metacognition is itself in doubt. In any case, we believe on the

grounds of experience that there are good reasons for using the extensive reading procedure much more than it is being used today. One could argue that students "learn to read by reading" and that "comprehension will take care of itself". In other words, students with a certain level of ability in English can learn to read by extensive reading alone. Experiments have shown (if not conclusively) that reading ability can improve as much with extensive reading as with skills training. At present, we cannot claim that extensive reading is sufficient for most ESL/EFL students to learn to read English. Most likely, skills/strategies training is also necessary. However, we are arguing here that current reading instruction centering on skills/strategies training also is not sufficient. As Jolley points out, because students do not spontaneously apply the skills presented in skill lessons, instruction and activities to encourage the development of and automatic use of comprehension skills must be incorporated into daily instruction.

The extensive reading procedure comprises just this kind of activity. In the EFL situation in particular, students do not have much opportunity to use English outside of class. Lengthy assignments of reading easy books will increase exposure to the target language greatly, probably much more than translation or skills assignments, which in any case involve much mental effort in the native language. In addition, extensive reading provides an excellent means of building schema. With this procedure, teachers can expect that their students will come to read English not only skillfully, but with pleasure as well.