

Extensive Reading; Why do it, how to do it, how not to do it

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Even a brief look at the research shows that extensive reading (henceforth ER) is the most successful approach we have in second and foreign language education for students at the advanced beginning and intermediate levels. When those who do in-class self-selected reading are compared with those in traditional classes, readers do at least as well, and generally do better, with the greatest success seen in longer programs in which students have a chance to get thoroughly involved with books. The evidence we have so far shows that readers show better gains in reading comprehension, vocabulary, grammar and writing. Studies done using other approaches (case histories, correlational studies) arrive at identical conclusions (See e.g. Krashen, *The Power of Reading*, 2004).

In addition to the test scores, studies also show that students prefer extensive reading to traditional instruction.

A current trend in ER is to bring in extra output-oriented activities, because it is felt that "Reading is not enough." This is an odd concern, considering that ER has been shown to be so successful in study after study. In addition, adding output in the form of writing has not been shown to increase language or literacy development. (For a recent study, see B. Mason, 2004, in the *International Journal of Language Teaching*.)

The problem with adding excessive output activities is that it takes time away from reading - this results in insufficient reading and little progress. When this happens, reading usually gets the blame, and teachers feel they need even more output activities.

It has been argued that students need to "practice" writing and speaking in class in order to learn to communicate in their second language. While I would never ban output activities from class, including an excessive amount of speaking and writing actually detracts from students' ability to speak and write. According to the Comprehension Hypothesis, language and literacy development occur in only one way, when we understand messages. Comprehensible input builds the competence that underlies our ability to speak and write a language fluently. The ability to produce output, in other words, is the result of language acquisition, not the cause. There is massive evidence for the Comprehension Hypothesis, and Krashen (*Explorations in Language Acquisition and Use*, 2003) has argued that there is no compelling evidence supporting various output hypotheses.

Our students are beginners and intermediates in English. Class-time should be devoted to helping them build basic competence through comprehensible input. In addition, we also want them to become autonomous: Extensive reading is a wonderful way of accomplishing this - if students continue to read, they will continue to improve long after their EFL program is over.

Classroom Activities

Does ER mean that teachers do nothing? Not at all. The teacher has several roles, all aimed at helping students obtain more comprehensible input. One role is to help students find texts that are interesting and comprehensible. This requires knowledge of the student as well as the available literature. Some class time might be devoted to acquainting students with books of interest, and may include read-alouds. Direct instruction in some reading strategies may also be useful, especially when they replace what are clearly inefficient strategies (eg look up every word). The ER teacher is also willing to explain difficult words and complex grammar constructions, but if this happens too often, it means that the text is inappropriate.

In my view, research, theory and my own experience lead to the conclusion that the best way to do ER is the

simplest: Students read a great deal of interesting and comprehensible books, eg 100-150 pages per week, that they select themselves from a large collection with plenty of choice, and with the guidance of a teacher who understands language acquisition and literacy development, knows what is available, and is a dedicated reader.

Support of extensive reading, which often includes "light" reading, does not mean a rejection of aural input. It also does not mean a rejection of literature, academic reading, or linguistics. Rather, ER is a bridge, just a stage in language development that makes more advanced stages possible. A student who has done a great deal of easy reading, from graded readers and easier authentic texts, will find academic texts far more comprehensible than one who has not done this reading. Unfortunately, this bridge has been missing in foreign language study until now.