

How Extensive Reading Contributes to EFL Learning and Curricula

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Although Extensive Reading (ER hereafter) has been adopted by some high schools and universities in Japan, nevertheless, it has yet to become the norm at many Japanese educational institutions. In this essay I will discuss the benefits that ER provides for developing the reading skills of L2 learners and how this can benefit reading curricula in Japan. ER makes at least three essential contributions to reading development: first, it increases the size of learners' Second Language (L2) reading vocabulary; secondly, it expands learners' depth of vocabulary knowledge, and finally; it develops the learners' vocabulary and reading fluency, reducing the time it takes for learners to recognize known vocabulary and language patterns.

Although standard EFL reading and ER courses differ, they have a complementary relationship. Standard reading classes at Japanese high schools are typically based on textbooks made up of rather dense, short texts, which function as a means for introducing large amounts of new L2 vocabulary and grammar. For example, a typical 1-2 page reading passage may introduce 20 new vocabulary items or more, using first language (L1) glosses to provide the meaning. As each text is short, it is not feasible to recycle much of the previously learned vocabulary from prior chapters, since the focus of each new chapter is primarily on introducing new words. On the other hand, ER is centered around students choosing interesting, longer simplified readers that are read with a focus on comprehending the story. This focus on comprehending meaning requires that the books have a low density of unknown words, a point which I will discuss later in greater detail. Rather than 1-2 page texts dense with unknown vocabulary, these books are longer (often between 20-40 pages for first year Kandai students for example) and, when carefully chosen by teachers or learners, offer a relatively manageable unknown vocabulary load, allowing readers to read for meaning with ideally little to no need for consulting dictionaries which tends to interrupt the flow of meaning-focused reading. With a primary focus on comprehending the story itself, ER can be more pleasurable and motivating for learners as the learners themselves choose the books that they want to read. Thus, while standard reading

courses provide a deliberate and intensive approach to reading and the learning of vocabulary, ER can offer a more motivating form of reading in which vocabulary learning, gaining depth of vocabulary knowledge, and fluency are secondary results of a focus on the story. These two different approaches are not in competition but are mutually beneficial as both approaches contribute to essential L2 reading skills.

ER's first contribution to Second Language (L2) reading and L2 Curricula is that it introduces new L2 vocabulary to learners. Indeed, early ER research and discourse primarily promoted extensive reading for vocabulary learning, i.e., incidentally learning both the form and meaning of new words through repeated exposures to them. As this may require between 5-20 meetings with a newly introduced word, it is typically a gradual process of gaining partial vocabulary knowledge of the L2 form before coming to understand the L1 and L2 meanings of a word. Clearly, this is not as fast and efficient of a method as having teachers or dictionaries provide L1 translations for the meanings of these unknown words. However, incidental learning serves the function of having learners process L2 vocabulary in context and offers the opportunity to develop an awareness of L2 meaning through repeated exposures. This incidental vocabulary learning is also more likely to occur since ER readers are simplified, written using high frequency vocabulary, which will be repeated relatively more often than in standard textbooks. The starting level of simplified readers clearly depends on the students' vocabulary knowledge at the start of an ER course. In this author's experience, many first year Kandai students will typically start with readers rated at the 400-600 word levels and then adjust their choice of levels afterward. In addition to choosing books at an appropriate level, the more that students engage in ER, the more opportunities they will have to come across newly met words and develop an understanding of their L2 meaning. Incidental learning complements standard reading courses in which teachers have reviewed the L1 meaning of vocabulary. That is, learners may have partial knowledge of vocabulary (L1 meaning and L2 form) gained from their regular reading courses and learning incidentally can then extend their knowledge to include the L2 meaning of a word. Learning new vocabulary from ER is a long-term process, that becomes increasingly important as learners move beyond beginning and low-intermediate reading proficiency.

ER's second contribution for L2 language learners and EFL reading curricula is that it provides the repetition needed to develop the language learners' depth of vocabulary knowledge. Unlike learning new vocabulary through ER, which complements the learning of new words in intensive reading courses, ER fills a gap that is not a part of standard curricula. As previously mentioned, standard reading courses have an intensive language focus using short

texts that lack the space to recycle previously learned vocabulary. And, even though EFL textbooks at the university level have longer readings, most do not systematically recycle previously learned vocabulary. This repetition of vocabulary in ER not only provides an opportunity to consolidate vocabulary knowledge but also introduces a variety of contexts and usages of previously met vocabulary, providing more opportunities for learners to develop their understanding other aspects of vocabulary and contextually dependent vocabulary knowledge. That is, ER can assist learners to go beyond processing individual words to develop their understanding of collocations, L2 synonyms, phrasal and grammatical patterns, contextual usage, register/formality, and connotations etc. Thus, ER, as a means for developing depth of vocabulary knowledge, serves an essential role in EFL curricula, that otherwise goes largely unserved.

The third contribution of ER is the development of fluency with known vocabulary. The goal of fluency is to develop an automatic recognition of vocabulary meaning, which is a precondition for the faster processing of reading texts. In an EFL context, many learners may know decontextualized vocabulary as measured on vocabulary tests, but the decoding of the vocabulary meaning in context requires processing a string of meanings in real time and developing a comprehension of the meanings beyond the vocabulary level to phrasal, sentence and longer sequences of text. Developing fluency with the form - meaning connection of individual words is an initial step which is followed by developing fluency with the additional aspects of deeper vocabulary and textual knowledge. The benefit of more fluent reading is reflected in faster reading speeds and faster processing of vocabulary and texts, allowing for learners to move up to higher levels of simplified readers and, eventually, readings written for native speakers. As with developing depth of vocabulary meaning, little to no time is allotted for fluency development in standard reading courses or curricula. The assumption seems to be that somehow learners will be doing this outside of the classroom on their own or somehow as a part of other assignments that are not specifically targeting language development.

All of this raises the issue of what level of texts are appropriate for learners to improve the potential contributions of ER. A simple, if not perfect means to determine this, is to consider the density of unknown vocabulary when choosing simplified readers, a skill that learners develop with some assistance and practice over time. A minimal condition for incidentally learning new words through repeated exposures varies according to scholars from knowing between 95 to 98% of the vocabulary of the text. However, most recent research favors the higher 98% figure of known vocabulary in a text, which means that no more than 2% of the text, or 4 words on a 200 word page, are unknown. Sometimes educators and administrators react to this as being "too easy" for learners. However, it is important to remember that the

primary purpose of extensive reading is to comprehend the story and its meaning without having to resort to dictionaries or ask for explanations. This “too easy” reaction also overlooks the expectation that, for example, university freshmen, are ideally reading a 20-40 page reader every 1-2 weeks. In this author's experience, this means that many students read for 1-3 hours each week out-of-class in order to finish 20-40 page books. With 2% of the vocabulary being unknown (i.e., with 2 unknown words on each 100 word page) learners are being exposed to 40-80 unknown words per book.

As with learning new vocabulary through ER, knowing at least 98% of the vocabulary in a text is also a reasonable percentage for developing depth of vocabulary knowledge. Unlike the focus on learning new words, in which the basic form-meaning connections are unknown, deepening vocabulary knowledge occurs with known vocabulary. As previously mentioned, this can cover quite a few aspects of vocabulary knowledge including collocations, added L2 synonyms, phrasal and grammatical patterns, contextual usage, register/formality, and connotations etc. Realistically, even native speakers may not know all of these many aspects. Thus, the task of expanding vocabulary knowledge is not a simple one for L2 learners and requires time and effort to achieve.

Whereas knowing 98% of the vocabulary in a text is a reasonable precondition for expanding vocabulary knowledge, knowing 99-100% of the vocabulary is a preferable for developing vocabulary fluency. That is, knowing the meaning of nearly all of the vocabulary and having an awareness of some of the aspects of the depth of vocabulary knowledge in a text better ensures an increased focus on fluency development when reading extensively.

It is necessary to acknowledge that this essay oversimplifies the actual processing of written text by L2 learners. The reality is that many learners may have only partial knowledge of the vocabulary that educators and researchers would like to assume is known. This is especially true early on during the implementation of an extensive reading programs when students will not have seen many repetitions of the vocabulary that has been introduced in regular reading classes. Moreover, all three of these processes — learning new unknown words, deepening knowledge of known words, and developing fluency with known words — can co-occur on any page of an ER text. Considering the complexity of L2 reading, reducing the burden of unknown vocabulary is necessary so that L2 learners can experience reading for meaning that is at least a bit closer to the experience of reading in L1 where vocabulary is less of an obstacle to comprehension. Learning new vocabulary, developing depth of vocabulary knowledge and gaining fluency involve many complex processes and ideally this requires a long-term, multi-year commitment to ER in language learning curricula.

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In conclusion, ER introduces new vocabulary as well as developing learners' vocabulary depth and fluency, all of which complement standard EFL reading courses in Japan. An additional bonus is that ER can be highly motivating as learners choose their own texts to read and can successfully experience reading these books for meaning. It is this author's hope that, learners, whether motivated by instrumental goals or the goal of experiencing the pleasure of reading, will continue to read L2 books after they graduate.

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