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## The Reading Circle

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There are many obstacles to initiating a successful extensive reading program in the EFL classroom. This paper, based on both research and classroom practices of the authors, reviews some of the principal obstacles, and seeks to show ways in which they can be overcome. Finally, some of the benefits to the students of persevering in their reading are shown.

EFL (English as a Foreign Language) 業における多読コースを学生達に意欲的に取り組ませる際には多くの困難が伴います。この論考は筆者二人による研究と授業実践に基づき、その主要な障害となるものを再検討し、それらを克服する様々な方法を提示しようとするものである。最後に、多読授業によって学生達に多読リーディング能力を向上させると、どのような効果が期待されるかを指摘する。

Getting students to read extensively—in their mother tongue or any other language—can be a difficult undertaking for the instructor. Moreover, the benefits of reading fluency may not be all clear to the learners, especially if they are not highly motivated.

This paper explicates and expands on a poster presentation called “The Reading Circle.” Usually we

think of a reading circle as a club of book-lovers who get together to discuss, meditate on, or marvel at some piece(s) of good literature chosen by group members. Most of us have difficulty imagining our students belonging to such a group. But imagine if we could get them started on a life-long love affair with reading—who knows but some of them just might!

But what does *The Reading Circle* mean in the context of our presentation? The background of our poster was a large circle divided into three parts: blue, green, and red. At the top left we listed the challenges (Obstacles) to our students' achieving reading fluency. These are the "blues" of our 3-part circle. As creative teacher-researchers, we look for ways (Strategies) to overcome these obstacles; these are the "greens"—the let's GO—of our circle. Finally, we list the rewards (Benefits) of persevering in extensive reading for the students; these are the "reds"—the joyful fireworks and flashing stars of success. Nothing breeds confidence and pleasure like success; and hopefully that success will be a motivating factor for students to continue reading independently, and to tackle the obstacles of progressively more difficult texts with their acquired skills. The cycle then becomes one of success, confidence, and enthusiasm for reading, rather than a downward spiral of defeat and despair. (Please click on the Power Point icon to view the slide show of our presentation at the conference.)



Click to view a **PowerPoint** Presentation

## Obstacles to an Extensive Reading Program

The obstacles are not so much separate entities as an interlocking mass of negative feelings and dread-full past experiences that have formed language students' opinions about reading in L2 (Waring, 2000, pp.1-6). These present a formidable block to both teacher and student alike. We present them here as a list of typical questions and complaints:

### *"What's the point?"*

Most college and university educators recognize that the distractions of student life (part time jobs, club activities, getting a driver's license) seem to be of far greater importance than schoolwork to most students. Formal studies offer few tangible rewards, and this seems to be especially true of L2 reading. Their high school experience of reading English centered on word for word translation of texts. The end result of their efforts was often just a string of sentences with little meaning attached. They were not asked to consider the ideas in the text, or the author's opinion; nor were they asked

to take a position vis-a-vis the contents. At most they might have been asked comprehension questions, or quizzed on grammar or vocabulary items. Access to the text as a vehicle of ideas, of delightful stories, or of the magical-poetical uses of language, was denied them.

*“I don’t know any vocabulary.”*

Students often use their “lack of vocabulary” as an excuse for not reading. Despite years of looking up words, and diligently writing out and memorizing word lists, they are hard put to retain those words or access their meaning in context.

But “lack of vocabulary” is directly linked to the style of their previous instruction. Vocabulary is not acquired from lists; it is acquired through repetitive exposure to words—and collocations—in a variety of contexts. Intensive reading, with its heavy emphasis on dictionary and translation work is antithetical to the natural accretion of vocabulary.

*“I have no time!”*

Shortage of time runs like a plague among students, especially those in first and second year. A heavy schedule of classes combined with the culture shock of living away from home for the first time, leaves them with little time or energy for a lot of reading. As teachers, we cannot ignore their complaints about lack of time and sleep—they are often the truth.

*“I never liked reading!”*

Again, given the demands and constraints on them as children, it is possible that many students had little time for reading, other than school textbooks and the occasional *manga*. Experiences of sustained enjoyable reading may have escaped them entirely. If they have no personal history of reading pleasure—or are burdened with negativity towards reading—this may well carry over into L2 reading and make it difficult to conceive of reading an English text for enjoyment.

So far, we have presented only the obstacles, and by this point you are about ready to throw in the towel. Don’t despair! Below are some good, workable strategies to help you win over the hearts and minds of your potential reading circle members.

On our poster, an arrow ran from each stated obstacle to its corresponding strategy. This paper, being constrained by its linear format, will simply follow the order of the list above in enumerating some of the strategies that can be put to work for you.

**Strategies for Overcoming the Obstacles**

*Explain the rationale of “lots of reading”*

The first step towards winning the active cooperation of students in an extensive reading program is to assume that they are mature enough to understand the rationale. Explain clearly the “hows” and “whys,” the methods and goals of extensive reading, before you do anything else.

You might consider distributing a reference sheet with some of the goals and strategies listed on it. Later, as you work through the skills and strategies, you can refer back to this sheet so that the students can connect what they are doing to the concepts you have described.

When explaining the “why” of extensive reading, try sharing with students some of the pleasures you get from reading: following an unfolding story to its delightful, sometimes surprising, end; engaging with the author in the very act of creating the text; living vicariously as hero or villain; learning about other eras and places, not through facts and figures but through characters who lived in those times and places.

As for the “how” of becoming an extensive reader, ironically, one can use some of the same strategies used to teach intensive reading, but apply them in a different way. Here is a partial list of ideas:

- *Previewing*

Having students look at illustrations (if any), and read the title, the opening paragraph, the topic sentences of each paragraph, and the closing paragraph fills the students in on the content and direction of the text, and allows them to form a hypothesis on the topic. Reading the full text after previewing then fills in the details about the topic, allowing the students to confirm or revise their hypothesis.

- *Chunking exercises*

These exercises are designed to build up speed by reading a text in “sense groups” rather than word by word. Nuttall (1996) gives a lucid description of how to set up, monitor, and analyze the results of such exercises (pp. 54-61).

- *Timed reading*

Timed readings force students to increase their reading speed. They should be done on a regular basis, so that students become comfortable with guessing the meaning of words they don’t know and then continuing to read. Spargo’s *Timed Readings* (1989) is a mine of such exercises, and many reading textbooks, such as the *Reading Power* series (Mickulecky and Jeffries, 1998) include them.

- *Predicting*

Asking students to stop part way through a text and predict what will happen next helps them to become engaged in the material and makes them become active participants in the construction of meaning in the text.

- *Finding the main idea*

The main idea is *what the author wants to say* about the topic. Finding the key words and their synonyms helps students find the main idea, and so does identification of the author’s “voice.” Is the topic presented in a neutral, positive, negative, or humorous way?

- *Identifying confusing elements*

Students are often confused by pronoun references and different types of syntax. Identifying these gives the students a feeling for how the various parts of a text hold together.

*Build vocabulary, and build confidence in the vocabulary already “owned”*

Here are a few strategies to promote students’ confidence in what they already know.

- *Word games*

Yorkey’s *Springboards* (1984)—and many others, as well as the Internet—are replete with puzzles, brainteasers, word/sentence jumbles, mystery words, and other games designed to review and reinforce passive lexical knowledge.

- *Blackboard relays*

Naming topics, and giving student teams a limited amount of time to race up and write all the words that they know related to that topic, is an exciting way to review or preview the vocabulary they are about to meet in a text (Variations on the game may be introduced, depending on the level.)

- *Word recognition games*

Looking for synonyms and antonyms, recognizing the odd word out in word clusters, whether on a semantic or grammatical basis, all build students’ word power.

- *Word analysis*

Learning to recognize word families and the changes wrought by various prefixes and suffixes gives students a powerful tool for deciphering meanings as well as the part a word plays in a sentence.

*Provide time for students to enjoy reading*

Two possible ways to increase available time are:

- Provide in-class reading time on a regular basis, thereby reducing the work that students have to do outside school. Having students read a text on a predetermined schedule over a number of classes (parts not finished in class can be continued at home) not only gives incentive to work efficiently in class, but makes them look forward to those periods of sustained reading time within the class.
- Combine extensive reading with other assignments. In an ideal world, simply reducing other assignments should give more time for extensive reading, but it rarely works that way. Combining assignments has more chance of success. Writing a response to a situation or dilemma in a story, or selecting a favorite part of a story to summarize, are writing tasks that evolve from extensive reading. Presenting a synopsis, acting out a part of a book, and group discussions

about the “worst” or “best” parts of a book combine speaking with extensive reading.

### *Create a revisionist history of reading experiences.*

Erasing negative feelings involves first finding the pleasure in reading. Evoking memories of enjoyable reading experiences in small group discussions or through questionnaires usually helps students to recall a time when they found reading pleasant.

Allowing students to choose the books that they want to read is a key factor in promoting successful extensive reading. Not only must the topic or type of story be personally interesting, but the students need to understand the basic rule of thumb of book selection: No more than 2 words on a page that you cannot understand. Determining students’ levels can be done by distributing photocopies of a representative page from a range of readers. Students read through the selections, discarding what is too difficult or too easy, until they find a book they believe to be at their level.

Making it clear from the outset that there will be no formal testing removes the element of stress, of dread, of the feeling of having to regurgitate according to the testing formula. When students are allowed to decide for themselves how they want to share what they have gained from their reading, they are much more inclined to enjoy the reading. Some may choose to write a

book report, others draw illustrations, join in a group discussion, or write a dialogue journal.

Using books translated into English that are already familiar to students in Japanese can draw students into the story quickly because they already have a sense of it. *Totto-chan* (Kuroyanagi, 1982) is a favorite because the character is not too far removed in age from the students, and they can identify with her as she gets into mischief.

Using a book that is out in film adds dimension to the reading. *The Giving Tree* (Silverstein, 1964) is a simple story with simple illustrations, and the film faithfully reproduces both. Students can watch, then listen and follow along in their own texts.

Dramatic reading by the teacher, (with lots of movement, gesture, and changes of voice) add to the enjoyment of reading. It also gives the students valuable clues about speech rhythms, intonation, and pronunciation. Children’s books and fables, as well as humorous and/or illustrated poems (Shel Silverstein again comes to mind), have proven popular.

Having students write their own ending to a narrative, and then share what they have written with their classmates adds creativity to the reading experience. If the stories with their different endings can be passed around, the many variations on the ending usually provoke much discussion.

## The Benefits of Extensive Reading

The benefits of extensive reading range from the simple and practical to the complex and highly personal and emotional. On a most basic level, that of vocabulary, repeated exposure to the same lexical items in novels moves vocabulary from the passive to the active level. Because this occurs in a natural way, a way that evokes contextual images, it sticks in memory without being consciously memorized. Along with lexical exposure, the exposure to different styles of writing, different attitudes and ideas about the same topic (or period in history, or human dilemma), broadens and deepens the students' understanding of human nature.

Advances in reading skills improve other linguistic skills. If students choose to share their reading through discussion or writing, both of these skills also improve.

Reading in another language gives students insights into the workings of another culture by exposing them to the values, mores, beliefs and customs of those societies.

But the single biggest potential benefit of extensive reading for students is that they become real book lovers. They read for enjoyment as well as to develop their interests and abilities. They feel comfortable reading in English, and will continue to challenge themselves by choosing to read in their L2. And for a teacher to see this happen makes the whole struggle worthwhile.

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