Accountability and variety in Extensive Reading

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Although Extensive Reading (ER) is now widely accepted as an effective way of improving learners' L2 proficiency, there is less agreement on the best way(s) of implementing it in the classroom. While sustained silent reading in class has undoubted benefits, there are several reasons why it is not always appropriate, both philosophically and practically. This paper will briefly consider some of these reasons, arguing that output activities have been unfairly dismissed. The key themes of "accountability" (having students demonstrate what they have read) and "variety" (avoiding tedious repetition in the ER classroom) are promoted as essential principles in ER materials development. Such materials allow teachers to evaluate students' work without destroying the creativity, freedom, and pleasure that are essential to successful ER. Ten examples of these materials are demonstrated and explained.

Extensive Reading 多読 (ER) はL2習得において効果的であることが広く認識されているが、授業への最善の導入方法については同意に至っていない。授業でのsustained silent reading（持続的黙読）の利点を疑う余地はないが、一方で議論的にも実用的にも適当ではない場合がある。この論文は、このような場合のいくつかの理由を簡潔に述べ、不適当なアウトプット・アクティビティーの排除について議論するものである。主なテーマであるaccountability（学生に既読の内容を表現させること）と variety（ER授業の単調な反復回避）がER教材開発には不可欠な要素であると奨励している。教材の具体的な例を挙げ、このような教材が、創造性・自由・ER成功の要素である楽しさを壊すことなく、学生への評価を与えることのできる秘訣であるとしている。

Depending on your view, the field of second language acquisition (SLA) can be deeply intriguing or keenly frustrating. Despite the mammoth amount of research into L2 learning in the past 50 years, there is still very little agreement on the best way to go about it. This is particularly so in regards to SLA in the classroom. The transfer of (SLA) theory into practice often fails to occur since, as Richards and Rogers (2001) point out, "researchers who study language learning are themselves usually reluctant to dispense prescriptions for teaching based on the results of their research, because they know that current

knowledge is tentative, partial, and changing" (p. 249). Similarly, Michael Swan (2005) notes,

> The fact is simply that such methods have not done very well. No approaches work as they are 'supposed to': foreign languages are too hard for most people to learn well in classrooms in the time available. In addition, all approaches are vulnerable to circumstantial factors such as poor teaching, unsuitable materials or unsatisfactory syllabus design; and all approaches will fail in particularly unfavorable contexts such as large secondary-school classes of unmotivated adolescents. (pp. 386-7)

However one exception is Extensive Reading (ER). Although it's debatable whether ER has become a commonplace element of English proficiency curricula in Japan (or elsewhere), there is no doubt of its current standing in the world of SLA theory. There is no longer any need to explicate in detail what ER is, justify why it should be taken as the subject of research, or promote it as a method for the development of L2 proficiency. Such issues have been exhaustively explored and consensus reached: when learners read a large amount of self-selected material in their L2, at a comfortable level and over a reasonably long period of time, they typically make meaningful gains in a wide range of proficiencies – and as a result, ER should be key to any L2 proficiency curriculum (Bamford and Day, 1997; Day and Bamford,1998; Elley, 1991; Krashen, 1993, 2003; Mason, 2005; Mason and Krashen, 1997; Nation, 1997, 2001; Waring, 1997).

This paper focuses on ER implementation in the classroom. My primary desire is to share with other practitioners a range of materials that I have developed at Kanda University of International Studies and which can be adapted for virtually any context in which ER is taught. Although I assume that the efficacy of ER is beyond question, I do not assume that all teachers agree on the best use of ER classroom time. It is that debate, therefore, that I first address.

Should Extensive Reading be reading alone?

According to many ER experts, the question of what to do in the ER classroom is simple: have students read. As Day and Bamford (1998) recommend, "Ideally, … no postreading work should be required, the act of reading being its own reward. Students read and that is all" (p. 140). Beniko Mason (2007) presents an even stronger version of this mantra, not only arguing that classroom output activities result in insufficient reading, but also that "an excessive amount of speaking and writing actually detracts from students' ability to speak and write" (¶ 5). The aversion to output is due to Mason's firm conviction that the Comprehension Hypothesis in its purest form is right: i.e., it is the reception of comprehensible input that drives language acquisition, and therefore output activities detract from the amount of input that is received, resulting in lower proficiency gains.

My own view is that the "input only" approach may be technically correct – in as far as it is supported by empirical evidence – but there are several reasons why it is not suitable in many contexts. One reason is that it ignores the pedagogical reality of many EFL situations. By definition, EFL students do not have many (or any) opportunities to speak outside of class. Therefore, a comprehensive skills approach can be most appropriate for the curriculum: the

speaking skill pervades all English classes (even reading), allowing students to maximize the few chances they have to interact in the L2. Secondly, allowing students to engage in group or pair activities in ER lessons promotes a sense of community. Students read *for* the group. Students have the pleasure of sharing ideas and feelings about their reading, thus providing them with a high motivation to read. Green (2005) has described what can happen when the emphasis on silent reading becomes an unassailable dogma, as it did in Hong Kong schools: "the typical [Hong Kong] extensive reading lesson has all the appearance of a particularly monastic detention session with teachers sitting at the head of the class enforcing a rule of silence" (p. 308). Thirdly, output activities allow students to share recommendations for further reading. Book lists, library tours and teacher recommendations all have their place, but none can compete with the dynamism of face-to-face book discussions with peers, and peers are the only true arbiters in such matters as cultural/generational relevancy, subject matter, style, and level of difficulty.

Accountability and variety

There is one other major reason why many ER teachers are unable to simply have students read in class: the necessity of providing grades. Most of us have to assess the students in some way, even though we know it may be detrimental to their enjoyment of reading. The trick is to strike a balance between making students accountable and making students comfortable. This will depend to a large extent on the nature of the institution and the amount of freedom it allows its instructors in determining grades.

The materials I present in the following address the problem of accountability. On the one hand they demand students to provide evidence that they have actually read, but on the other hand they stimulate creative response and critical thought. The key element in achieving this balance is variety of ER materials. If we ask students to respond to their reading in the same manner every week, the task will soon become boring (Helgeson, 2005) and may also be perceived as an assessment chore. However, if students are asked to respond to their reading in a different way each week, they would view the task as a thought-provoking extension of the reading process.

For these reasons, I have developed a bank of reflective writing tasks (or "book reports") large enough to avoid the repetition of any one task over an academic year (assuming ER is taught once a week over two 15 week semesters). Furthermore, I advocate the completion of these tasks in class, in spite of the objections mentioned earlier to output activities. It is imperative, in my view, that reflective tasks are not seen as homework, since the notion of homework detracts from the ultimate goal of reading for pleasure.

This does, however, lead to some logistical issues. If students are reading at their own pace, how can they be ready to complete output tasks at the same time? My solution is that each student apply the task to whatever text he/she read for homework, whether it be a complete book or story, or only part thereof. Thus, a student may be challenged to produce a 'movie poster' of a book that he/she has not finished reading yet. Ultimately, the product is not primary; rather, it is the process that counts. A second logistical issue is genre. Many of the tasks presented here are designed for

fiction, since that is what most students read. However in many cases it is self-evident that a certain task could work equally well for non-fiction, or non-fiction of certain kinds (such as biography). This is left to the discretion of the teacher. Where it is deemed that a task is totally unsuitable for non-fiction, the standard book report format (see below) can be substituted for those students.

Reflective written response

The ten activities that follow can easily be adapted to make them more complex or more simple. There are trade-offs in each direction. With increased complexity comes increased accountability: it is difficult for a student to complete the task without really having read the book, and the teacher can more accurately gauge the relative efforts of students for grading purposes. On the other hand, increased complexity may dovetail with increased difficulty and therefore decreased enjoyment, as well as a sense of increased evaluation (all antithetical to ER). Increased complexity also chews up more class time. Naturally, increased simplicity implies the opposite: less accountability (it becomes easy to cheat the system) but less distraction from the ultimate goal: reading for reading's sake.

Standard book report

The traditional method of having students respond to a book is to provide them with several basic prompts such as "What attracted you to the book?", "Describe two characters in the story", "Write a short summary of the book", and "Explain your personal opinion about the story". It may also ask students to circle appropriate responses, such as "I think this book was: EXCELLENT-GOOD-FAIR-POOR-TERRIBLE" or "The level of this book was: TOO EASY-JUST RIGHT-TOO DIFFICULT". There is nothing wrong with the standard book report and it often works well at the beginning of an ER course, since it introduces students to the notions of personal and critical response, as well as enforcing the message that *disliking* a book is a valued response. All of these concepts may be surprising to students in the early stages of an ER course. Nevertheless, the repeated use of this report – common practice in many programs – undoubtedly leads to boredom and ceases to be perceived as an interesting and creative activity.

Movie poster

The first example of an alternative report style is the Movie Poster. Students are told that the book they read is going to be made into a movie (if the book already is a movie, they are told that there is going to be a re-make). Students are provided with a piece of paper, at the top of which they have to write a fitting title (not the same as the book title). Beneath that, they have to draw an image: it may be a scene from the book, or a depiction of a character. Below that, they have to write the names of three characters and the actors who will play these parts. Students must choose famous actors who would suit the roles. Finally, at the bottom of the poster, they invent two quotations from media sources. Thus, the handout will look something like the following (with sample movie posters from the internet inserted by the teacher on the right-hand side, to provide stimulus):

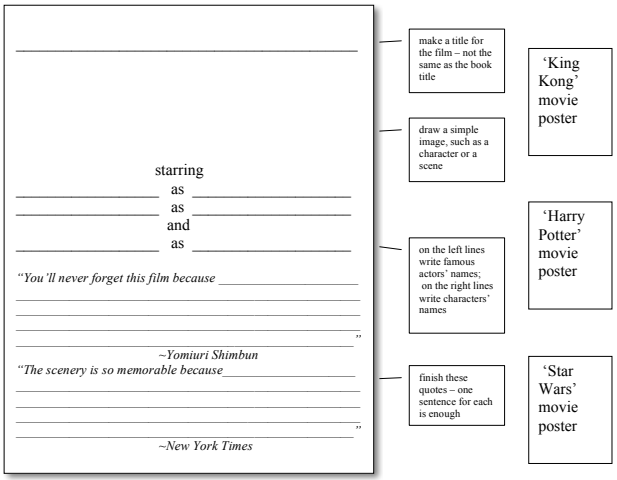

Figure 1. Movie poster

To complete any or all of the sections of the movie poster, students have to demonstrate knowledge of the book.

A fitting proverb

All Japanese students know a few proverbs. Many can recite several English proverbs too. In this activity students are asked to think of a proverb that relates to their book in some meaningful way. The following instruction is provided to students:

> *Do you know any English proverbs? Choose one that has some connection to the book that you read. It might say something about a character, a relationship, something that happens, or one of the deeper meanings behind the story. If you don't know any English proverbs, feel free to translate a Japanese one. If you really have no ideas, ask the teacher to show you some proverbs.*

Having thought of a fitting proverb, they then write several sentences explaining how it relates to the book.

Letter to the library

There are many ways to make creative use of various genres related to correspondence (letters, messages, cards, emails etc.). For example, students can be asked to think of an appropriate gift that could be given to a character in the book, and then write a card to accompany it. Alternatively, students can be asked to assume the identity of one of the characters and write a letter to another member of class explaining what has happened to him/her. In Letter to the Library, students are given a handout containing the following message:

> *Recently, a student borrowed the same book you read this week from the Kanda University library. She was very surprised to find the following notice attached to the cover:*
>
> KANDA LIBRARY TERMINATION NOTICE: Due to overcrowding, the Kanda library has been forced to remove a large quantity of books from its collection. This book has been selected for removal as it is unsuitable for students. It will no longer be available after April 1, 2008. Thank you for your understanding.

Write a short letter explaining why you disagree with this decision.

There are two points in the termination notice that students can take issue with: the fact that their library has no more room for books and the judgment that a certain book is unsuitable for students. In my experience, students enjoy writing protest letters and arguing against the authorities' claim to know what is suitable for students.

Relationships diagram

As explained, book reviews can manifest in various forms of written genres. In addition, they can (and perhaps should) be multi-modal. We have already seen this in the Movie Poster activity, which allows for both written and visual modes of response. A diagram is another form of expression that works well as a reflective writing task in ER. Students are not asked to write about the book in sentence-form, but instead construct an illustrative map of connections between the characters in the book. The instruction students receive is:

> *Make a diagram to explain the relationships between characters, as well as the storyline. Draw boxes containing characters' names, arrows between boxes to indicate relationships, words/phrases along arrow lines to explain relationships, and adjectives/phrases next to boxes to describe characters or explain what they did.*

The result is a free-flowing circuit board from which students can explain the book in fine detail, as in Figure 2 below:

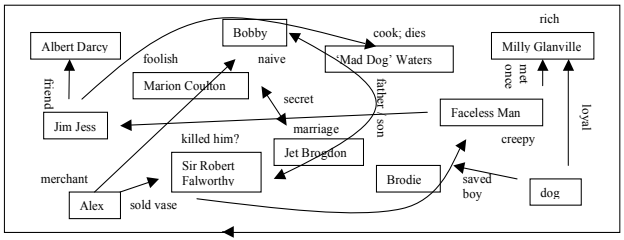

Figure 2. Relationships diagram

Writing in sentence-form and drawing pictures both take time. However this particular activity is relatively easy to accomplish for any student. Importantly, however, students would not be able to complete it without a good knowledge of the book.

Points of interest

This activity further explores the theme of multi-modality. Instead of using written compositions, pictures or diagrams, students are asked to construct a graph to represent their level of engagement with the reading material. The students are provided with a simple table like the one shown in Figure 3. The vertical axis represents interest level (low interest at the bottom, high interest at the top); the horizontal axis represents the flow of the book from start to finish. Students fill in cells to indicate their interest level at the start of the book, end of the book, and three points in between. Roughly 12 to 15 columns are enough to allow students the space to graphically represent how close to the beginning, middle or

end their chosen points are. (If a student has only read part of a book, they can apply the graph just to the section they read.) They can then draw lines linking the cells to show the fluctuation of interest throughout the text. Below the graph, they can write a short phrase for each point to explain what happened (e.g. "the kidnapping"). If increased accountability is desired, students can also be asked to write one or two sentences explaining the reasons for their feelings at each point.

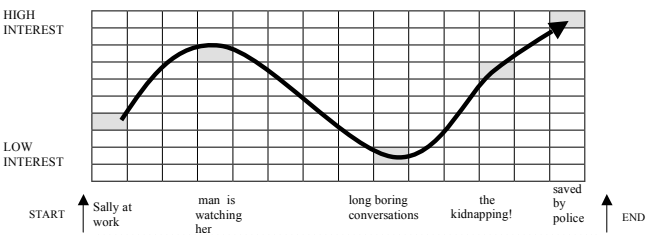

Figure 3. Points of interest

Your life, your book

Books are made more interesting and motivating if students can see connections between the books and their own lives. However, Japanese students often come into ER with the unconscious assumption that "foreign" books are just that: something from another world, far removed from their real existence. In this activity I present students with the following instruction to force them to think of how fiction can reflect their reality:

> *Can you think of anything that happens in the book that is similar to something that has happened in your own life? Alternatively, can you make a connection to something that happened to someone you know, or is similar to something that you heard about in the news?*

Many students may find this task difficult, so alternative responses are provided in the instruction: they can write about someone they know or something they heard about in the news. Students then compose two mini-paragraphs: the first describing an incident or episode from the book, the second describing a related event from their life.

A family member

This is another activity that necessitates the forging of connections between the imaginary world of the text and the real world of the reader. Students are asked to think about the book characters within the framework of their own family:

> *If you could choose one character from the book to be a member of your family, which character would you choose? Why? Would you like him/her to be your mother, father, sister, brother, aunt, uncle, grandfather, grandmother, cousin…? Why? If you don't like any of the characters, write about why you would <u>not</u> want one of the characters to be in your family.*

This is quite a natural and effective way to connect with the book, since so many students have, it seems, always wished they had a sibling (perhaps the small size of Japanese families plays a role here). In justifying their choice they are

forced to demonstrate a reasonably intimate knowledge of the character, thus meeting the criterion of accountability.

Dear diary

It may come as a surprise to many people that diary-writing is a popular pastime among young Japanese. In addition to traditional, paper-based diaries that are typically only seen by the author him/herself, there has been an explosion in the popularity of diary writing on social networking websites such as *mixi,* in which the individual documents his/her life for a select reading audience (i.e. friends). The genre lends itself easily to an ER book report format. Students are given the following instructions:

> *Choose one character from your book. Create some extracts from his/her diary, explaining key events from his/her life and showing your familiarity with the book. If you don't know exact dates, make guesses using your knowledge of the book. Although you can invent some information, try to make the diary an accurate reflection of the character's experiences in the book. Explain experiences and feelings.*

The teacher can make this task longer or shorter by specifying the number and/or length of extracts. Assuming a character's point of view is interesting, challenging and new for students.

Favorite quotation

This is a very simple idea that is nevertheless an effective method of personal response to a book. An interesting way to introduce the task is to put one or more famous quotations on the blackboard and have students guess which book/movie/play they come from. Examples might be: "Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou Romeo?" (*Romeo and Juliet)*, "May the force be with you" (*Star Wars*), and "I'll be back" (*The Terminator*). Students are then asked to pick out one quotation from their book that made a strong impression on them for any reason (good or bad). On a worksheet they write the quotation and a short explanation of its significance. The length of the quotation can vary from a single phrase up to three or four sentences. This requires the students to skim and scan back through the book – a worthy skill in itself, it is also a way to refresh students' memories about the content of their book, which can then lead to group oral discussion.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper is to suggest some activities that extend students' ER experience in the classroom. Those who claim that output activities have no place in ER ignore the practical realities of many teaching environments: for grading and other purposes, teachers need to know whether (and what) students have been reading. In addition, there are several pedagogical reasons why output activities can enhance overall proficiency: (i) the limited nature of EFL environments necessitates a comprehensive skills approach; (ii) output activities foster a sense of reading community, thus increasing motivation; and (iii) such activities allow

students to learn about books from peers. For these reasons teachers need the support of speaking and writing materials for ER, rather than accepting that sustained silent reading is the one and only correct approach.

The sample tasks presented in this paper allow students to demonstrate their knowledge of, and personal reactions to, reading material. They are writing tasks in the first instance, but self-evidently lend themselves to in-class discussion. Significantly, they address the issue of accountability, which so often gets ignored in the idealized projections of what an ER classroom should be. Lastly, the materials never lose sight of the fact that if creativity, freedom and above all enjoyment are ever destroyed, so too is the purpose of ER. This is achieved by continuously striving for variety in material design. Both theorists and practitioners of ER need to bear these principles in mind.

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