Reading to Learn or Teaching to Read: the Roles of Learners and Teachers in an Extensive Reading Programme

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Extensive reading is predicated on the belief that the teacher's role is to guide and facilitate the reading process while learners self-select texts based on interest and ease of reading (Day and Bamford, 1998). However, this situation is potentially problematic, given that teachers and learners may possess differing viewpoints regarding reading material. Having autonomy in choosing what to read may place learners in an unfamiliar position, while instructors may wish to exercise agency in selecting texts to ensure that reading materials are at a suitable level for learners. Utilizing focus groups and stimulated recall interviews, this research examines the beliefs learners and instructors have regarding text selection. Findings suggest that learners select texts based on factors other than difficulty level, while instructors may feel ambiguity regarding their role; pre-selection of texts may ensure learners read at a suitable level but at the expense of choosing readings that are of personal interest.

Extensive reading is informed by the view learners should read massive amounts of text, and that students select reading materials based on personal interest (Day & Bamford, 1998). Reading is done for pleasure. Rather than use a dictionary to check vocabulary items, students learn to read by reading (Parry, Devine, Carrell & Eskey, 1987). Learners read quickly, focusing on enjoying the story and develop the habit of reading without effort, leading to increased reading fluency. As noted by Powell (2005), self-selection of texts is fundamental to learner motivation to pursue extensive reading, a point echoed by Guo (2012) and Duggan (2017). Grabe and Stoller (2002) also note that being able to choose texts empowers learners, enhancing motivation to read.

Maley states that extensive reading is 'the single most effective way to improve language proficiency' (2005, p. 354). The perceived benefits of extensive reading can be summarized as follows:

1. Comprehension of written texts improves through reading

2. Vocabulary improves as students acquire a wider active and passive vocabulary

3. Knowledge of grammatical structures improves as learners become more proficient at noticing mistakes in their written and spoken language

4. This carries over into the affective realm as students develop an improved motivation to learn English as their

knowledge of English increases (Davis, 1995, p. 330).

Learners who read extensively are also receiving a level of input that may compensate for a lack of exposure to the target language in other areas such as classroom instruction, where Renandya (2007) notes the quality of such input may be variable.

However, the benefits learners acquire from extensive reading are contingent upon the selection of appropriate reading material. Appropriateness in this case refers to learners reading at a level described as $i - 1$; that is, a level slightly below the level of proficiency students currently possess. Hu and Nation (2000) observe that learners should be familiar with 98% of words on the page in order to be able to read extensively. How learners select reading material is, then, of importance. What factors influence this selection? Are learners able to select texts at an appropriate level of comprehension? Selection of appropriate material is a practical problem (Chang & Renandya, 2017), which can undermine the efficacy of extensive reading as a pedagogical approach. The significance of this paper is that it is one of the first attempts to examine learner and teacher perspectives on selecting reading material within the same extensive reading programme and provides insight into the motivations that inform learner and teacher behavior regarding this process.

The instructor's role in an extensive reading programme is important. Teachers orient students to the goals of the programme, facilitating the process (Day & Bamford, 1998, p. 141). Nonetheless, this may be problematic. Given extensive reading is an individual process not directly supervised by the teacher (Türkdoğan & Sivell, 2016), teachers may feel some concern when allowing learners autonomy in selecting

their own reading material. Associated concerns include how to monitor what students are reading and evaluating learner progress. In such a situation, teachers may feel a need to intervene in the selection of reading materials to ensure $i - 1$ occurs. That is, instructors may wish to exercise agency.

The definition of teacher agency this paper will adopt is 'the capacity to act' (Priestley, 2015). In selecting reading materials for learners, instructors are engaged in a process of relating materials to pedagogical goals. The question then arises as to why teachers feel the need to act to influence the selection of reading materials.

Participants and Learning Context

To investigate the issues outlined above, I conducted focus groups and stimulated recall interviews with students and teachers involved in an extensive reading programme at a private university in central Taiwan.

The student participants in this study were learners from two Level Four Freshman English classes. Level Four is the highest level in what is a four-level programme. Students at this level typically average 600 in TOEIC. Fifteen learners volunteered to take part in a focus group, while five members of this group agreed to a follow-up stimulated recall interview about areas of interest to emerge during the focus group.

Five instructors in the Freshman English programme at this university also agreed to take part in a focus group and undertake follow-up stimulated recall interviews regarding focus group data.

Method

A focus group involves a moderator facilitating discussion by a group on a topic of

interest to the researcher. Interaction is transcribed and analyzed for recurrent themes. Stimulated recall is a method in which participants are shown a prompt (the focus group transcript) and asked to reflect on their thought processes when contributing to the focus group interaction, which allows for a deeper examination of the themes that emerge during the focus group.

Data and Analysis

Student Perspectives

Student Focus Group and Stimulated Recall Interviews

On the left of Table 1 is a data extract taken from the focus group. Beside it is stimulated recall interview data related to the content of the focus group interaction. Initials have been used to ensure anonymity. Under discussion are the factors influencing the selection of reading material, in particular if the blurb is useful.

Table 1: Student Focus Group and Stimulated Recall Interview Data

Focus Group Data	Stimulated Recall Interview Data
Int: When you choose a book to read for our Freshman English class, what attracts you to a particular book? *P: Pictures.* *N: Cover.* *S: The story.* *Int: OK so we had three different answers. So what about the pictures?* *P: Colourful.* *Int: You mean the cover or inside the book?* *P: Inside.* *Int: So if they're colourful, it makes you want to read the story?* *P: Yep.* *Int: So what about the cover, what attracts you to that?*	Interview 1: D *Int: So I asked last time when you go to the library do you read the blurb on the back of the book.* *D: Yes. I will read it.* *Int: And you always do that?* *D: Always.* *Int: OK so when you look at the blurbs, what do you notice? Like do you think about how many words, or the level or just…* *D: Hm…* *Int: Or just the summary?* *D: Just the summary. Yes. I mean the summary.* *Int: OK. So do you usually grab one book, take a look and go OK this will do? Or do you look at more than one?* *D: More than one until find the one is most attractive me.*
N: Colourful cover. The cover I will be interested in. *Int: OK. But S you said the story.* *S: Yes.* *Int: So can you tell us more about that?* *S: I will prefer to read the story because uh for example it's interesting.* *Int: OK. So do any of you ever check the back of the book. You know, the blurb at the back.* *E: Always.*	Interview 2: P *Int: So do you think it's easy because English is not your first language, to choose an appropriate level of book?* *P: No. Not easy.* *Int: OK so what attracts you to certain books?* *P: The cover.* *Int: OK. So the pictures look pretty…* *P: Yeah.* *Int: …and you think. OK. I was asking D yesterday, the ones you choose in the basement, you know you can see on the back how many headwords, the level and so on. Does that help you make a choice?* *P: No.*

Difficulty level of the text was not mentioned by any of the focus group participants as a factor in book selection. Aesthetic appeal and story content appear to be the leading reasons for selecting a story. Given that *i* - 1 is a generally accepted as a necessary condition for extensive reading to be an effective pedagogical strategy, the data above indicates that learners are less concerned with comprehending the text than the visual appeal of a story or the content of the plot. It is evident that these learners are choosing reading material based on personal interest. However, there is a perceptible lack of attention to the difficulty level of the text. Due to space, it is not possible to include further examples from the focus group transcript; however, it is telling that at no time did participants mention comprehending the text as a reason for selecting a story. In the stimulated recall interviews that followed (shown on the right), I attempted to gain a greater understanding of how learners went about selecting reading material, in particular if the information contained in the blurb related to headwords and difficulty level was a consideration when selecting a graded reader.

Approximately one week after the focus group, five participants were interviewed regarding comments they had made during the focus group. Interview 1 is with D. When asked if she read the blurb, she stated she always read it but was focused on a summary of the plot. It should be noted that D exhibited some hesitation when asked what she noticed when looking at the blurb. This would seem to indicate that when examining the blurb of a particular book, she is not especially aware of the information contained there. When summary was offered, she responded to this, stating that a précis of the plot was her focus when looking at the blurb. She did not examine headwords or reading level.

However, learners had been explicitly told by their classroom instructor to do so when selecting a book to ensure that it was at the right level of comprehension. The importance of personal interest is illustrated here by D noting that she would look at a range of books until she found one that '*is most attractive me*'. It is indicated that story content takes precedence over difficulty level when selecting reading material.

The final interview extract involves P. In the focus group she stated that the pictures inside the graded reader were important in guiding her to choose a book; attractive pictures would make her more likely to read a particular story. Of note is her observation that choosing an appropriate level of material is challenging when English is not your first language. While I am not stating that a lack of English proficiency leads to focusing on pictures to help understand a novel's story, it can be argued that visual images serve as a means of understanding the story for learners of English as a foreign language. If illustrations seem to make the story content clearer, this may influence what material is selected. Exemplified here is the problem many learners face; choosing an appropriate book involves several considerations such as interest, visual appeal and comprehensibility. At a given moment, one variable may hold sway over another and influence what reading material is chosen.

However, P has altered her position from that articulated in the focus group. While still focused on visual appeal, she now states that it is the cover that is her primary focus when choosing a book, rather than the pictures inside the book. She explicitly states that the headword count and difficulty level of the text are not a consideration when choosing a text. Neither is the blurb. In this case, it is evident that visual appeal

Table 2: Teacher Focus Group and Stimulated Recall Interview Data

Focus Group	Interview 3: J
Int: So do you think your students are good at choosing a reader at an appropriate level? You know, that whole I – 1, 98% knowledge of vocab in any given sentence. Are they realistic I guess is a better way to put it, when they choose their book? *M: Well they all, they wanna choose something too high, too difficult for them actually I think.* *W: Actually it's interesting because when I was teaching BIBA students they wanted to be higher than the um s- simplified readers.* *Int: Hm hm.* *W: They always wanted to claim that they had read Harry Potter that semester.* *Int: Yes.* *W: Something like that. In English. And who's to say they did or didn't?* *Int: Hm hm.* *W: There's…they probably read it in high school, not this semester. Um so I keep them with the simplified readers and since I've done that they read low. I think Level Four generally speaking is not reading any higher than Level Three.* *Int: Yeah I would agree with that.* *W: Yeah.* *M R: But but I'd say uh…* *W: Typically Penguin level four. Yeah. Level seven in M-Reader. Very typical.* *K: It's it's level five, six normally.*	*Int: So you go on to say that you have a hard time when students choose books themselves.* *J: Yeah.* *Int: Some choose with many pictures…so would you be saying that they choose something that's not appropriate to their level?* *J: Hm th- there's a tendency that a lot of them would choose something that's too easy for them.* *Int: OK.* *J: Hm but there are also some students who choose…who who will rather choose level three.* *Int: OK.* *J: For me I will rather…I think that will be too difficult for them. I don't sure if this affect their mo- level of motivation that we actually have a unified reader.* *Int: Hm hm.* *J: Because at the very beginning of the semester they did not…they were not given, they are not given the choice, they are forced to read something. If they are they are not given the choice they don't feel motivated.* *Int: OK.* *J: I believed in that actually.* *Int: That they should choose what they want to read?* *J: Yeah.*
	Interview 4: K
	Int: You seem to be saying there's a lot of sameness, that they're focusing on one genre, some students. Whereas others are doing things in a more diverse kind of way. *K: It's it's the big thing like I don't believe in extensive reading if you shove them readers down their throat. So I really want to give them an option so I try to still introduce a class reader that makes it m- more…how do I say that? Easier to to to to launch the idea and point out the things and you're also like, a bit like quality controlling the stuff.* *Int: Hm hm.* *K: So what I do is for a typical class of between 30 and 40 students I choose six readers from…I try to, six different genres. I introduce each of the readers in class. The students who think they like the reader raise their hand and they get it.*

is the primary criterion when choosing reading material. Discussion will now turn to teacher perspectives on book selection.

Teacher Perspectives

Teacher Focus Group and Stimulated Recall Interviews

In the focus group interaction in Table 2, teachers articulate the view that learners generally do not select readers at an appropriate level, instead choosing reading material at a level beyond their competence. This involves claims of having read 'authentic' material designed for native users of English. As shown earlier in the learners' focus group and interview data, learners tend not to focus on the level of the reading material selected. Teachers are aware of this and W makes the point that the distinction between levels three and four (based on English proficiency) does not lead to much difference in the level of reading material these students select. It can also be seen here that teachers are utilizing their knowledge of the levels of texts in relation to pedagogy and assessment; it is observed that learners from both groups are at Penguin Level Four, which is then matched with the equivalent M-Reader level (though K states his students are at level five or six on M-Reader). It is also noteworthy that W states that '*I keep them with the simplified readers*'. This is an example of teacher agency being enacted. Given that learners choose reading material that is too difficult, she has limited the choice learners have in order to achieve the pedagogical goal of learners reading at an appropriate level. This has led to students reading 'low'. The data here makes evident that assessment plays a role in how teachers approach extensive reading; texts are required to be at a particular level in order for learners to comprehend that material; assessment

can then take place, in this case, M-Reader quizzes.

J's interview data initially differs to some degree from the observations in the focus group interaction depicted here. In keeping with earlier learner data, her students appear focused on choosing a reader based on visual images. Unlike data from the focus group, she notes that her students tend to choose material at too low a level. (Level One is the lowest level in the Freshman English programme.) She also notes that some students will also choose texts beyond their competence. This level of mismatch between competence and selection has led to J exercising teacher agency in choosing a unified reader for her students, though she admits some unease about this, stating '*they are forced to read something*'. This is done at the beginning of the programme, based on earlier experience of learners choosing books that were too difficult. However, J appears to be conflicted about enacting agency in selecting a unified reader, as this goes against her beliefs that students should choose what they want to read. J notes that taking away choice is likely to curtail student motivation to read extensively. However, in stating that learners are forced into reading, it appears enacting agency is based on awareness that motivation to read extensively is limited. In the case of this instructor, teacher agency comes into play due to a belief that low-level learners do not choose books at an appropriate level and that a unified reader may scaffold learners through the process before they select their own reading material. This takes place at the possible expense of learner agency and motivation.

The second interview extract shown here is a further example of teacher agency in relation to the selection of reading material. K is describing how he introduces extensive

reading to his learners. Like J in the preceding extract, he is articulating his beliefs about extensive reading and how these beliefs inform his pedagogical approach. To make extensive reading effective, he introduces a variety of readers to learners that he has selected to ensure an appropriate level of comprehension. It should be noted that he uses the term '*class reader*', though this is not a unified reader. Learners are given a choice of readers in different genres and select one based on personal preference. Conspicuous here is that K views this as a launching point that will scaffold learners when selecting their own reading material. It allows for what he describes as '*quality control*', in other words, students begin at a level that is more likely to ensure $i - 1$. This approach also allows K to '*point out the things*', such as texts being at a level where students can read with ease.

Both interview extracts show how instructors utilize teacher agency with regard to book selection. It is clear these teachers regard extensive reading as being of use to learners; however, in order for this approach to be effective, J and K believe learners need guidance in the initial choice of reading material. Beliefs about learner behavior inform this expression of agency; while each uses a differing approach, both teachers maintain that learners need to read at an appropriate level. This means that initially, learners do not select their own reading material. Either a unified reader or class reader is chosen, before learners choose their own readers. Based on beliefs about students and their behaviours, these teachers enact agency to achieve a pedagogical purpose—ensuring learners read at an appropriate level.

Conclusion

This paper has discussed how learners and teachers possess differing perspectives on the selection of reading material. While much of the literature argues that students will be motivated to read if allowed to self-select readers (see Duggan, 2017; Green, 2005; Powell, 2005), the data presented here shows that this is a problematic issue for learners. Aesthetic factors can influence text selection, rather than the idea of reading at a level that ensures enjoyment and reading at speed. A contributing factor to struggling with extensive reading is selecting reading material that is too difficult (Yamashita, 2004) which may well occur if learners select books based on aesthetic concerns, as mentioned by P in the interview data. The teachers interviewed here appear to be focused on achieving $i - 1$ through a form of pre-selection of reading material that will facilitate reading at pace. This form of teacher agency may be counter to the theory informing extensive reading; however, in some cases this may be a valid response to how learners go about selecting readers. Another approach may be to emphasize criteria for self-selecting books that includes the headword count of that book, as noted by Rodrigo, Greenberg, Burke, Hall, Berry, Brinck, Joseph and Oby (2007). Selecting appropriate reading material can be problematic as learners and teachers may harbor differing views, as illustrated here. Selecting appropriate reading material is vital in ensuring extensive reading is effective as a pedagogical approach that aids students in learning English as a second or foreign language.

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