

The Sustained Motivation Cycle for Extensive Reading

Nathan D. Crocker
Matsuyama University

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While extensive reading (ER) is widely recognised as an ideal way of providing comprehensible input for language acquisition, teachers often struggle to convince students of its usefulness and maintain motivation throughout a course. In this paper I propose an approach to ER implementation designed to secure initial engagement, foster autonomous reading habits, and maintain motivation. Building on Krashen's (1982) input hypothesis and Day and Bamford's (2002) "top ten principles for teaching extensive reading," this model prioritises the psychological needs of learners and visible progress. The model provides an approach with 4 integrated phases: (1) a comprehensive introduction to ER, (2) motivation boosting initial success, (3) social reinforcement through communicative activities, and (4) the use of visual tracking tools to maintain motivation. By focusing on motivation and sustained engagement, this framework provides a solution for the problem of ongoing motivation in ER.

多読は言語習得のための理解可能なインプットを提供する理想的な方法として広く認知されている一方で、教師はその有用性について学生に納得させ、コース全体を通じて彼らのモチベーションを維持することに苦労している。本論文では、初期の動機付けを確保し、自律的な読書習慣を育み、動機付けの維持を目的とした、多読導入のためのアプローチを提案する。Krashenのインプット仮説とDay and Bamfordの「多読教授の10原則」に基づき、このモデルは学習者の心理的ニーズと目に見える進歩を優先する。このモデルは次の4つの統合されたアプローチを提供する：(1)多読の総合的導入、(2)初期の成功を強化する動機付け、(3)コミュニケーション活動を通じた社会的強化、(4)モチベーション維持のための視覚的トラッキングツールの活用。動機付けと持続的な関与に焦点を当てることで、この枠組みは、多読における継続的な動機付けの問題への解決策を提供する。

Extensive reading (ER) is the practice of having students read a large amount of relatively easy material for general comprehension and enjoyment. This is widely regarded as an effective way to improve reading speed and fluency, acquire vocabulary and syntactic structures, and foster positive reading habits (e.g., Day & Bamford, 1998; Krashen, 1982; Nation, 2024). However, despite the perceived benefits of ER, there is often a gap between its theoretical potential and its implementation in classrooms. Teachers may struggle to implement ER effectively due to students misunderstanding its purpose and benefits (Day & Bamford, 1998, 2002). Ingrained language learning habits like intensive reading and translation methods may hinder students' ability to read fluently (Takase, 2008), as many students may never have read for pleasure in their primary language (Robb & Ewert, 2024). Furthermore, technological advances like AI chatbots and instantaneous translation apps have made it easy for unmotivated students to take shortcuts by reading the material in their primary language (Mikami & Shiozawa, 2023). The purpose of this article is to propose a framework which assists in establishing initial student engagement and long-term motivation in order to realise the pedagogical and theoretical benefits of ER in the classroom.

Extensive Reading Theory

Extensive reading is a practical way of providing students with input for acquisition. Krashen (1985) proposed that language acquisition requires comprehensible input, and his input hypothesis states that the ideal material for acquisition is at the $i + 1$ level, one step beyond the learner's current competence. When implemented carefully, ER is able to provide this level of material to individual students. Day and Bamford's (1998, 2002) "top ten principles for teaching extensive reading" stresses easy material and high reading volume. The use of easy material is supported by Nation (2022), who argued that readers must know approximately 98% of running words in order to read for pleasure.

Even when the input is comprehensible, anxious and unmotivated students may struggle with acquisition. Krashen (1985) further posits an *affective filter* (p. 81), which

is a psychological barrier that comes up when students are disengaged or stressed but lowers when they are deeply engaged with the message of the input. When students lose themselves in a text, the affective filter drops, allowing for more effective acquisition (Krashen, 1985). Yamashita (2004) links Krashen's focus on the affective domain to ER in a study examining learner performance in ER. She found that positive feelings about reading were more important as a motivating factor than positive thoughts about the value of reading.

Autonomy, Self-Regulation and Motivation

A key tenet of ER is that students be able to read autonomously in order to enhance reading pleasure and motivation (Day & Bamford, 2002). This autonomy requires students to possess the abilities to regulate their own learning as well as to sustain motivation over a semester. Benson (2013) defines learner autonomy as “the capacity to take control over one's own learning” (p. 142), stating that there are three important areas in which students can do this: learning management, cognitive processing, and learning content. In an ER context, this could include taking control over material selection, reading pace and environment, goal setting, and the decision to work a word out from context instead of using a dictionary.

The importance of autonomy is stressed in self-determination theory (SDT), which provides a way of examining how students can be motivated to start and continue ER. According to SDT, autonomy is one of three innate psychological needs, along with competence and relatedness, that are critical for establishing intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985). In ER, these needs are met through students choosing their own reading material and reading texts below their reading level, and through teachers providing reading activities in a positive classroom environment. According to SDT, for motivation to be maintained, the challenge to students must be at a specific level in order to be optimal: difficult enough that they must stretch their abilities, but not so difficult as to seem impossible (Ryan & Deci, 2017). ER consistently provides students with this level of reading challenge.

With the autonomy that ER offers students comes the need for self-regulation of that reading. Self-regulated learning (SRL) is necessary for autonomous learning and sustained effort over the long term (Zimmerman, 2002). Zimmerman (2002) presents a cyclical self-regulation process where learners plan, perform, and monitor their efforts to reach a goal. This self-regulatory process can be applied to ER by having students set their own goals and self-monitor their progress in order to sustain effort and motivation over a 15-week course.

Other theories of motivation that support the potential of ER include goal-setting theory (GST) and the L2 motivational self. GST proposes that the achievement of specific measurable goals can turn initial motivation into a long-term habit (Locke & Latham, 2002). Mikami (2020) explicitly connects Locke and Latham's (2002) GST to ER in her qualitative study of motivational change through goal setting in ER. She found that commitment to goals was the most significant factor in boosting motivation. The study also linked goal commitment to increased intrinsic motivation and reading self-efficacy.

Dörnyei's L2 Motivational Self System (2009) links motivation to learners' future vision of themselves within their learning environment. The L2 learner wants to become the confident, fluent reader they see as their ideal L2 future self. The conditions that foster a motivational L2 self-image are access to a plausible self-image that is not in conflict with peer or societal pressures, activation of that image, and strategies that help learners reach their goals (Dörnyei, 2009). In ER this can be realised through activities that help create a vivid future self-image of a fluent reader and the creation of a supportive in-class social group to help sustain learners' ideal L2 selves. Observing peers successfully use the L2 helps learners develop a more vivid and plausible ideal L2 self (Dörnyei, 2009).

Problems of Implementing ER

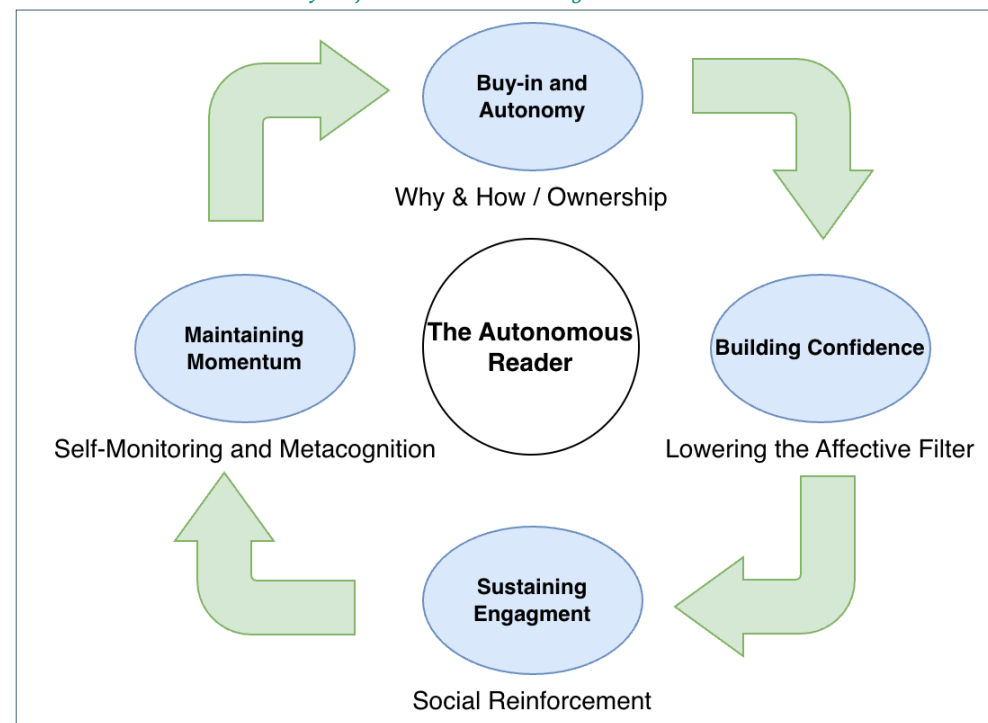
Despite sound theory, in-class implementation of ER continues to be a struggle (Day & Bamford, 1998, 2002; Renandya, 2007; Renandya et. al., 2021; Takase, 2008). One issue is student preconceptions of what reading in English is. The prevalence of intensive reading and translation methods to teach reading have conditioned students in Japan to expect slow and laborious progress through English passages. Day and Bamford (1998, 2002) state that serious students might be unable to see the benefits of reading easy and interesting materials, and Takase (2008) suggests that when students are accustomed to teaching that focusses on word-by-word translation, the Japanese translation for each word automatically pops into their head, a habit that must be unlearned. That same predominance of translation-oriented teaching leads to anxiety in Japanese students when they are not translating everything because, as Takase (2008) states, “for them, reading is interpreted as translating” (p. 132). Day and Bamford (1998) further describe student dependence on dictionaries as a “linguistic lifeline” (p. 122). In my own experience, these factors are a hindrance because they create a reluctance to initially engage with ER. Students often tell me, after being introduced to ER, that they are anxious about reading a whole book in English because they have never done that before.

Two further issues involve students reading texts that are too difficult or avoiding reading altogether. I often see students choosing books for ER that are beyond their level. Whether driven by a desire to reach word count goals faster, or a feeling that they ought to be reading more difficult books, students often select texts that are too demanding. This can trigger a “vicious cycle” of reading, where slow and difficult progress frustrates learners and further degrades their motivation (Extensive Reading Foundation, 2011). A further issue is that unmotivated students may avoid English reading tasks by using first-language versions of the texts. Advances in translation technology have made such practices increasingly difficult to identify and prevent (Mikami & Shiozawa, 2023).

The Sustained Motivation Cycle

In order to address these issues of initial commitment and sustained motivation in ER, I propose The Sustained Motivation Cycle for Extensive Reading (SMC-ER). This is a student-centred model, grounded in SDT and thus addressing the psychological needs necessary for internalisation and intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Deci and Ryan (1985) argue that intrinsic motivation is based on the psychological need for competence and self-determination. This is appropriate to ER implementation because, as a volume-based activity, it depends on intrinsic motivation, which is in turn dependent on student interest and student challenges at an optimal level. In the SMC-ER, self-determination is regulated by goal setting, with the model providing a guide for moving learners from an externally regulated initial commitment to internalisation and intrinsic motivation. The model consists of four phases: securing student commitment through information and autonomy, building confidence with immediate success, sustaining engagement with social reinforcement, and maintaining momentum through self-monitoring. The phases of the SMC-ER are illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1
The Sustained Motivation Cycle for Extensive Reading



The following sections detail the functions of each phase in sustaining the momentum of the reading process.

Phase 1: Student Commitment Through Information and Autonomy

The first phase involves introducing students to ER goals and methods. This should include not only the basic principles of ER, but also how ER differs from the style of reading they might be used to, what it means to acquire language instead of studying it, and the importance of easy vocabulary. It should also introduce the importance of goal-setting and the forming of an ideal L2 self. Deci and Ryan (1985) state that people

are more engaged with an activity when they are self-determining, when the locus of causality is internal rather than the result of external forces. Teachers can help to shift the students from externally motivated reading—that is, reading because they want a good grade, towards intrinsically motivated reading that is personally meaningful and fun, by satisfying the basic needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

Besides explaining the basic principles of ER, it is important, as Day and Bamford (1998) suggest, to give students an overview of the goals of the program. Teachers can explain the goals of the reading in concrete terms like: “making meaning directly from the text without translation” (p. 120), focusing on the general meaning of the text, guessing from context any unfamiliar words, and “being satisfied...with less than total comprehension” (p. 120). In order to convince students that reading easy books is worthwhile, The Extensive Reading Foundation (2011) suggests informing students that although they may know the vocabulary in the books, they are still learning because they are putting their reading into practice and increasing their reading speed. I find it useful to put a passage usually used for intensive reading alongside a typical ER text and have a conversation with students about the differences between them and the possible learning benefits of each. The Appendix contains an example of this.

The comprehensive introduction fulfils two main functions: it defines ER for students, clearly separating it from the intensive reading that they are more familiar with, and it prepares students to move away from a state of dependence on the teacher to a state of informed autonomy, which is important for long-term engagement (Benson, 2013). The knowledge of why it is beneficial to read easy books leads on to the next phase.

Phase 2: Building Confidence with Immediate Success

Phase 2 provides a positive first encounter with ER and ensures initial success in order to build self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997) and lower the affective filter (Krashen, 1985). This experience also aims to satisfy the psychological need for competence (Deci & Ryan, 1985) by providing a mastery experience that shows students that they are capable of ER—an important mechanism for building self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997). Without an initial success, there is the possibility of students falling into the “vicious cycle” (Extensive Reading Foundation, 2011) and falling back into more familiar L2 practices. An unqualified initial success has the best opportunity of lowering students’ anxiety and defensiveness, making subsequent reading material more accessible (Krashen, 1985). Students will only commit to the long-term demands of an ER programme if they have high expectations of success (Day & Bamford, 1998).

As explained in Phase 1, books read for ER should be non-challenging—at an *i* or an *i* - 1 level. However, in order to build confidence with a positive first encounter in Phase 2, the initial books should be even less challenging—at an *i* - 1 or *i* - 2 level (Renandya, 2007). Teachers need to curate materials so that only a limited range of lower-level books are available for students’ initial ER experience. I start with a very low-level graded reader, about 200 words long with a lot of supporting pictures, which we read and discuss in class together. I let the class use the word count of this book in their own word count tally, which helps students get off that possibly demotivating “0” and allows me to explain that what we have just done as a class is what ER is about. I then encourage students to choose their own books, reminding them that it is better to start easily and build up in difficulty. Word count goals do not have to be part of the evaluation of an ER course. I use word count goals in my ER courses to ensure students are, in fact, reading extensively. If students are only reading a book every few weeks there is the possibility that they are translating it word-by-word.

Phase 3: Sustaining Engagement with Social Reinforcement

Phase 3 focusses on activities to be used in class with the purpose of sustaining engagement throughout an ER course by bolstering motivation through group activity. This phase is grounded in the psychological need for relatedness, which helps individuals achieve self-determination (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2017), Bandura’s (1997) concept of vicarious reinforcement of self-efficacy through witnessing a peer succeed, and Dörnyei’s (2009) ideal L2 self which is powerfully shaped by the L2 environment.

Phase 3 starts with the establishment of a relaxed and comfortable classroom environment. Day and Bamford (1998, 2002) emphasise the teacher’s job as a reading role model demonstrating “the attitudes and behaviours of a reader” (2002, p. 140). They also stress that reading is its own reward, and that moving away from a structure of being tested on reading material is important for lowering students’ affective filter. Renandya (2007) adds that the teacher is “modelling enthusiasm for reading” (p. 145) and sending a message that we value reading. In my classes I emphasise that students’ thoughts about a book are their own opinions and cannot be wrong. I have seen that this helps students be less reluctant about giving their responses to a book.

In this phase, teachers coordinate low-stakes activities that support L2 reading and learning. Activities like book talks, book recommendations, and reading circles can create excitement around reading, foster a sense of community, connect reading to a social context, and satisfy the human need to belong (Ryan and Deci, 2017). Bamford and Day

(2004) offer a wealth of such activities, which I use with my own activities to encourage enjoyment and foster the spirit of ER. My own experience suggests that collaborative creating of a character or a story are most successful. One activity is to read a graded reader together as a class up to a specific point, usually to a turning point in the story, or just before the climax. Then I ask students in pairs or small groups to write the ending of the story (Johnson & Matthews, 2025). I have been surprised by the energy students put into this activity and the variety of endings that they come up with.

One-on-one teacher conferences can also improve self-efficacy through guidance and positive verbal feedback (Bandura, 1997). Teachers can help students avoid falling into the vicious cycle of reading by ensuring that they are always reading at the correct level. In my experience this is largely letting students know when I think the reading material they have chosen is too difficult and giving book recommendations at the appropriate level. Teachers can also highlight student successes by reviewing completed books and focussing on how far the student has come. They are also able to give praise that moves away from generic comments like “good job” to highlight more specific skills, such as, “you are doing a great job at choosing books that are easy but interesting.” By giving process-oriented feedback teachers can help students interpret their own progress as an experience of mastery rather than an accidental success, which Bandura (1997) argues builds a sense of self-efficacy.

Phase 4: Maintaining Momentum Through Self-Monitoring

Phase 4 involves making student progress visible through word count goals and visual charts that provide feedback, and objective evidence of progress. This phase is grounded in goal-setting theory (Locke & Latham, 2002), which stresses that motivation is sustained through specific goals and feedback, Zimmerman’s (2002) SRL, which posits that learning is most effective when it follows a cycle of forethought, performance, and reflection, and Benson’s (2013) concept that autonomy requires the ability to manage one’s own learning.

To implement Phase 4, teachers provide progress graphs and charts, and guide learners in using them. These could track a number of variables, such as:

- total word count for the course or the session;
- student progress towards individually set goals;
- total words read by the class;
- student attitudes towards reading.

It is important to remember that these tools are primarily for motivation and student self-monitoring and should not be used for grading. The online ER platform MReader (<https://mreader.org/>, n.d.) has features where students can collect book covers as badges on their home page, as well as see their word count increasing (Robb & Waring, 2012). I prefer something tangible and fun that can be used in class, such as a large image of a thermometer where the top of the thermometer represents 80% of the reading goal for the whole class and the aim is to explode through the top of the thermometer as soon as possible.

There is a danger that goal setting can reduce student motivation. Mikami (2020) found that some students appeared to lose motivation if they did not meet the word count goals they had set. That is, some students set goals that were too difficult and lowered their achievement rates, and these unsuccessful students often set and adjusted their goals without much consideration of the circumstances (Mikami, 2020). The role of individual goal setting in ER, whether it be word count, pages, or books read, should be handled carefully. I encourage students to start with achievable goals in order to build confidence and then slowly test their limits. It is important to be explicit that not meeting a goal is not a failure, but an opportunity to reassess future goals. Goal setting should be looked at as part of one-on-one teacher conferences.

Conclusion

The phases of the SMC-ER aim to facilitate students’ progression from learning about ER and experiencing early success, to developing motivation through goal-setting and social interaction, and finally to establishing intrinsically motivated reading habits. The model prioritises the affective domain, stressing that successful ER is as much about learners’ emotions and identities as it is about language learning. There are many potential benefits to this system. The SMC-ER ensures that students have a clear understanding of ER and its pedagogical purpose. By establishing this understanding, teachers can reduce the friction that is often associated with the introduction of easy texts. Fostering a system that minimises the chance of initial failure helps to reduce L2 reading anxiety and increase student reception to language acquisition. The ultimate goal is to shift student focus from the external motivators of grades to the internal motivators of gaining pleasure from reading. This gain in motivation will potentially discourage the avoidance of L2 reading and reading material that is too difficult.

Bio Data

Nathan Crocker is an adjunct lecturer at Matsuyama University and Okayama University of Science (Imabari Campus). His research interests are in the implementation of extensive reading as well as literature and creative writing in language learning.

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Appendix

Sample Activity

Intensive and Extensive Reading Passage Comparison

Sample Intensive Reading Passage: Five Tips for Using Less Plastic

Quit using plastic bags. Instead, take your own reusable shopping bag to the store. People use a trillion plastic bags worldwide every year. Roughly 10 percent are used in the United States alone. That's almost one bag per American per day. In contrast, the average Dane uses four single-use bags *per year*. In 1993, Denmark was the first country to place a tax on plastic bags. Today, other countries (such as Chile, Kenya, Indonesia, Germany, and New Zealand) either make customers pay for plastic bags, or have banned them completely.

Note. Repurposed from *Reading Explorer 1* (3rd ed., Unit 11B), by N. Douglas and D. Bohlke, 2020, Cengage Learning.

Sample Extensive Reading Passage: *The Secret Tunnel*

Faye took the diamonds from David.

“Hey! They’re *my* diamonds!” said David. “I found them. What are you going to do with them?”

“It’s okay, David,” she said.

Suddenly, Faye threw the diamonds at the wall. Tyler and David were very surprised.

“What are you doing, Faye?” shouted David. “Hey, they are my diamonds. Why did you do that? You’ll break them!”

Note. Repurposed from *The Secret Tunnel: Foundations Reading Library 7*, by R. Waring and M. Jamall, 2006, Cengage Learning.

In this activity I have the students look at the passages one by one and ask them about the differences and the learning benefits of each. In terms of the difference, I hope to elicit comments about the ER passage, such as: the vocabulary and grammar are easier, it tells a story, the language is less formal, it has more action, there is more space around the words, and it is easier to read quickly. For the educational benefit of each I try to elicit that the intensive reading passage is more useful for learning vocabulary and difficult grammar, and the ER passage is useful for fluency and speed because it is easier to read more quickly. I use this activity as a springboard to talk about the key differences between intensive reading and ER and the educational benefits of ER. The obvious contrast in material makes it easier to explain concepts such as when you are doing intensive reading you are focussed on learning; however, when you are doing ER, you are focussed on the meaning of the story and the learning happens automatically.