

## Introducing the Novel in an Extensive Reading Program

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**[Abstract]** In the Volume 9, Number 2 (December 2002) edition of this journal, the author published a paper focusing on the research which shows that extensive reading is a key element in language programs for students in transitioning from the beginner to intermediate and higher proficiency levels. Using this research as the educational foundation for a university reading program, the author then described the procedures for and the student feedback of a one-year course. Since that time, the author has altered the structure of the course in a way that she feels more benefits the students. It is the goal of these research notes to share these structural changes and reflect on how they improve the overall effectiveness of the course.

**[Key words]** Teaching methodology, TESOL, SLA, Reading, Extensive reading, Free voluntary reading

### I. Background of the study

Regardless of which methodology is currently popular for teaching foreign languages, one key element seems to hold true: Having students engage in extensive reading is an integral element in a balanced curriculum and may be a key factor in helping students progress from beginner to intermediate proficiency levels while living in an environment that does not necessitate the usage of the target language.

Based on these findings, I decided to incorporate extensive reading in a one-year university reading skills class. Up until that time, the standard curriculum for that class involved building micro reading skills such as skimming, scanning, preview and predicting, guessing word meaning from context, making inferences and looking for topics. These skills could be practiced and de-

veloped using the short texts in the students' course book and others provided by the instructors. However, longer readings such as novels more easily promote the development of macro skills like choosing the main themes, summarizing, describing characters and communicating impressions.

The university English faculty members agreed to build a collection of graded readers in the library so students in my English class could engage in this new addition to the set curriculum. Results from the first year were so overwhelmingly positive that the faculty decided to incorporate extensive reading in the official syllabus for all levels of reading classes and greatly expanded the selection of available graded readers.

Internationally, research has been done extensively which shows that curriculums which in-

corporate reading programs help students reach an equal or higher proficiency levels than in programs which do not. The book *The Power of Reading* (1993) and *Foreign Language Education: The Easy Way* (1997) do an excellent job of summarizing this research (Sawazaki 2002). Studies are also being done in Japan which promote extensive reading programs (Field 2001, Mason and Krashen 1997a, Waring 2002).

Now, in the third year of this action research to develop an effective reading program, I have made several key structural changes which have made much better use of our limited class time and resources in order to help students improve their basic English skills. In these research notes, I will share an outline of the original approach to the reading course, alterations which were made for the current year's program, and hopes for the future. The main shifts have taken place in the first, or spring, semester of this course. Given that the course is in progress (currently in the second, fall, semester) at the time of this publication, scientifically based comparisons of end results from this year and the previous year cannot yet be made. However, I feel that my subjective observations of the spring semester are significant enough to warrant sharing them.

## II. Synopsis of the previous curriculum

The approach to teaching reading which I used in the previous year's curriculum was based on the assumption that students need to focus on the micro skills (scanning, predicting, previewing etc.) before engaging in practice of the macro skills (summarizing, picking out main themes, analytical discussions, etc.). Thus, the skills that their course book focused on should be practiced before novels were read. This as-

sumption was based on the premise that students needed a bridge between the predominantly grammar/translation methodology which they engaged in in high school English classes and a more fluency-based approach such as extensive reading in this university course. Since grammar/translation often leaves students with a fear of uncertainty of unknown words and structures and a need to translate word for word (Field 2002), I was afraid that their slow reading rate would discourage them when they engaged in their first trial of reading an English novel. As affective factors are strong influences in foreign-language success rates, I was apprehensive about having student dive directly into extensive reading. If they first had opportunities to consciously partake in exercises whose message was that it is natural to read without knowing all of the structures and words and that we can derive meaning from many clues (titles, pictures, previous events, surrounding words, etc.), the transition would be more comfortable.

Given these assumptions, I created a curriculum which involved practicing the micro skills in the course book in the first semester along with students reading the same instructor-chosen novels, and then, in the second semester, engaging in extensive reading using the graded readers that students could choose freely from the collection in the library. For Japanese students, I felt this would provide a secure enough bridge between the two conflicting approaches. The student feedback at the end of the year clearly showed that the students enjoyed reading independently selected novels so much that they wished we had engaged in that practice from the beginning of the school year.

Despite my hesitancy, the students' voices demonstrated that approaches developed in

other countries can easily transcend cultural borders and that some universals exist when it comes to learning languages. In his article entitled "Acquiring Literacy Is Natural: Who Skilled Cock Robin" Goodman claims :

There is a comfort and orderliness that appeals to teachers in sequential skill hierarchies. (There) are two kinds of learners; one kind do well on the skill drills because they have enough control of the reading process to deal with the parts within the wholes. They don't need the skill instruction. The second kind have great difficulty with the sequenced skills because they are dealing with them as abstractions outside of the meaningful language process. Such learners can't profit from skill instruction unless they can transcend it and find their way to meaning on their own. (1982, p. 247)

This passage requires me to reflect on myself as a language instructor and to ask some crucial questions: Am I focusing on skill drills because it makes me feel secure in my teaching? Are students truly benefiting in a way that I hope they do when engaging in these drills? Is there a better way to structure the class to fit the needs of the students? It is these questions which lead me to alter the curriculum.

Richard-Amato sums up one of the primary principals of extensive reading when she states that "learning to read in a first or second language is generally a matter of wanting to know what someone has to say about some area of interest." (1988, p. 196) In postponing the element of the curriculum where students are able to freely choose the readings they want to engage in, am I not also postponing the students' opportunity to gain truly meaningful reading skills? This concern propelled me to make the following alterations in the curriculum.

### III. Reconstructing the curriculum

As previously explained, the rationale for the curriculum order in the 2003 program was based on the assumption that students needed practice with the basic skills for reading (skimming, scanning, predicting, guessing meaning from context, and others) before endeavoring on the task of reading independently selected novels. In addition to the American-based principles of language learning stated above, the results of one of Mason's Japanese-based studies, however, provoked me to reanalyze this assumption and reconstruct the previous curriculum. Mason's findings showed that even remedial students benefited greatly from reading novels from the very beginning of the course (Mason and Krashen 1997a). Based on these positive results, I concluded that the students' overall skills may increase at a faster rate if both reading skills and extensive reading through novels were practiced concurrently.

In the previous year, 2002, students were required to read three graded readers in the spring semester (all from the Oxford Bookworms Library Series Stage 1: 400 headwords) and to focus mainly on reading skills building in their course book. Since all of the students read the same book, they were able to discuss the plots and help each other with comprehension in groups. They also kept a vocabulary notebook. The primary focus, however, was on skills building. It was not until the fall semester that the student were able to assess the level of graded reader they should read and have the liberty to chose which novel they were interested in reading (from the Oxford Bookworms Library and Penguin Readers series).

In the 2003 curriculum, however, the students were only given one book to read, and instead

of simply focusing on plot comprehension, I gave the students positive reading skills hints and a questionnaire about their first experience reading a novel (see Appendix A). For this year, I chose the famous novel, *The Phantom of the Opera*. In the next lesson they received a handout with included copies of the first page of a sample book from each level in the Oxford and Penguin readers series. They read through each page, highlighting the words they did not know and could not guess from the context. After completing this assignment, they were to estimate their reading level in each series (Oxford is slightly more advanced than Penguin). Books in the appropriate level should have no more than two to three unknown words per page (Waring 2002).

For the rest of the semester, students were to read a book and turn in a report similar to the *Phantom of the Opera* report on a bi-weekly basis. At the end of the semester, students chose one novel for their final presentation. They were to create and perform a 1-2 minute commercial for the purpose of convincing their classmates that they too should read this novel. This presentation demonstrated their enthusiasm for reading and allowed the students to share their knowledge and feelings with each other in a meaningful way.

#### IV. Student feedback and teacher observation

By engaging in self-selected extensive reading from the very beginning of the course, students were able to accomplish in one semester what the students of the previous year did in one whole year. Although the amount of skills practice decreased, the students' attitude and enthusiasm towards reading was apparently

higher at this mid point in the course than it was in the previous year. Students were challenging higher levels of readers than did the students from the previous year. The motivation demonstrated by the students would most likely transfer over to their skills practice and result in higher levels of reading skills. This assumption, however, is yet to be justified.

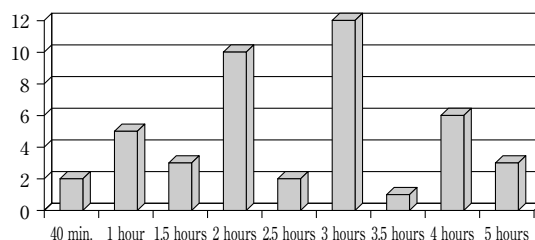
In the previous year, the feedback from the students' reading of their first novel tended to be comments of frustration ("I had to translate in order to understand." "I could not read quickly." "I read word for word."). It was my hopes that by seeing their weaknesses, students would be motivated to practice skills building in order to overcome them. However, this experience tended to be demoralizing and many students approached reading the following two required novels as an exercise in painful practice rather than a potentially joyful experience.

In this year's class however, the focus of the first book report and questionnaire was made in a more positive fashion, allowing students to focus on correct and helpful techniques for reading fluently. The following are the results from the questionnaire completed by 53 students.

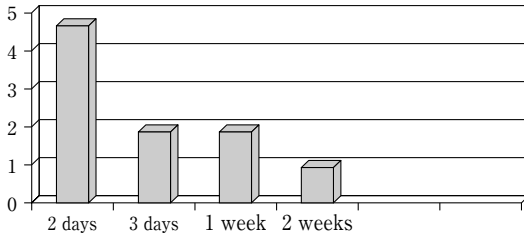
#### Questionnaire results for *The Phantom of the Opera* :

How long did it take you to read this book ?

A. Average of 2.6 hours (43 students).



B. Average of 4.4 days (10 students).



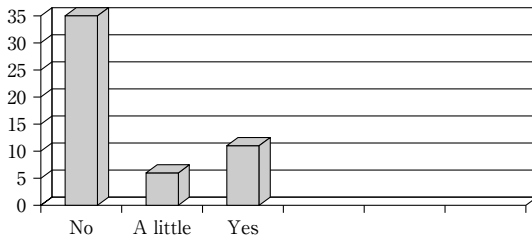
Note: The questionnaire should have required responses in hours.

Was this too long ?

No (35 students).

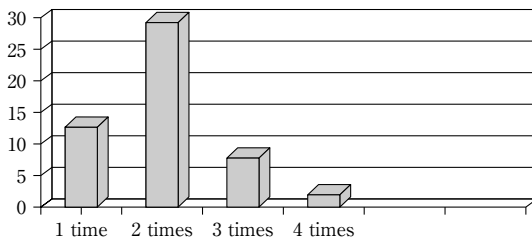
A little ( 6 students).

Yes (11 students).



How many times did you read this book ?

Average of 1.98 times (53 students).



Rate each from 1 (a little) to 5 (a lot) :

Average from 53 students' responses :

- 4.1 1. I enjoyed reading this book.
- 4.0 2. I understood the plot of the story.
- 3.6 3. I could guess the meaning of words I didn't know.
- 3.8 4. I used the pictures to help me understand the story.
- 3.3 5. I read in chunks. (Not word for word.)
- 3.0 6. I translated the English into Japanese as I read.

The results of this questionnaire show that

there is, in general, a positive response to the first novel reading experience of this group of students. The average reading time, 2.6 hours, is not unreasonable for a 40 page novel. Given that there are 13 pages of pictures and the average number of words per page for the remaining 27 pages is 280 words, the students were reading at an average of 48 words per minute. This is not taking into account time for rereading, taking short breaks, using pictures to facilitate meaning and reflection on the story. The majority of the students themselves felt that this was not an unreasonably long period of time for reading this novel. Since the majority of the students read the book at least 2 times, this shows they were motivated to reread the story. This might account for the high score for their level of enjoyment and comprehension of the plot. As for the reading skills actively used, the two highest were using pictures to help facilitate meaning and guessing words from context. The students scored themselves moderately for translating, many claiming they did not need to resort to this as they read. The students found the skill of reading in chunks to be the most challenging for this first time experience.

This preliminary book report and questionnaire set the tone for the subsequent independent extensive reading component of the course. Students seemed to enjoy engaging in the project and submitted well-written and thoughtful reports.

As for the final part of the questionnaire, *How do you think you can improve your reading skills ?*, students gave a variety of responses. The responses in order of popularity were :

I should read many books in English.  
(25 students)

I need to read more quickly and in chunks.  
(8 students)

I should read one book repeatedly.  
(8 students)

I should read books I am interested in and  
enjoy reading. (8 students)

I should improve my vocabulary.  
(6 students)

I should guess the meaning of words I do  
not know. (5 students)

It is important to read easy books first,  
then read more difficult books. (4 students)

I should not translate as I read. (3 students)

I can improve my reading skills by reading  
out loud in a loud voice. (3 students)

I should read famous books. (1 student)

With nearly half of the students stating independently that they should read many books in English in order to improve their skills and that they should read the same book repeatedly, there is little the instructor needs to do to but send them on their way. This is what took place in the spring semester. The students were encouraged to read books on a weekly basis. Of course, remaining in the proper level is important, but I also pointed out that interest in the story plays a major role in how they read. So, I

encouraged the students not only to think about difficulty and length, but also genre and topic area. The students all participated in the subsequent extensive reading project with fervor.

## V. Further studies

Students tend to live up to the expectations of the instructor. So, it is crucial that the instructor set the standards high enough so that students can engage in the curriculum at their maximum capacity. The challenge is find the balance between teacher expectations and student goals and interests. The end of the year evaluation will prove to be interesting to see if the students benefited more from the year-round extensive reading project than the previous year's students who only participated in this project in the latter half of the year.

It is my hopes that further studies in a variety of English language learning situations will be conducted to see how such programs should be implemented and to what benefit they have for the learners.

Appendix A

Name : \_\_\_\_\_  
Student number : \_\_\_\_\_  
Class : \_\_\_\_\_

Points : \_\_\_\_\_/20

**The Phantom of the Opera**

By Jennifer Bassett

This is the first book you read this year. Think about the following :

1. You do not need to understand all of the words in order to understand the story.
2. Do NOT use a dictionary.
3. Read when you are relaxed, but not sleepy !
4. Try to read sentences in chunks, not word by word. If it helps, read out loud.
5. Try to visualize the story.

Please write notes about the following as you read :

Main characters (Who are they and what do they do in the story) :

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Plot of the story :

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Comments :

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Answer these questions after you finish reading :

How long did it take you to read this book ? \_\_\_\_\_

Was this too long ? \_\_\_\_\_

How many times did you read this book ? \_\_\_\_\_

Rate each from 1 (a little) to 5 (a lot)

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. I enjoyed reading this book.  
\_\_\_\_\_ 2. I understood the plot of the story.  
\_\_\_\_\_ 3. I could guess the meaning of words I didn't know.  
\_\_\_\_\_ 4. I used the pictures to help me understand the story.  
\_\_\_\_\_ 5. I read in chunks. (Not word for word.)  
\_\_\_\_\_ 6. I translated the English into Japanese as I read.

How do you think you can improve your reading skills ?

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## Resources

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### Introducing the Novel in an Extensive Reading Program

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[要旨] 筆者は、本紀要の第9巻2号で、言語プログラムにおいては、初級学習者が中・上級レベルに移行するためには多読 (extensive reading) が重要な要素であることを示した。著者は、この研究を大学の講読プログラムの基盤として生かし、一年間の英語講読コース用の手順と学生のフィードバックについて述べた。その後、著者はこのコースの構成に部分的な改良を行った。これらの研究ノートの目的は、これらの構成上の変更について述べ、こうした変更がコースの全体的な有効性をどのように向上させたかについて考察することにある。

[キーワード] 第二言語習得、教授方法、英語教育、Extensive reading、Free voluntary reading