

Extensive Reading in an Asian Context -- An Alternative View

Thomas Robb
Kyoto Sangyo University

Day and Bamford present "ten top principles" for extensive reading. The use of the word *principle* implies that these assertions should be valid for all settings where extensive reading is practiced. I would like to argue, however, that in Japan and probably in many other countries, adherence to some of these "principles" might undermine the primary intent of ER, which is to have our students read more in order to increase their exposure to syntax, lexis and perhaps culture of the target language.

Specifically, Principle 3, "Learners Choose What to Read" confuses two issues: 1) that students should be able to freely select material and give-up, with which I do not take issue, and 2) the issue of students "reading for themselves". The article relies heavily on the principle of learners being responsible for their own learning, a concept which is *au courant* in U.S. educational circles and language teaching in general. While a laudable goal, unfortunately, it is not extendable to the teaching/learning cultures of many non-Western societies. We need to recognize this fact of life.

Surely, we should try hard to foster appropriate attitudes for "self-motivated learning," but in institutionalized settings in many parts of Asia, where the priorities of the students favor extra-curricular activities, such as, part-time jobs, clubs and social life, over learning, simple encouragement will not be effective with a large number, and perhaps the majority, of one's students. We as instructors, however, have a responsibility to see that *all* students learn despite other distractions they might have, even if this requires cracking our pedagogical whips. While "self-motivated learning" is not an all-or-nothing dichotomy, we make binary choices when selecting our approach: shall we require book reports or not, shall we require a certain number of pages or books for passing grade or not, etc. These choices can have a profound effect on the outcome of our extensive reading program.

Thus, students in my program are not "reading for themselves" but rather reading to satisfy a course requirement (Principle 6 - "Reading is its own reward"). Surely, we hope that they will be able to read books that interest them and therefore, to some extent enjoy what they are reading, but we cannot expect that enjoyment factor alone will motivate most students to read.

A further problem is Day and Bamford's over-riding assumption that ER will take place in a "reading class." Clearly, most EFL classes in Asia attempt to teach all "4-skills". The fact that "extensive reading" can be done outside the classroom is a significant advantage since precious class time can be spent on aspects where the presence of a teacher is required. At Kyoto Sangyo University, non-English majors currently take two English classes in their first year. One is a 4-skills class; the other is an "intensive reading class". If the intensive reading instructor were to

try an extensive approach, "one book a week" (Principle 4), even with relatively short and simple texts this would be an excessive burden since the students are normally taking *fifteen* classes concurrently, each of which has a single 90-minute meeting per week. This configuration of classes and class hours is still the norm in Japanese universities, although the Ministry of Education and Science is now encouraging experimentation and variation.

When there is no designated 'reading class' where the instructor can directly supervise the students, there is a very good chance that students will not do the reading unless there is a clear follow-up or tracking mechanism to hold them responsible for their work. In my department, with over 10 years of experience with extensive reading, a simple record of what has been read, or book reports that require little new information were quickly and cleverly circumvented by enterprising students.

The distinguishing factor of extensive reading is, as the name implies, reading a large volume of material with less emphasis on comprehension. Any approach that accomplishes this can be termed "extensive reading" even if it does not adhere to some or many of the principles cited in the article.

While "a variety of reading material on a wide range of topics" may be desirable, we have tried two approaches to feedback, neither of which is compatible with the "variety" approach (Principle 2). Summaries do not work well with short material. In fact, even short story collections are challenging since they are of higher information density than longer works.

We are currently using the Accelerated Reader computerized quizzes which require a quiz to be developed for each book made available to the students (since there are currently no ready-made quizzes for ESL/EFL materials). Reliable quizzes are virtually impossible to develop for selections with a low word count. Furthermore, our students tend to shun the short-story anthologies that we do have (Penguin and Oxford Bookworm titles) in favor of longer works.

I look forward to Day & Bamford's forthcoming book which will, hopefully, provide new, workable ideas for feedback and tracking.

About the Author

Thomas Robb, Ph.D. is a professor at Kyoto Sangyo University, Faculty of Foreign Languages where he has been experimenting with approaches to Extensive Reading for about twenty years. He is webmaster of the "Extensive Reading Pages" and spends much of his time developing programs and materials for C.A.L.L.