

Top Ten Principles for Teaching Extensive Reading¹

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Abstract

This article puts forward ten principles for an extensive reading approach to teaching reading. They deal with the nature of extensive reading and the conditions and methodology necessary for its success. In the interests of professional development, the authors encourage teachers to use the principles as a tool to examine their beliefs about reading in general and extensive reading in particular, and the ways they teach reading. *keywords:* extensive reading, principles, teaching reading, professional development, teacher beliefs

In an article published in 1986, Ray Williams discussed his top ten principles for teaching foreign language reading. He used his top ten to begin his reading seminars by asking participants to evaluate them and add new ones. His purpose, Williams wrote, was to get teachers to examine their own beliefs. The article had its desired impact on us. Now, years later, they remain as stimulating as when we first read them. Consider, for example, his first two principles:

1. *In the absence of interesting texts, very little is possible.*
2. *The primary activity of a reading lesson should be learners reading texts--not listening to the teacher, not reading comprehension questions, not writing answers to comprehension questions, not discussing the content of the text (1986: 42).*

Another that still rings clearly is Williams' fifth:

5. *Teachers must learn to be quiet: all too often, teachers interfere with and so impede their learners' reading development by being too dominant and by talking too much (p. 44).*

Williams' top ten principles relate primarily to one approach to the teaching of reading, viz., intensive reading. We would like to extend the discussion to extensive reading. Extensive reading, apart from its impact on language and reading ability, can be a key to unlocking the all-important taste for foreign language reading among students. After all, teaching reading to students without such a taste is, as Eskey (1995), nicely phrased it, like teaching swimming strokes to people who hate the water.

In the same spirit as Williams, we offer our top ten principles for teaching extensive reading as a tool for professional development.² These are what we believe are the basic ingredients of extensive reading. We encourage teachers to use them as a way to examine their beliefs about reading in general and extensive reading in particular, and the ways they teach foreign language

reading. We posit these ten principles in the hopes that others will consider them and react to them.

1. *The reading material is easy.*

This clearly separates extensive reading from other approaches to teaching foreign language reading. For extensive reading to be possible and for it to have the desired results, texts must be *well within* the learners' reading competence in the foreign language. In helping beginning readers select texts that are well within their reading comfort zone, more than one or two unknown words per page might make the text too difficult for overall understanding. Intermediate learners might use the *rule of hand*—no more than five difficult words per page. Hu and Nation (2000) suggest that learners must know at least 98% of the words in a fiction text for unassisted understanding.

It follows that, for extensive reading, all but advanced learners probably require texts written or adapted with the linguistic and knowledge constraints of language learners in mind. In discussing first language reading development, Fry observes that "Beginning readers do better with easier materials" (1991: 8). This is all the more true with extensive reading because learners read independently, without the help of a teacher. Those teaching English are fortunate that the art of writing in English for language learners is well-developed: a great variety of high-quality *language learner literature* is published for learners of all ability levels (see Hill's best picks, 1998, and survey review, 2001).

The use of easy material is controversial. There is still a pervasive view that, to accustom students to real-world reading, real-world texts should be used for extensive reading. This is to confuse the means with the end, and paradoxically to rob students of exactly the material they need to progress to the goal of reading real-world texts. For students to be motivated to read more and study more, and to be able to ladder up as their foreign language and reading skills improve, they must be reading texts that reflect their language ability--texts they find easy and enjoyable at every step of the way.

2. *A variety of reading material on a wide range of topics must be available.*

The success of extensive reading depends largely on enticing students to read. To awaken or encourage a desire to read, the texts made available should ideally be as varied as the learners who read them and the purposes for which they want to read. Books, magazines, newspapers, fiction, non-fiction, texts that inform, texts that entertain, general, specialized, light, serious. For an inside track on finding what your students are interested in reading, follow Williams' advice: "Ask them what they like reading in their own language, peer over their shoulders in the library, ask the school librarian..." (1986: 42).

Varied reading material not only encourages reading, it also encourages a flexible approach to reading. Learners are led to read for different reasons (e.g., entertainment; information; passing the time) and, consequently, in different ways (e.g., skimming; scanning; more careful reading).

3. *Learners choose what they want to read.*

The principle of freedom of choice means that learners can select texts as they do in their own language, that is, they can choose texts they expect to understand, to enjoy or to learn from. Correlative to this principle, learners are also free, indeed encouraged, to stop reading anything they find to be too difficult, or that turns out not to be of interest.

What Henry noticed about her L1 non-reading undergraduates is no less true in foreign language reading: "my students needed to read for themselves, not for me" (1995: 6). For students used to working with textbooks and teacher-selected texts, the freedom to choose reading material (and freedom to stop reading) may be a crucial step in experiencing foreign language reading as something personal.

Further, although there may be a class or homework assignment, extensive reading puts the student in charge in other important ways. As Henry observes, "compliance means reading books, but other than that, the purposes and pleasures to which students put their reading are entirely their own" (p. 69). This encourages students to become responsible for their own learning. Samuels, in discussing first language reading, claims that "unless we phase out the teacher and phase in the learner, many of our students will fail to become independent because throughout their education they were always placed in a dependent role -- dependent on the teacher" (1991: 17).

4. *Learners read as much as possible.*

This is the "extensive" of extensive reading, made possible by the previous principles. The most critical element in learning to read is the amount of time spent actually reading. While most reading teachers agree with this, it may be the case that their students are not being given the opportunity or incentive to read, read, and read some more.

There is no upper limit to the amount of reading that can be done, but a book a week is probably the minimum amount of reading necessary to achieve the benefits of extensive reading and to establish a reading habit. This is a realistic target for learners of all proficiency levels, as books written for beginners and low-intermediate learners are very short.

5. *The purpose of reading is usually related to pleasure, information and general understanding.*

In an extensive reading approach, learners are encouraged to read for the same kinds of reasons and in the same ways as the general population of first-language readers. This sets extensive reading apart from usual classroom practice on the one hand, and reading for academic purposes on the other. One hundred percent comprehension, indeed, any particular objective level of comprehension, is not a goal. In terms of reading outcomes, the focus shifts away from comprehension achieved or knowledge gained and towards the reader's personal experience.

A reader's interaction with a text derives from the purpose for reading. In extensive reading, the learner's goal is sufficient understanding to fulfill a particular reading purpose, for example, the obtaining of information, the enjoyment of a story, or the passing of time.

6. *Reading is its own reward.*

The learners' experience of reading the text is at the center of the extensive reading experience, just as it is in reading in everyday life. For this reason, extensive reading is not usually followed by comprehension questions. It is an experience complete in itself.

At the same time, teachers may ask students to complete follow-up activities based on their reading (see Bamford and Day (in press) for a wide variety of extensive reading activities for teaching foreign language). The reasons for this are various: to find out what the student understood and experienced from the reading; to monitor students' attitudes toward reading; to keep track of what and how much students read; to make reading a shared experience; to link reading to other aspects of the curriculum. For such reasons, students may be asked to do such things as write about their favorite characters, write about the best or worst book they have read, or do a dramatic reading of an exciting part of a novel. Such activities, while respecting the integrity of students' reading experiences, extend them in interesting and useful ways.

7. *Reading speed is usually faster rather than slower.*

When learners are reading material that is well within their linguistic ability, for personal interest, and for general rather than academic purposes, it is an incentive to reading fluency. Nuttall notes that "speed, enjoyment and comprehension are closely linked with one another" (1996: 128). She describes "The vicious circle of the weak reader: Reads slowly; Doesn't enjoy reading; Doesn't read much; Doesn't understand; Reads slowly. . ." (p. 127) and so on. Extensive reading can help readers "enter instead the cycle of growth. . . . The virtuous circle of the good reader: Reads faster; Reads more; Understands better; Enjoys reading; Reads faster. . ." (p. 127).

In the service of promoting reading fluency, it is as well to discourage students from using dictionaries when they come across words they don't understand. Extensive reading is a chance to keep reading, and thus to practice such strategies as guessing at or ignoring unknown words or passages, going for the general meaning, and being comfortable with a certain level of ambiguity.

8. *Reading is individual and silent.*

Silent, individual extensive reading contrasts with the way classroom texts are used as vehicles for teaching language or reading strategies or (in traditional approaches) translated or read aloud. It allows students to discover that reading is a personal interaction with the text, and an experience that they have responsibility for. Thus, together with freedom to choose reading material, individual silent reading can be instrumental in students discovering how foreign language reading fits into their lives.

Extensive reading means learners reading at their own pace. It can be done both in the students' own time when and where the student chooses, or inside the classroom when part or all of a classroom period is set aside for silent, self-selected reading. In the latter case, teachers may witness, as Henry describes it, "the most beautiful silence on earth, that of students engrossed in their reading" (1995: xv).

9. *Teachers orient and guide their students.*

As an approach to teaching reading, extensive reading is very different from usual classroom practice. Students accustomed to wading through difficult foreign language texts might drown when suddenly plunged into a sea of simple and stimulating material. Serious-minded students, for example, in thrall of the macho maxim of foreign language reading instruction, *No reading pain, no reading gain*, might not understand how reading easy and interesting material can help them become better readers.

Students thus need careful introduction to extensive reading. Teachers can explain that reading extensively leads not only to gains in reading proficiency but also to overall gains in language learning. The methodology of extensive reading can be introduced, beginning with choice: students choosing what to read is an essential part of the approach. Teachers can reassure students that a general, less than 100%, understanding of what they read is appropriate for most reading purposes. It can be emphasized that there will be no test after reading. Instead, teachers are interested in the student's own personal experience of what was read -- for example, was it enjoyable or interesting, and why?

The final component of orientation is practical. Students are introduced to the library of reading materials and how it is divided into difficulty levels. It should be remembered that students unaccustomed to browsing foreign language reading material may need assistance in selecting appropriate texts of interest to them.

Orientation is the first step. Guidance throughout the extensive reading experience is also needed, in light of the independence and choice extensive reading allows learners. Teachers can keep track of what and how much each student reads, and their students' reactions to what was read. Based on this information, teachers can encourage students to read as widely as possible and, as their language ability, reading ability and confidence increase, to read at progressively higher levels of difficulty. Guidance implies a sharing of the reading experience, which leads us to the final principle of extensive reading.

10. *The teacher is a role model of a reader.*

Nuttall famously said, "reading is caught, not taught" (1996: 229). Maley explains the implications of this for teachers when he says, "We need to realize how much influence we have on our students. Students do not just (or even) learn the subject matter we teach them; they learn

their teachers. Teacher attitude, more than technical expertise, is what they will recall when they leave us" (1999:7). In short, effective extensive reading teachers are themselves readers, teaching *by example* the attitudes and behaviors of a reader. In Henry's words, teachers are "selling reading" (1995: 52), and the primary way to do that is to be a reader.

Further, in Henry's opinion, teachers of extensive reading "have to commit to reading what their students do" (1995: 52). She explains, "By reading what my students read, I become a part of the community that forms within the class" (p. 53). When students and teachers share reading, the foreign language reading classroom can be a place where teachers discuss books with students, answer their questions and make tailor-made recommendations to individual students. It can be a place where students and teachers experience together the value and pleasure to be found in the written word.

Conclusion

Our top ten principles for teaching extensive reading complement the ten principles for teaching foreign language reading offered by Williams. We hope that our ten principles will give teachers food for thought and reflection as they consider their beliefs about how best to help their students become proficient foreign-language readers.

Notes

1. The authors wish to thank the anonymous reviewers of this article for their suggestions.
2. These ten principles originally appeared in Day and Bamford (1998, pp. 7-8) and also in Bamford and Day (in press). They have been revised and expanded for this article.

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