

REACHING RELUCTANT READERS¹

RICHARD R. DAY

University of Hawai'i

JULIAN BAMFORD

Bunkyo University

INTRODUCTION

An EFL teacher approached one of us with a question about her students. They were, she said, "reluctant readers." While they were good students, she reported that they had no interest in reading anything in English apart from their required assignments. She wondered what she was doing wrong, or what she should be doing that she wasn't doing.

By all accounts, this particular teacher's situation is all too common; it is a reflection of students' experiences of learning to read English as a foreign language all over the world. In general, *students learning to read English as a foreign language find it a difficult process and, as a result, they do not enjoy it.* Even if they are avid readers in their first language, as this teacher said many of her students were, all too often they do not become readers of English.

Can reluctant readers be reached? Can students develop a positive attitude toward reading in English? We believe they can. Traditional approaches and classroom practices, with their focus on translation, answering comprehension questions or practicing skills such as finding main ideas, tend to ignore the larger context of students' attitudes toward reading and motivation to read. The result, inevitably, is students with little or no interest in reading English.

Yet it is possible for students to discover the benefits and pleasures of being able to read in English. This can happen if extensive reading is incorporated into the EFL curriculum. This article introduces extensive reading as a way of improving students' attitude and motivation toward EFL reading as well as improving their proficiency in reading and their English language ability. We begin by explaining that easy and interesting reading material is the key factor in extensive reading. We discuss how to gather a library of suitable reading materials and how to encourage students to read them.

¹ A version of this article will appear in *English Teaching Forum*.

Finally, we propose several ways of fitting extensive reading into the EFL curriculum.

An Extensive Reading Approach

An extensive reading approach aims to get students reading in the English language and liking it. It is an approach that sees reading not merely as translation or as a skill, but as an activity that someone chooses to do or not to do for a variety of personal, social, or academic reasons. Extensive reading can be blended into any EFL curriculum, regardless of that curriculum's methodology or approach. For example, programs which utilize a reading skills approach can add extensive reading without modifying existing goals and objectives. Extensive reading complements a curriculum because, while helping the program achieve its objectives of teaching students to read and pass examinations, it broadens those objectives and improves students' attitude toward achieving them. An overview of the characteristics of successful extensive reading programs is shown in Figure 1.

1. *Students read as much as possible*, perhaps in and definitely out of the classroom.
2. *A variety of materials on a wide range of topics is available* so as to encourage reading for different reasons and in different ways.
3. *Students select what they want to read* and have the freedom to stop reading material that fails to interest them.
4. *The purposes of reading are usually related to pleasure, information and general understanding.* These purposes are determined by the nature of the material and the interests of the student.
5. *Reading is its own reward.* There are few or no follow-up exercises after reading.
6. *Reading materials are well within the linguistic competence of the students* in terms of vocabulary and grammar. Dictionaries are rarely used while reading because the constant stopping to look up words makes fluent reading difficult.
7. *Reading is individual and silent*, at the student's own pace, and, outside class, done when and where the student chooses.
8. *Reading speed is usually faster rather than slower* as students read books and other material they find easily understandable.
9. *Teachers orient students to the goals of the program, explain the methodology, keep track* of what each student reads, and *guide* students in getting the most out of the program.
10. *The teacher is a role model of a reader for students*--an active member of the classroom reading community, demonstrating what it means to be a reader and the rewards of being a reader.

Figure 1. Characteristics of successful extensive reading programs (from Day & Bamford, 1998, pp. 7-8)

The Importance of Easy and Interesting Reading Materials

As the word *extensive* suggests, this approach involves students reading a great deal. But getting EFL students to read extensively depends critically on what they read. The reading materials must be both *easy* and *interesting*. *Easy* means materials with vocabulary and grammar well within the students' linguistic competence. When students find no more than one or two difficult words on a page, then the text is appropriately easy.

In our work with EFL teachers, we find that they are often reluctant to embrace the use of easy, high-interest materials. Even though the mix of difficult and boring materials can be deadly, teachers and students alike often appear to be under the spell of what might be called *the macho maxim of reading instruction: no reading pain, no reading gain*. This is unfortunate because struggling with hard, dull material is not the way to become a willing EFL reader. Nor is it, in fact, the most efficient way of becoming an able reader.

The Benefits of Extensive Reading

Reading a large amount of easy material has a vital role to play in learning to read fluently. Firstly, it helps wean students away from word-by-word processing of text, encouraging them instead to go for the general meaning of what they read, ignoring (rather than worrying about) any details they do not fully understand. Secondly, by meeting the same patterns of letters, words, and combinations of words again and again, students process them more quickly and accurately and thus develop a sight vocabulary (words that are recognized automatically). Consequently, students increase their reading speed and confidence, and can give more attention to working out the overall meaning of what they are reading.

In addition, Paul Nation (1997) and Day and Bamford (1998, pp. 32-39) report that, in study after study, extensive reading results in students making significant gains in other aspects of foreign language competence such as listening, writing, and vocabulary. For example, in a study of university students who were failing their EFL classes, Beniko Mason and Stephen Krashen (1997) found that extensive reading turned the students around. The students began with cloze test results behind those of a comparison class. But after they each read about 30 English language learner literature books during the semester, their cloze test results almost matched those of the comparison class that had had traditional reading instruction.

Why does extensive reading have a positive effect on language learning? Undoubtedly, part of the reason is that it provides increased exposure to English. The

important role of comprehensible input in foreign language learning has been well documented by Krashen (e.g., 1989, 1991, 1993). But the impact of extensive reading may also relate to attitude. Many people find learning a foreign language hard, and feel more or less inadequate to the task. Successful foreign language reading experiences can counter such feelings of failure. Indeed, in the study just quoted, Mason and Krashen say, "Perhaps the most important and impressive finding in this study is the clear improvement in attitude shown by the experimental students. Many of the once reluctant students of EFL became eager readers. Several wrote in their diaries that they were amazed at their improvement" (1997, p. 93). As Nation concludes in his 1997 article (entitled "The Language Learning Benefits of Extensive Reading"), "Success in reading ... makes learners come to enjoy language learning and to value their study of English" (p. 16).

Building a Library of Reading Materials

The first task for teachers who want students who both can and do read in English is to find materials that their students will find easy and interesting to read. When selecting reading materials for any age group and ability level, teachers must have the students' interests uppermost in mind. As Colin Davis says, "The watchwords are quantity and variety, rather than quality, so that books are selected for their attractiveness and relevance to the pupils' lives, rather than for literary merit" (1995, p. 329).

Materials for high-intermediate and advanced students. If money is available, the task of building a library is relatively straightforward. High-intermediate and advanced students will probably enjoy reading carefully chosen English-language books, newspapers, and magazines. A subscription to a local English-language newspaper, or one published internationally, such as *The International Herald Tribune* or *USA Today*, is sure to be appreciated by many students. Magazines are also popular: general interest magazines such as *People* with its celebrity interviews and gossip, or specialized magazines according to students' interests. If reading materials are in the students' fields of interest, comprehension is made easier by the students' knowledge of the subject matter.

Suggestions for titles of suitable books for more advanced learners can be found in Brown (1988) and Mikulecky (1990), and these range from Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House on the Prairie* to Lee Iacocca's business autobiography *Iacocca*. Henry's (1995) appendix of popular book titles (e.g., Danielle Steel's *Accident*; Stephen King's *Carrie*) is useful for students in search of horror and romance (pp. 148-151).

Materials for intermediate and beginning students. For less advanced adult and adolescent learners of English, a useful source of reading material is books and magazines produced for native-speaking children and teenagers. Children's books, with big print and colorful illustrations, are relatively easy for EFL learners to read, and some like Shel Silverstein's *The Giving Tree* and Ezra Jack Keats' *The Snowy Day* have much to say to older learners. Best of all, they are short; some can be read in a few minutes. Children's magazines are also worth investigating, and *Magazines for Kids and Teens* (Stoll, 1997) lists more than 200 magazines by target age and subject. Popular teen literature, such as novels by Judy Blume (e.g., *Deenie*; *It's Not the End of the World*) and Paula Danziger (e.g., *The Cat Ate My Gymsuit*), are often much enjoyed by high-intermediate learners of all ages. Finally, not to be overlooked are the pleasures of comic books, from Mickey Mouse, beloved by all ages, to (if culturally appropriate) brutally violent adults-only fare like *Spawn*.

For beginning and intermediate students, however, by far the most suitable reading materials are books, magazines, and newspapers especially written for EFL learners. This language learner literature is published in growing quantity, variety, and sophistication by both local and global publishers. There are hundreds of attractive fiction and non-fiction books appropriate to students of various ages and interests, including folk tales and science fiction, thrillers adapted from best-selling writers like John Grisham's *The Client*, classics, travel guides and novels based on popular movies or TV shows like *Baywatch* (Schwartz, 1997). Titles of books are listed in the catalogs of such publishers as Oxford University Press, Longman, and Heinemann. To make selection easier, the appendix of Day and Bamford (1998) includes a bibliography of 600 titles of high-quality language learner literature in English divided by student ability level (pp. 174-217).

Materials for children. No less than for older learners, reading material for children learning English must be chosen so that they will be both understood and enjoyed. Carefully-selected books of children's literature can provide the core of a library, and both Brown (1994) and Allen's 1994 article "Selecting Materials for the Reading Instruction of ESL Children" have lengthy bibliographies of suggested titles (pp. 128-131).

Working with limited funds. When money is scarce, building a library is more difficult but not impossible. If the Internet can be accessed, it can be a source of extensive reading material, and an article by Beverly Derewianka in the 1997 collection *Successful Strategies for Extensive Reading* (Jacobs, Davis & Renandya, Eds.) makes

suggestions for where and how to find it. In the same volume, Propitas Lituanas (1997) describes how, in her school in the Philippines, students, past and present, and teachers, active and retired, were asked to donate books and magazines for an extensive reading program. Embassies and other institutions were also approached. Lituanas also describes a positive aspect of resource constraints: "Involving students in writing letters to ask for these materials provides an opportunity for them to write with a real purpose" (p. 28). She continues, "Because we are not buying the materials, we do not get to choose exactly what we want" (p. 29). However, "in some ways, because the students themselves took part in getting the materials, they value the program even more" (p. 29).

Obtaining donated reading material is only a beginning. Many of the donated books and magazines will be of little interest to the students using the library. Each item must be considered as carefully as when buying books. In order to create a collection attractive to students, it is far better to choose a few suitable items from among the many donated than to simply add them all to the library. Next, as with all extensive reading libraries for language learners, the materials should be clearly labeled by difficulty level so that students can find reading matter suitable to their own English proficiency.

A consideration with both donated material and reading material found on the Internet is that, in terms of difficulty, it is mainly suited to advanced learners. One way to fill the lack of material for lower-level students is for them to produce their own reading material. Students can dictate or write on topics such as "an interesting person I know" or "a place I recommend visiting." Teachers can consult the students about rewriting, editing, and correcting, helping students to express themselves in natural language. The finished products can be read by the rest of the class and by other classes, and the best can be kept in an ever-growing permanent library. Beatrice Dupuy and Jeff McQuillan (1997, in the Jacobs et al. collection) describe how this was done in a French program: 250 students produced a collection of 400 handcrafted books in a great range of genres (p. 175).

Lower-level students should have access to published language learner literature if at all possible, however. Lituanas (see above) writes that one of her most successful schemes was explaining to parents at a Parent-Teacher Association meeting how extensive reading would benefit their children. Parents agreed to donate 50 pesos (about US\$2) each for books, etc. This echoes Colin Davis writing about setting up extensive reading programs in Cameroon: "... even in developing countries Parent/Teacher Associations have ways of collecting money if they are convinced of the educational benefit to their children of supporting such initiatives" (1995, p. 334). A few purchased books can go a long way. Davis describes how one basket of books was used by several

classes in rotation (p. 332). Damon Anderson (personal communication, July 24, 1998) suggests that a book of short stories might be physically divided story by story so more than one student has access to it at one time.

Extensive Reading in Action

Cultural considerations. Before introducing extensive reading in the classroom or for homework, the role of the students' culture must be taken into consideration. While reading is ultimately a solitary act by an individual, each culture has its own views of what reading is, and why and how it is done.

Teaching in a *non-reading* culture, or in one that does not attach importance to reading for pleasure, makes the task of the EFL reading teacher more complex. Robin Smith's article, "Transforming a Non-Reading Culture" (1997, in the Jacobs et al. collection), provides an inspiring account of working in a secondary school in Brunei. Among the strategies used by Smith and his colleagues were reading aloud to their students, ensuring that books were attractively displayed and available, and joining a book club to help individual students purchase books inexpensively. Smith details the positive impact that extensive reading had on student self-esteem and general academic results. Noteworthy, too, was the role played in the extensive reading program by language learner literature, particularly the *Heinemann Guided Reader* series. These books provided the vital and popular entry point for students not yet able to read teenage literature and other library books.

Orientation. Because students have become so accustomed to wading through difficult English texts, a sudden plunge into a sea of simple and stimulating materials can be disorienting. It might not be obvious to serious-minded students, for example, why reading easy and interesting material should be a part of their EFL education. Nor do students necessarily know how to go about choosing and reading books on their own. It is therefore important for teachers to orient their students to the goals and methodology of an extensive reading program.

If appropriate, the orientation can begin by contrasting extensive reading with traditional kinds of reading instruction (see Figure 2).

| <i>Intensive</i> | <i>Type of reading</i> | <i>Extensive</i> |
|------------------------------------|------------------------|--|
| Read accurately | Class goal | Read fluently |
| Translate Answer questions | Reading purpose | Get information Enjoy |
| Words and pronunciation | Focus | Meaning |
| Often difficult Teacher chooses | Material | Easy You choose |
| Not much | Amount | A lot |
| Slower | Speed | Faster |
| Must finish Use dictionary | Method | Stop if you don't like it No dictionary |

Figure 2. Chart contrasting intensive and extensive reading (from Day & Bamford, 1998, p. 123)

The orientation should also include the ground rules of extensive reading:

- Select your reading materials, based on your interests and reading ability.
- Don't use dictionaries.
- Practice the skills of either guessing at the meanings of unknown words or ignoring them.
- Don't be concerned with every detail. Keep reading in the face of difficulty and go for the overall meaning.
- If a book is boring or too hard, stop reading and find another book.

Such ideas capture the way that people usually read in cultures where reading is widespread. If students are from such a culture, telling them to approach EFL extensive reading in the same way as they read in their first language will make it clearer to them.

Extensive Reading and the EFL Curriculum

The ideal way to integrate extensive reading into the EFL curriculum is through a separate, stand-alone extensive reading course in which students read and report on their reading to the teacher and other students (see Day & Bamford, 1998, pp. 126-139;

Renandya, Rajan, & Jacobs, 1999). Realistically, however, for the majority of EFL situations, a new course is impossible. There is simply too much to do already. Alternatively, then, extensive reading can be included in the curriculum as part of an existing course, as a non-credit addition to a course, or as an extra-curricular activity.

As part of an existing course. This possibility involves incorporating a certain amount of extensive reading into a course already in the curriculum, regardless of the content of that course (e.g., reading, writing, speaking). This is done by adding a requirement that the students read a certain number of books per week or per semester. For example, in a grammar-translation class, the teacher explains the benefits of extensive reading and how to go about it, and then explains the requirement (e.g., reading one easy book per week and writing a short report on it). The teacher also makes sure students understand that they will be graded on or given credit for the extensive reading assignments. Since class time is limited, most or all of the extensive reading would be done as homework: Reading a book of language learner literature takes between 20 minutes and two hours depending on the level of the book.

One way to grade students on their extensive reading is to set a scale of credit in relation to the amount they read. This could be done either in terms of books, or number of pages read. For example, students who read 15 books a semester could have 15 points added to their final grade.

As a non-credit addition to a course. If there is simply no way whatsoever that class or homework time can be given to extensive reading, then teachers might consider making it an optional part of their EFL courses. As an inducement to read, teachers can tell their students the rewards of extensive reading (e.g., they will enjoy it; their reading will improve; they will increase the size of their vocabulary). The teacher would then encourage the students to read on their own, according to their interests and for their enjoyment, and the teacher would keep a record of this reading. Students would need to understand that the extra reading is optional and not a formal part of the course. At the same time, teachers can consider giving extra credit that might influence a student's final grade, if the student were on the borderline between, say, a *B* and a *C*.

As an extra-curricular activity. A third possibility for adding extensive reading to an EFL program is through an extra-curricular reading club. It could be organized and conducted like other extra-curricular activities. A teacher would be in charge; it would meet after school; and it would be open to anyone taking EFL courses. A membership

fee might be necessary if suitable reading materials are not available and need to be purchased. Having regular reading activities and goals helps create and sustain motivation and interest. For example, members might meet once or twice a week to give oral reports on books they have individually read. In addition, they might all read copies of the same book silently and individually, and then, as a group, discuss it chapter by chapter and help each other with the meaning of difficult words. The club can also organize regular reading marathons in which each student aims to read a certain number of pages during a set period of time.

A less structured form of an extra-curricular reading club is a reading/study lounge filled with attractively displayed English books. Smith (see above) describes how the lounge at his Brunei school fills with students at breaks and after exams are over. An on-duty teacher helps students choose and return books (p. 36).

Follow-up to Reading

How can a teacher know if students are actually reading, or that they are understanding what they read? The standard way is to have students answer questions, and publishers usually include a page or two of such comprehension questions at the back of their language learner literature books. Another common way of checking reading is to require students to write a short summary of what they read.

But however convenient such forms of follow-up may be for the teacher, they tend to spoil the enjoyment of reading for the students, reducing it to just another school activity. These common forms of follow-up also give no indication to the teacher of how much a student enjoyed reading. It is far more in the spirit of real-world reading for students to let the teacher or each other know what they felt personally about what they read. Students can write a paragraph or two (in English or their own language) about their reactions to a book. If the teacher has also read the same book, it will be obvious even from a student's brief comments if a book was read and how well it was understood.

Reaction reports are enjoyable for teachers to read because they give insights into students' thoughts and feelings. They also indicate to what extent a student is developing into an eager reader of English. And if teachers respond to students' reaction reports with their own comments or questions, the reports help to establish a reading community in a way that answering comprehension questions and writing summaries never can. Teacher comments on students' reports can range from longer remarks to a simple, "I'm glad you enjoyed the book."

The Role of the Teacher

The EFL teacher introduced at the beginning of this article enjoyed reading both in her own language and in English. Indeed, it was being a reader—and knowing how pleasurable and useful reading can be—that sparked her concern that her students didn't read in English. Interestingly, the fact that she is a reader can be a part of the solution to her problem, because the best way to introduce students to the pleasures of reading is to interact with them as a reader as well as a teacher.

Teachers can begin by reading some of the easy English books or other materials that their students are reading. This allows teachers to recommend books to individual students or to the whole class. Teachers might show students the cover and the title of the book and invite them to speculate on what the book is about. They can also point out and read the cover *blurb*—the brief text that summarizes the story or introduces the book in a tantalizing way. Some students may have little idea of how to choose an English-language book that interests them, and this is a lesson on how to go about it.

Whenever teachers feel it appropriate, they can read aloud to the students a paragraph from a book that they like from their own English reading. Or it might be a poem, part of a newspaper article or an item from an Internet site. Teachers can post these and other interesting items on the classroom wall and invite students to do the same. In ways such as these, the teacher acts as a role model of a reader. Together with other incentives (e.g., setting aside a special shelf for the most popular books in the class library; encouraging students to write book reviews for the school newspaper, or draw posters for the school library) teachers are building a reading community with their students—a community of people who are enjoying and sharing English reading, and are making it a part of their lives.

Conclusion

Most EFL teachers must, first and foremost, make sure that their students do well in their courses and pass the required examinations. But a teacher can, at the same time, achieve the broader goal of helping students become English readers by making sure that they have access to easy, interesting reading materials. This is the beginning of reaching reluctant readers because it allows students to discover that they can actually read English and enjoy it. The more students read and the more they enjoy it, the more likely it is that they will become students who both can and do read in English.

At the same time, extensive reading supports all aspects of an English-language program. To borrow Colin Davis' words, "Any ESL, EFL, or L1 classroom will be poorer for the lack of an extensive reading programme of some kind, and will be unable

to promote its pupils' language development in all aspects as effectively as if such a programme were present" (1995, p. 335).

The time to start an extensive reading program in your class or school is now.

REFERENCES

- Allen, V. G. (1994). Selecting materials for the reading instruction of ESL children. In K. Spangenberg-Urbschat & R. Pritchard (Eds.), *Kids come in all languages: Reading instruction for ESL students* (pp. 108-131). Newark, DE: International Reading Association.
- Blume, J. (1973). *Deenie*. New York: Dell.
- Blume, J. (1972). *It's not the end of the world*. New York: Dell.
- Brown, D. S. (1988). *A world of books: An annotated reading list for ESL/EFL students* (2nd ed.). Washington DC: TESOL
- Brown, D. S. (1994). *Books for a small planet: A multicultural-intercultural bibliography for young English language learners*. Alexandria, VA: TESOL.
- Danziger, P. (1974). *The cat ate my gymsuit*. New York: Dell.
- Davis, C. (1995). Extensive reading: An expensive extravagance? *ELT Journal*, 49(4), pp. 329-336.
- Day, R. R., & Bamford, J. (1998). *Extensive reading in the second language classroom*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Derewianka, B. (1997). Using the Internet for extensive reading. In G. M. Jacobs, C. Davis, & W. A. Renandya (Eds.), *Successful strategies for extensive reading* (pp. 128-143). Singapore: SEAMEO Regional Language Centre.
- Dupuy, B., & McQuillan, J. (1997). Handcrafted books: Two for the price of one. In G. M. Jacobs, C. Davis, & W. A. Renandya (Eds.), *Successful strategies for extensive reading* (pp. 171-180). Singapore: SEAMEO Regional Language Centre.
- Grisham, J. (1996). *The client*. Retold by J. McAlpin. London: Penguin.
- Henry, J. (1995). *If not now: Developmental readers in the college classroom*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook.
- Iacocca, L., & Novak, W. (1986). *Iacocca: An autobiography*. New York: Bantam.
- Keats, E. J. (1962). *The snowy day*. New York: Viking.
- King, S. (1974). *Carrie*. New York: Signet.
- Krashen, S. (1989). We acquire vocabulary and spelling by reading: Additional evidence for the input hypothesis. *The Modern Language Journal*, 73(4), 440-464.
- Krashen, S. (1991). The input hypothesis: An update. In J. Alatis (Ed.), *Georgetown University round table on language and linguistics, 1991* (pp. 427-431). Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press.
- Krashen, S. (1993). *The power of reading: Insights from the research*. Englewood, CO: Libraries Unlimited.

- Lituanas, P. M. (1997). Collecting materials for extensive reading. In G. M. Jacobs, C. Davis, & W. A. Renandya (Eds.), *Successful strategies for extensive reading* (pp. 25-29). Singapore: SEAMEO Regional Language Centre.
- Mason, B., & Krashen, S. (1997). Extensive reading in English as a foreign language. *System*, 25(1), 91-102.
- McFarlane, T. (1997). *Spawn book one*. TSR Hobbies.
- Mickulecky, B. S. (1990). *A short course in teaching reading skills*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.
- Nation, P. (1997). The language learning benefits of extensive reading. *The Language Teacher*, 21(5), 13-16.
- Renandya W. A., Rajanm, B. R. S., & Jacobs, G. M. (1999). Extensive reading with adult learners of English as a second language. *RELC Journal*, 30, 39-61.
- Silverstein, S. (1964). *The giving tree*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Smith, R. (1997). Transforming a non-reading culture. In G. M. Jacobs, C. Davis, & W. A. Renandya (Eds.), *Successful strategies for extensive reading* (pp. 30-43). Singapore: SEAMEO Regional Language Centre.
- Schwartz, D. (1997). *Baywatch: The untold story*. Retold by R. Waterfield. London: Penguin.
- Steel, D. (1994). *Accident*. New York: Delacorte.
- Stoll, D. R. (Ed.). (1997). *Magazines for kids and teens* (new ed.). Lassboro, NJ: Educational Press Association, and Newark, DE: International Reading Association.
- Wilder, L. I. (1971). *Little house on the prairie*. New York: Harper & Row.

Richard R. Day
Department of ESL
1890 East West Road
Honolulu, Hawai'i 96822
e-mail: rday@hawaii.edu

Julian Bamford
Bunkyo University
1100 Namegaya
Chigasaki
Japan
e-mail: bamford@shonan.bunkyo.ac.jp