

## **Developing Language Skills of English Specialization Students through Extensive Reading**

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### **Abstract**

Extensive reading in English can develop students' vocabulary, grammar and comprehension. Some expressions of spoken language in reading texts can help students improve their speaking and listening skills. In addition, by reading a lot in English, students can improve their cultural awareness, world knowledge, and interpersonal skills which will make their language and literature studies easy and effective. Thus, these skills will surely help students to acquire communicative competence which is the ultimate aim of language learning. In this paper, the importance and advantages of extensive reading are presented. A possible way to carry out an extensive reading class for English Specialization Students (especially for first year students of English) is proposed. Some possible problems and solutions are also discussed.

**Key words:** Language Learning, Extensive Reading, Communicative Competence, Language Skills, Cultural Awareness

### **Introduction**

Through my experience as an English language teacher conducting communicative skills to first and second year English specialization students at West Yangon University I have found out that most of the students are not creative, responsive and imaginative in doing speaking and writing tasks in the classroom. Their limited vocabulary and general knowledge make them unable to understand and appreciate a reading text easily. They cannot appropriately use a language item which they have learned, in writing and in speaking.

To make students creative, responsive and imaginative, students should be trained to read in English. Extensive reading is one of the best ways to make students read broadly. It is a sort of reading for pleasure such as reading a novel, a short story or an article, etc. during one's free time. Extensive reading can develop good reading habits. By reading many books, students can improve their vocabulary and grammar. Moreover, they can also gain general knowledge. These qualities will surely help them to be effective learners in a language classroom. Hence, students should have extensive reading habit so that their language skills can be developed.

English specialization students must read a lot in English. Through reading in English, they can have cultural awareness which will help them in their language study. Moreover, they can gain overall language proficiency. If students are trained to read extensively in the first year, their reading habit can help them in the following years. They will be able to use the library and select suitable reference books. For these reasons, it is necessary that we, teachers, should foster the reading habit in English specialization students in their first year at university.

### **The Extensive Reading Approach**

According to Stevens & Musial (1970), reading is learning. According to Carrell & Carson (1997, pp.49-50), "extensive reading ... generally involves rapid reading of large

quantities of materials or longer readings (e.g. whole books) for general understanding, with the focus generally on the meaning of what is being read than on the language.” Mature readers bring to the text their experiences, abilities, and interests; the text, in turn, allows them to expand those experiences and abilities and to find new interests. Extensive reading is a subcategory of silent reading. Extensive reading means reading in quantity and requires a general understanding of what is read. Extensive reading involves skimming and scanning as strategies for gaining the general sense of a text.

According to Day & Bamford (1998:7-8), the goal of an extensive reading approach is to get students to enjoy reading in English. They give a list of characteristics of successful extensive reading programme as follows:

1. Students read as much as possible, in class and outside the class.
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 materials that fail to interest them.
4. The purposes of reading are usually related to pleasure, information and general understanding and 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 during reading because constantly stopping to look up words makes fluent reading difficult.
7. Reading is individual and silent. Students read at their own pace, and outside class, they choose when and where to read.
8. Reading speed is usually faster rather than slower as students read books and other materials they can easily understand.
9. Teachers orient students to the goals of the programme, explain the methodology, keep track of what each student reads, and guide students in getting the most out of the programme.
10. The teacher is a role model for students – an active member of the classroom reading community who demonstrates what it means to be a reader and the rewards of being a reader.

As students should be trained to read extensively, this extensive reading approach should be applied to the first year English specialization students. The extensive reading class will make students read broadly to widen their vocabulary, grammar as well as cultural awareness which will make their language learning successful.

### **Application of Extensive Reading Approach in First Year English Specialization Class Procedure**

The procedure of an extensive reading approach is as follows:

1. Give students orientation, explain them the benefits of reading, how to choose a book, where they can find books to read, why they need to read in English, how important reading habit in English is, etc.
2. Go along with them to the library.

3. Help students in choosing books; tell them to select a book they are interested in, tell them a brief story of a book, so that students can decide whether they should choose a particular book or not.
4. Allow them to borrow one book each for the first time.
5. Remind them to practise the skills of guessing the meaning of unknown words and give them tips for extensive reading: not to use dictionaries while reading the book, to skip over difficult words and to stop reading when it is boring or too difficult.
6. In class, register students' names and the titles of the books they choose.
7. Instruct students to keep a log book to record the books they have read.

For example,

No.	Date	Title of the book	Author	Remarks
1	17.12.06	Sense & Sensibility	Jane Austen	- about a young girl, Elinor, whose father died, leaving no house for them (her mother, two younger sisters and herself) to live in - Elinor got married to Edward, the man she loved, at the end of the story
2.	24.12.06	David Copperfield	Charles Dickens	- life story of a man whose father died before he was born and whose stepfather was cruel - he was brought up by his aunt and he became a writer and had a happy life at the end

8. Ask students to write a very simple report that includes the name of the book, the writer, the main character(s), the theme, the plot, the setting and whether they like the book or not and why.
9. In the second period (the following week), collect the reports of students.
10. In the class, ask students the names of the books they read, whether they like them or not and their recommendation which helps other students in choosing books. (optional).
11. Ask students to borrow another book.
12. In the third period, return corrected or reviewed reports to the students, if necessary give feedback on common mistakes in punctuation, spelling, and grammar.
13. Ask students to choose another book.
14. In the last period, review the work of the whole semester; ask them to check their record, to count books they have read, who the authors are, and which books or authors they like, and why.

This extensive reading class needs about twenty to thirty minutes a week to allow students to choose the book and to record the titles of the books. Students can read books at home or during their free time in the class. This extensive reading class can be attached to any module of the specialization, but communicative skills is the most suitable module.

### **Material**

The reading materials must be both easy and interesting. "Easy" means materials with vocabulary and grammar well within the students' linguistic competence. The first task for teachers is to find easy and interesting materials. Every university or college has ELSIP (English Language Self Instruction Programme) graded readers at their libraries. Level I readers of ELSIP are suitable for the first year English specialization students to start reading. There are other graded reader series published by Oxford University Press, Longman, Heinemann, etc. In addition, it is possible to choose other suitable stories and photocopied hand-outs (of the same story for the whole class at the same time) if ELSIP series or other easy readers are not available.

### **The role of the teacher**

To put this extensive reading programme into practice, the teacher should also read extensively. The teacher must read the books in advance, to be able to decide suitable reading materials for students. This will also help the teacher in checking students' reports, and asking students questions about the books in the class. Whenever appropriate, the teacher should explain the usefulness of the knowledge they gained from reading in their daily lives, how to connect the information in a reading text to their own experience, etc. In this way, the teacher acts as a role model for students. The role of the teacher includes monitoring the students' reading, helping the students become aware of the benefits of the extensive reading and sharing the joy and knowledge she gained from her own reading.

## **Benefits and Drawbacks of Extensive Reading Programme**

### **Benefits**

Extensive reading offers many advantages and some of which are as follows:

1. enhanced language learning in such areas as spelling, vocabulary, grammar, text structure
2. increased knowledge of the world
3. improved reading and writing skills
4. greater enjoyment of reading
5. more positive attitude towards reading, and
6. higher possibility of developing a reading habit.

(Krashen, 1993; Nations, 1997; Day & Bamford, 1998; cited in Renandya & Jacobs, 2002, p.298)

Bell (1998) stated that extensive reading plays an important role in language learning. It can provide 'comprehensible input'. It can enhance learners' general language competence. It increases the students' exposure to the language, which leads to improvement in writing. It can motivate learners to read and can consolidate previously learned language. It helps to build students' confidence with extended texts and finally, it facilitates the development of prediction skills. These are all what students urgently need.

In addition, as students have to go to the library to borrow books, they come to know how to use the library effectively and it is a great advantage for them. Hence, giving extensive reading task to students is a way of introducing them to different kinds of reading materials in the library.

Reading easy readers makes students to be able to read fluently. Students can understand what they read easily, so they become confident to read and they can enjoy reading. By encountering the same patterns of letters, words, and combinations of words again and again, students can develop their vocabulary which will help them to understand more when they read other books. Consequently, they can increase their reading speed and confidence and they read more and more. Then, they can build up a reading habit.

Day & Bamford (1998) stated that extensive reading makes significant improvement in language competence in listening as well as in writing. Furthermore, although extensive reading is not included in the examination, research findings prove that extensive reading pays off in exam success. Bamford and Day (1997), Nations (1997) and Day & Bamford (1998) also report that extensive reading resulted in students' making significant gains in other aspects of foreign language competence such as listening, writing, and vocabulary. In a study of university students who were failing their EFL classes, Mason & Krashen (1997) cited in Day & Bamford (1998) found that extensive reading helped the students improve their scores on a cloze test. Research evidences show that reluctant students of EFL became eager readers by reading extensively. Extensive reading increases exposure to English. Success in reading makes students come to enjoy language learning.

By reading many works by great writers, students will become more familiar with the literary works. This will lead them to widen their cultural awareness. Consequently they can improve communicative competence in English. Thus, their language learning will be more effective. Actually, by reading extensively, students will develop not only the reading skill but also the speaking and interactive skills. By reading short stories and novels in English, students will learn many examples of spoken language and their colloquial English will be greatly improved. Moreover, as students have to write a short report and the teacher has to review them and give them feedback, students can improve their writing skills, especially, summary writing.

### **Drawbacks, possible constraints and solutions**

One of the drawbacks of adopting extensive reading is that giving extensive reading to students calls for the teacher's time and effort. Going along with students to the library to borrow books and recording the titles of the books and students' names may need at least thirty minutes every week. To save this time, students can be asked to go to the library on their own to borrow books during the break time. Or, the teacher can bring the books to the class so that students can choose the books they like to read in the class. Then, the teacher needs only to record the titles of the books and students' names.

The teacher needs to spare time for collecting materials, giving orientation, collecting students' reports and correcting or reviewing them and giving feedback to the students. This process is very time-consuming and may be a great burden to some teachers. The alternative way for correcting students' report is asking some students to talk about the books they have read in the following class instead of writing a report. And the teacher can ask some students a question or two to check whether they have read and understood the book thoroughly. Questions like "Who is the main character in the story? What happened to the main character at the end of the story?" etc. can be used for the purpose. Alternatively, the teacher can ask

some students to talk about the book (the story) in the class. The extensive reading programme is meaningful as long as students continue reading.

Another drawback is that some students are not interested in reading. In this situation, if the class is large, these students can be neglected and this will reduce the burden to the teachers in correcting the reports and controlling the class. Or, the teacher can make students aware of the benefits of reading so that they want to read.

Moreover, students may not have time for extensive reading as they have to study their academic subjects to pass the exam. Teachers can suggest to them to read when they are tired of studying difficult subjects. Teachers should advise them to choose short and easy stories. And, students can read during break time, or the leisure hours at home.

Reading is not the only way to get pleasure and knowledge, in this multi media world, there are a great many enjoyable and exciting ways and means for gaining knowledge. However, in my opinion, reading is the most convenient and the easiest way for most of the students to widen their general knowledge and to improve their language skills.

If ELSIP readers or other graded readers in English are not available, the teacher can select and copy some interesting articles or short stories from journals and magazines for English language learners. Students can read the same material at the same time. There are about four months in one semester, so there will be about 12 to 15 periods for extensive reading programme. Finding twelve to fifteen reading materials suitable to students' level is not a very heavy burden.

### **Reflection to My Own Extensive Reading Programme**

The extensive reading programme for second year English specialization students was carried out at West Yangon University in the academic year 2006-07. As I taught them the module Communicative Skills, I took about 20 or 30 minutes a week for extensive reading class. I followed all the procedures mentioned above. I used ELSIP graded readers level I. About half of the students (25-30 students) participated earnestly. Most of them have read all (19 books) or over fifteen books. I asked them to talk about the books they read. I asked them to write essays such as "The book I like best", "The story I like best" etc. Some students helped me in recording books they borrowed and returned. Later, students do the borrowing and returning the books by themselves and there were no books lost. I found out that, their motivation in language learning, their grammar and writing skills really increased. Students' participation in class activities also improved.

### **Conclusion**

Extensive reading in English can make students efficient learners. It is particularly crucial in aiding the development of three of the most important components of fluent reading: a large sight vocabulary, a sizable general vocabulary and knowledge of the target language and of the world. Sight vocabulary refers to words that readers can recognize quickly and effortlessly. This rapid and automatic process of word recognition is extremely crucial for reading. Through reading, students can widen their vocabulary, improve grammar, reading skill and consequently they can improve their overall language proficiency. They may even come to understand how pleasurable and useful reading can be. They may acquire the habit of reading in English. The general knowledge they acquire through reading can bring them success not only in their learning the language but also in their studies.

Extensive reading is one of the possible ways to make students read broadly. As students are trained to read since the first year, they will continue their reading practice in the following years. They will come to know how to use the library. Their overall language

proficiency will be improved and they will be enriched with general knowledge so that they will become more active and creative in classroom activities, more imaginative in writing, more competent in speaking activities, and more responsive in classroom interactions. Due to the above unlimited advantages, it is the responsibility of the English language teachers to cultivate the reading habit in the first year English specialization students.

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