



Reviewed work:

Extensive Reading Activities for Teaching Language. (2004).
Bamford, J. & Day, R. R. Cambridge: Cambridge University
Press. <http://uk.cambridge.org/> Pp. 232. ISBN 0521016517.
\$30.00.

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Reviewing a book with 106 different activities written by 41 different contributors in 12 countries is not an easy task and threatens to be rather disjointed. What unified it for me was reflecting on my own experience with extensive reading, and a number of images kept recurring to me. One image was of me, twenty years ago, sitting on the sofa in my living room, listening to book reports on cassettes, admiring my students' ingenuity - one student, having read Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*, recorded his report in reverse, reading it out from end to beginning. I also remembered my reaction to colleagues who read huge numbers of books in order to be able to catch out students who had not read them. I remembered the joy of students finding books to read and the disappointment of those who did not. Another image that came to my mind was of Roxanne, a twenty-something Romanian whom I know, currently living in London, who every Monday morning makes sure that she gets the special offer included with one of the daily newspapers, usually an instalment of one encyclopaedia or other, to ensure that she has masses of reading material.

From secondary school classrooms to learners reading newspapers on the underground, extensive reading is all around us. Many language learners have always known that this is the most important way to get massive amounts of target language input; the question is how to convince the other learners – and teachers - that this is what they should be doing. This book provides answers to this question, exemplifying how much can be done with extensive reading and how it can become part of any classroom. It does not set out to demonstrate the success of extensive reading in language teaching – this is best reserved to empirical research articles (e.g., Hafiz and Tudor, 1990) and case studies (e.g., Davis 1995; Asraf and Ahmad, 2003), many of which will be familiar to the readers of this journal. But the rich variety of this collection attests to the range of what can be done with extensive reading as well as to the resourcefulness of the profession.

The book is organised in five main parts. The first part, taking up approximately half of the book, looks at Organizing Extensive Reading. This part includes sections focusing on Getting Started; Introducing Reading Materials; Motivating and Supporting Reading; Monitoring

Reading, and Evaluating Reading. The second half of the book deals with the way in which extensive reading interacts with Oral Fluency, Writing, Reading, and Vocabulary. In addition there is a short introduction, which lists the principles of extensive reading and suggests ways of using the activities; there is also a list of FAQs at the end of the book, which again covers similar ground.

As in most resource books for teachers, the format of all activities is identical. Each one starts with a one or two line summary of what the activity is about. It then lists the *Level* at which the activity can be used, its *Aims*, and the *Preparation* needed. The main part of each activity is devoted to the *Procedure*, in which each step of the activity is listed in detail. This is followed in many cases by sections on *Tips*, *Extensions* and any *Variations*; many activities include photocopiable work sheets.

One very welcome section appears at the end of each activity, and in it the contributor writes comments on the activity, pointing out its strengths, providing additional hints about using it, and also pointing out any pitfalls. In some cases this section includes additional comments from other teachers who have used the activity. All this does a number of things. Firstly, it provides the contributor with the opportunity to discuss points that would not sit well within a one-size-fits-all format, making it easier to understand which students the activity would work for. Secondly, it adds the human touch, the voice of the teacher, and thus enhances the face validity of the activities, in that it is clear that each activity has been used by its contributor and that it has worked for them. It also contributes to the user friendliness of the book by making it like a conversation with one's peers. This conversation is enhanced by the extensive cross referencing to other activities which appears in the Tips section, as well as in the index and the suggestions for other activities to look at which appear at the end of each section. I therefore felt that this is a book about making connections between activities: you open one activity, start pulling the thread and are drawn into looking at others.

One of the interesting things that emerged for me during the reading was the extent to which so many of the activities are connected to important trends in language teaching. One such trend is learner autonomy and the shared responsibility that teachers and learners have for the learning that occurs in the classroom and outside it. There are many activities in which the learners consult with their peers, and share information about the books that they are enjoying; there are activities in which learners help the teacher keep a record of reading levels, provide feedback on readability levels and ensure that the reading levels assigned to specific titles are appropriate. In other cases teachers take quotes from student book reports and post them for the other students, so that student writing becomes input for the other students. The picture that emerges is thus one of classrooms in which learners continually collaborate with each other and with the teacher in the learning process.

There is also quite a lot of guidance provided – for example, first reporting about a book with guidance, then slowly giving students more freedom. There is reporting with notes, and then reporting without notes; there is one activity in which students summarise the book in 4 minutes and then within 3 and then within 2: this and other activities reflect current understandings about how task performance changes following rehearsal or changes under time pressure (see, for example, Bygate, 2001; Foster and Skehan, 1999).

Another feeling that this book confirmed for me was that one of the most important issues about an extensive reading programme is the detail of administering it. Once the principle is accepted, it is the detail that counts, how to get the students to read, how to ensure that they are reading at the right level, how to ensure that they keep being motivated and that they are enjoying their reading. This book is all about the detail. Many activities are designed to do the same thing as others in the book – but it is important to realise that different activities will appeal to different teachers and to different students. Teachers, therefore, need to be aware of the different ways there are, for example, to get students to report on their book – a one-sentence summary, a two-minute oral report, repeated reports, writing on the web, reporting to the teacher, reporting to other students and so on.

One thing that was particularly pleasing was the large variety of texts being used in the classroom, with such varied sources as blurbs, catalogues, reading realia, children's books for older students, the news, and the internet. In addition, extensive reading is not placed in isolation, and is connected with all language skills, including quite a great deal of listening – for example, listening to a story on cassette or read by the teacher (and, of course, any oral fluency activity involves a great deal of listening too). There were also meaty topics being dealt with, including such issues as genetic engineering and genocide.

There were two issues, however, which raised certain queries for me. The first was that the provenance of the activities seemed to be rather limited. I know how difficult it is to get contributors to write for resource books; but at some point I realised that activities seemed to come from rather restricted educational contexts: when I looked at this more carefully it became clear that the book is almost exclusively written by contributors working in higher education institutions round the Pacific Rim. I was not sure why this had happened – one explanation is that this since the two editors work in Hawaii and in Japan, it is only natural that their contacts would be in the region. It could also be the case that this is where the most interesting work on extensive reading is being done – and even a cursory glance at the contributors on this topic to this journal over the years would confirm that this is probably the case. Nevertheless, I was wondering to what extent a teacher working in a secondary school in South America, or in a private language school in Europe would feel that they could take these activities and use them, simply because the university setting of the activities is so different from their own. True, for many of the activities this does not actually matter – but there is for me an issue of face validity here. There is some reference to doing activities in secondary schools, but I thought that this point could have been given more salience.

Connected with this was my slightly uneasy feeling that this is a First World book, a world in which students can buy the books they see in catalogues; in which the teacher can set up a reading lounge for the students; in which the teacher can set listening homework, with the assumption that everyone will have a cassette recorder at home. There are activities where everybody needs access to the internet; another activity talks of individual conferences with students (not amazingly easy when you have 200 students and do not have an office in the school). I found very few activities that would work quite easily in resource-poor situations – one such activity here was learners writing their own stories for the other learners. I would have liked to have a whole section devoted to activities which were resource-poor – just as Davis (1995) discusses two situations in detail, one of which is from a resource poor context.

To sum up, this is not a book for someone who needs convincing about the merits of extensive reading (and surprisingly, there are still teachers like that!), but rather for teachers who are looking for ways of convincing their students of these advantages. It would be particularly suitable in the armoury of a teacher trainer showing trainees how extensive reading can be used. It would be useful for a head of department demonstrating to their staff that extensive reading can after all be administered fairly easily, within their context, and that it can be used by all teachers, no matter what their personal teaching style is. It would be ideal for teachers new to extensive reading, but also to teachers who have used extensive reading before, but are looking for a new activity to liven up their class. The large number of activities and the attention to detail I have mentioned above ensure that there is something here for everyone.

References

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About the Reviewer

Amos Paran taught at secondary schools in Israel before coming to the UK and doing his PhD on reading processes in L1 and L2 at the University of Reading (giving rise to many jokes). He is now course director of the MA TESOL by Distance Learning at the Institute of Education, University of London.