

Top Ten Principles for Teaching Extensive Reading: A Response

Philip Prowse

Prior to reading the article I thought it might be useful to note down my own 'top ten'. Here they are with brief accompanying notes, followed by a comparison with the ten principles in the article. All ten are important so the list isn't really in order of priority although the first five may be more significant than the second.

1 - Choice

All the research into extensive reading points towards what Stephen Krashen calls 'free voluntary reading' as the source of the benefits that extensive reading can bestow (Krashen 1993).

2 - Ease

When reading is easy and pleasurable much more of it is done and the language learning benefits grow with the amount read. I.S.P. Nation states 'A density of one unknown word in fifty is more suitable for pleasurable extensive reading.' (Nation 2001 p. 165).

3 - Texts to engage with and react to

Ease of reading does not preclude engagement and I would prioritise books which make the reader keep turning the pages!

4 - No comprehension questions

The natural response to a book is emotional or intellectual, and comprehension questions are neither of these. Henry Widdowson's famous dismissal of them is worth quoting: 'Comprehension questions ...commonly require the learner to rummage round in the text for information in a totally indiscriminate way, without regard to what purpose might be served in doing so...Reading is thus represented as an end in itself, an activity that has no relevance to real knowledge and experience and therefore no real meaning.' (Widdowson 1979 p. 180).

5 - Individual silent reading

Reading at the learner's own pace while they turn the text into a theatre in their mind is vastly preferable to reading aloud, or 'barking at print.'

6 - No dictionaries

Well-written language learner literature contextualises, glosses and repeats any new lexis. The use of a dictionary (essential for intensive reading) prevents the extensive reader from developing valuable guessing skills.

7 - Range of genres

Make a wide range of genres available to the learner – the choice of reading material is very personal.

8 - Use recordings

Reading and listening at the same time conveys great benefits in pronunciation (sound-symbol correspondence) and in increasing reading speed.

9 - No tests

Testing gets in the way of reading. The true test of reading is when a learner starts another book.

10 - Teacher participation

The teacher must read the same books as the learners so as to be able to discuss them with them.

So how did I do? I turned to the 'Top Ten Principles' article with some trepidation, but this soon turned to relief!

1 - The reading material is easy

Yes! And the Nation reference is the same. Ease of reading promotes reading and our aim is for students to read as much as possible.

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

Similar to my genre point. In preparing the *Cambridge English Readers* series we researched the preferences of several thousand learners worldwide and found widely differing preferences within the same age, sex, learning background and nationality groups.

3 - Learners choose what they want to read

Yes! In many ways this is an organisational issue to ensure that students have access to books at the right levels in class or school libraries. Most reader publishers now have excellent websites, some with sample chapters of all titles, so that students can try before they buy or borrow.

4 - Learners read as much as possible

Indeed – and a book a week may be too low a target. I can recall working with Chinese EAP students in a residential environment where they were reading a book a day – with consequent great improvement in their colloquial spoken English.

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

Of course our covert purpose in encouraging extensive reading is the research-proved benefits it brings to overall language proficiency. I see no problem and many benefits in sharing this research with students so that they understand that extensive reading is not about just practising reading but it has significant effects on all the language skills.

6 - Reading is its own reward

See Widdowson's remarks about 'rummaging' quoted above in the context of comprehension questions. I'm more ambivalent about 'follow-up activities' than the authors of this article though. I'm all in favour of direct response to a text and if this takes the form of a spontaneous

dramatisation or discussion that's fine. Otherwise I'd prefer to see the learner reading another book. With the class reader of course, where all the learners read the same book, then follow-up activities where the text acts as a springboard into language use are central.

7 - Reading speed is usually faster rather than slower

Absolutely and I'm delighted to see we agree on the inappropriacy of dictionary use during extensive reading.

8 - Reading is individual and silent

Almost the same words. A problem encountered in some cultures though is that a class of students reading silently is not perceived as a class learning, let alone being taught, both by the students themselves and the school administration. The cry goes up 'Why do we pay you to teach and all you do is let them read?' There is clearly a major educative task here both with students and teachers. I have had students (these were from a French *grande école*) rejecting extensive reading as 'pas sérieux' and teachers explaining that a 21 hour a week intensive course had not time for extensive reading ('They want exam preparation, you see.') despite the fact that research shows that extensive reading pays off in exam success.

9 - Teachers orient and guide their students

I must say here that I prefer my 'participate' but I can see the point which is being made. It really relates to what I wrote above under 8 – the role of the teacher includes helping the students (and their parents and our fellow teachers) become aware both of the benefits of extensive reading and of how to go about it.

10 - The teacher is a role model of a reader

And here's the participation. Particularly with teenagers, discussion of shared book experiences can provide a neutral ground where communication in English can take place easily and naturally.

So a great deal of congruence. My only real point of difference with the authors of this article is the stress I would lay on exploiting the recordings of readers to stimulate reading by giving 'tasters', to get them into books when reading is impossible (eg in the car, or out running), to listen while reading to improve speed and pronunciation, and indeed to listen instead of reading. There is little or no research evidence as yet, but my hunch is that listening to lots and lots of readers could have similar effects on language acquisition.

Conclusion

I quote from Bright and McGregor (1970 p. 59) in their chapter on Extensive Reading: 'Criteria that have to be satisfied. *General*. The most important thing is that the pupils should enjoy what they read. A book that satisfies all other criteria but fails this one is a reject.'

References

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