A Self Access Extensive Reading Project using Graded Readers (with particular reference to students of English for academic purposes)

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In the context of a university English Language Centre, where students were preparing for tertiary level study through English, development of an adequate reading ability was perceived to be a problem. As a response to this perception, a self-access extensive reading project using graded readers was set up with the help of the Edinburgh Project in Extensive Reading (EPER). Feedback on the project was sought from students, who were also tested over three university terms. The results showed not only that progress as measured by test scores correlated positively with the amount of reading done, but also that students rated the project favourably.

INTRODUCTION

In the university English language centre where I work, we run two basic types of full-time courses: a General English course and an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) course. Our students are aged 17 and over, are graduates and undergraduates, and come from a variety of countries and cultures including European, Far Eastern and Arabic. Many of our students are preparing for tertiary level study through English, and therefore have to develop their reading ability to a point where they are able to read large quantities of difficult text. Some time ago we felt that the progress which students were making in reading appeared minimal, and this, if true, was clearly a serious problem.

One obvious reason for any lack of progress suggested itself: the students were simply not reading enough. Most people believe that the repeated doing of something leads to its improvement, that practice of a skill improves it. In the case of reading this is expressed as ‘you learn to read by reading’ (e.g. Grabe 1991, 396). But, although there were dedicated reading classes two or three times per week, it probably hardly needs reiterating that reading classes by themselves are insufficient for the development of an adequate L2 reading ability (e.g. Nuttall 1982, Williams 1986).

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Most reading classes, even in 'communicative' classrooms, will not provide adequate opportunity for the development of reading for various reasons. Some, if not all, of the following features are likely to apply to all but the most exceptional of classes:

- students do not actually read much in reading classes: texts and time are, of necessity, short;
- the conditions (i.e. how, when, where, how long, what for) of reading are controlled by the teacher, not the readers;
- the model implied by most pedagogic procedures for dealing with L2 texts is the 'transmission model' referred to by Zamet in which reading is reduced to:
  a matter of identifying and retrieving a set of ideas that reside in and are transmitted by a text, a set of ideas that all readers can agree on. (Zamet 1992, 465).

As Hirvela (1996) points out, this primacy of the text in the 'learner-text interaction' is as true in communicative classrooms as in more traditional ones. An 'emphasis on the learner as reader' which takes account of the reader's experience of the original text together with the meaning embedded in the text - the learner's 'story of reading' - (ibid. p129) has yet to find its way into mainstream classrooms.

- Reading is only a part of what is done: for example, texts may also be used as vehicles for information about language, or as stimuli for a series of integrated skills activities or the production of spoken or written discourse.
- There may be an over concentration on skills and strategies deriving from 'top down' views of reading (eg: predicting, skimming, scanning, guessing words from context - see Grabe 1997: 377) without reference to 'bottom-up' processes (Paran 1996).

- Reading fluency, such as L1 learner readers develop (at school, for example, through reading schemes, quiet reading periods, reading aloud one-to-one with a teacher), is not usually a stated aim of reading classes.

Classes by themselves, then, do not offer enough practice in the business of real reading. One measure which can make up for deficiencies in classroom reading opportunities is for the students to read extensively. As Krashen notes:

Free voluntary reading is...the missing ingredient in intermediate second and foreign language instruction. (1993:1)

So we decided to set up an Extensive Reading Project whose purpose was to establish a systematic, self-access reading resource using graded readers. We hoped that students would:

(i) improve their ability to read fluently and to employ all the strategies associated with good readers;
(ii) read a lot;
(iii) read outside class hours independently;
(iv) find reading in English an enjoyable experience;
(v) move through different levels of text difficulty and see for themselves their own progress.

The Project was also concerned with developing effective systems for the management of extensive reading in our particular context, to evaluate these and to make recommendations for the future.

The reading resource was developed with the help of Edinburgh University's Project in Extended Reading (EPER), which has a comprehensive database of graded readers (see Appendix 1). We planned to monitor the progress of our project over one academic year (i.e. three ten week terms), as we were advised by EPER that there would be little benefit accruing to students over shorter periods than this. However, a difficulty for long term monitoring is the fact that students can join our courses at the start of each 10 week term, and leave at the end of each term. The majority of students stay for one term only, with smaller numbers continuing for two terms, and relatively few remaining for the full academic year (30 weeks). Nonetheless, the Project was begun in October 1993 with 26 students.

Before describing the project in detail I should perhaps briefly outline some of the reasons why an extensive reading scheme seemed the appropriate approach to our 'reading problem', and also why we decided to use graded readers as the reading resource. This latter point may need some justification for those of our students who study English for academic purposes.

THE BENEFITS OF EXTENSIVE READING

Extensive reading clearly provides practice in reading. In Nuttall's 'virtuous circle' (Fig. 1), practice is the implied key to improvement.

![Fig. 1: The virtuous circle of the good reader (Nuttall 1982, 168)](image-url)
In other words: by reading more and faster, comprehension skills improve. As comprehension is more successful, so motivation encourages more reading. There is some support from psycholinguistic studies for the notion that comprehension improves through reading more. Oakhill (1995) has reported research indicating that limitations of working memory may be responsible for poor comprehension, and she has suggested that perhaps ‘reading with understanding improves working memory’.


Summarising the principal claims, it seems that extensive reading can provide opportunities for practice and/or improvement in the following areas:

1. **Language improvement**
   - a) building vocabulary
   - b) building structural awareness
   - c) giving exposure to language (‘comprehensible input’)

2. **Speed**: improving automaticity/reading faster

3. **Background knowledge**: enhancing knowledge

4. **Comprehension**: improving comprehension/text attack skills

5. **Attitude**
   - a) promoting confidence
   - b) promoting motivation

6. **Quantity**: reading more, reading whole texts

7. **Word attack skills**: providing opportunity to employ ‘good’ word attack skills

8. **Types of reading technique**: improving flexibility of reading rate depending on purpose, e.g. skimming, scanning, study reading

9. **Reading practice**: ‘learning to read by reading’

10. **Transfer to other skills**: improving spelling, writing, speaking, listening

11. **Learning resource**: becoming independent of others, e.g. teachers, interlocutors

There are clearly many valuable language and other benefits to be gained from extensive reading. At the start of the project, however, we saw the main goal as the improvement in reading fluency. A secondary but implicit aim was language improvement: this can be inferred from the notion of the progress which allows students to move through different levels of text difficulty.

Another consideration was the type of extensive reading. We chose to implement the type which comes under the heading of self access ‘Free Voluntary Reading’ (FVR), discussed by Krashen (1993). Within this category, unlike the classroom reading discussed above, students:

- read whole texts;
- read as often, wherever and for however long they want;
- read what they want;
- are not ‘tested’ on their comprehension (though we did have available work cards for some books);

This type of extensive reading seemed to have the potential to make up for some of the limitations of the reading done in class.

**The Importance of Level of Difficulty of Text**

Many of our students are probably spending most of their time reading difficult texts. This situation has arisen, in my opinion, partly as a result of the view in recent years in ELT that learners should read authentic material whatever their level, and that the text is less important than what learners are asked to do with it.1 The various arguments for and against using authentic texts are well documented elsewhere (e.g. Hudson 1991, Alderson & Urquhart 1984), and I do not wish to go into the issue here, except to make the point that there are various consequences of exclusive reading of texts which are too difficult. Some of these are as follows:

- Students get locked into the vicious circle described by Nuttall (1982: 167) in which reading is too difficult to be a pleasurable experience, and so not much reading is done outside class.
- Decoding difficult text is a slow, arduous business requiring translation into the L1 (Upton 1995, Cohen 1995), and other techniques involving L1 such as reading a sentence backwards (Japanese, Korean students).
- Learners have poor self concepts as readers (Hosenfeld, 1984, 233) and they have low expectations of comprehension. (Compare this with L1 readers who expect to understand a very large part of what they read, i.e. 99-100% - see Clay 1985, Carver 1994).
- L2 written texts are seen mainly as sources of information about language - 'linguistic objects' (Johns & Davies 1983) - resulting, somewhat bizarrely, in complaints if a text is ‘too easy’.
- Because reading is slow, not much text is read, and so exposure to language input and opportunities to meet new words are limited (Parry 1991).
Application of learner-reader strategies such as guessing meanings from context (Paran 1996a, 29) will depend on level of difficulty of the text; you cannot guess the meaning of a word unless you understand its context to start with (Nuttall 1982, Parry 1991). As Hudsonput it:

"It is unclear how the learner as reader can comprehend the message while that same learner as language acquirer identifies and masters unknown vocabulary, grammar and text structure. There is an apparent enigma regarding just how this bootstrap comprehension can take place if the second language learner is deficient in essential lexical, syntactic and discourse knowledge necessary for comprehending the content of the text." (1991,83)

If a text is difficult, getting a general idea may be possible but reading for detailed understanding may be beyond a student's capability. Thus, important aspects of comprehension, such as text-level inferences, may not take place.

To conclude, the text used in class are often 'authentic' because, among other reasons, these are thought to be motivating. Very often, these texts are newspaper or magazine articles, since they have topical relevance (see, for example, Wong et al. 1995). But the most difficult kinds of texts appear to be newspaper articles: many students reported to us in interview that they found reading the newspaper more difficult than reading academic texts in their subject area. Furthermore, if our EAP students, in particular, read authentic, general interest texts in class, and outside class spend their time on authentic, subject-related texts, they are likely to be reading texts which most of the time are too difficult. The 'short circuit hypothesis' (see Clarke 1980, Alderson 1984) argues that reading skills and strategies acquired in the L1 are not transferred to the L2 until a certain threshold level of ability in the L2 is reached. However, I would like to suggest that it is not only the level of ability per se, but the difficulty of the text which is at least as crucial, ie that students with a low level of knowledge of the L2 can be relatively 'good readers' - whatever this means - if the text is at the right level.

What is the right level of difficulty?

It is difficult to be very precise about difficulty levels but there are some sources of information. For example, Clay (1985) recommends that the L1 learner reader should be 90 - 94% correct in his/her recognition and understanding of words on an instructional text and 95 - 100% correct on an easy text. A difficult text is 85-90% correct. Carver (1994) gives the following figures for native speakers: an easy text contains 0% unknown words, a difficult text contains 2% unknown words, while material 'which is matched to the ability of the reader' contains around 1% unknown words. In a longitudinal study by Parry (1991), 4 ESL students, who were instructed to list words that 'caused them difficulty' in an introductory anthropology text, recorded an estimated 1.6% to 0.12% of the total words in the text. Nuttall (1982, 26) recommends 1% unfamiliar words for texts used in extensive reading, and 2-3% for intensive reading texts. Finally, Laufer (1987) describes a study which found that below the level of 95% understanding of words in a text, comprehension was 'unsatisfactory'.

A 95% minimum level of comprehension for extensive reading is a figure which seems to be generally accepted (e.g. White 1994, Grabe 1995a), although it seems somewhat at odds with Carver, Nuttall and Parry. But perhaps the two measures - correct in recognition and comprehension of words and unfamiliar words (ie words never seen before) - are not the same thing. It is clearly possible to recognise a word without having a correct understanding of it, and it is possible to have a correct understanding of a word but still inappropriate interpret a piece of written discourse for syntactic or other reasons.

At any rate, the minimum 95% comprehension figure was the guide which we adopted in our Reading Project. Clearly, in order to achieve this level of comprehension, students whose language proficiency is below a certain level will need to read simplified texts. For this reason, graded readers were an obvious choice.

DESCRIPTION OF THE READING PROJECT

Setting up the Project

The process involved in setting up the project was as follows:

- During the summer term of 1993, we carried out a pilot test with our current group of students to gauge the approximate distribution of our students across EPER's nine levels (see Appendix 1), and therefore the number of books per level we would require.
- During the summer vacation, with the help of EPER, we selected and ordered sufficient books for the project. From the results of the initial test, EPER sent us a suggested number of books per level and a list of recommended titles from their database. After weeding out low quality titles from our existing stock and ordering a selection of new books from the recommended list, we arrived at the following distribution of books across seven levels at the start of the project:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>EPER LEVEL</th>
<th>NUMBER OF BOOKS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
At the beginning of the Autumn term, students were tested, informed of their reading levels, and were issued with a set of instructions for the project.

The notion of extensive reading was explained, stressing the importance of a large quantity of fluent reading, i.e., reading at a reasonable speed without constantly having to stop to use dictionaries. It was made clear to students that the books at their level should be relatively easy; they should be able to understand 95% of what they read.

Once students had completed 10 books at one level then, after consultation with their reading tutor, they could move up to the next level.

The project was set up as an open self-access system, usable from 8.30 am – 6.00 pm on weekdays, and so it was up to students whether and how much they read. However, in the first term we asked students to try to read an average of one book a week (8/9 in a term), and in the second term we tried to encourage students to read two a week.

**MONITORING AND EVALUATION**

The Reading Project was primarily conceived and implemented in terms of its learning potential to the students who would be its subjects. In addition, we wanted to be able to make sensible recommendations to students in future years as to how best to go about the business of improving their ability to read in English. Therefore, it was important to build in systems for formative evaluation of the project from the students’ point of view, as well as systems for data gathering on the students’ own reading processes, attitudes and habits. These aims were achieved through regular testing, tutorials, questionnaires and interviews, as follows:

- **EPER** supplied us with two parallel cloze tests, each consisting of about 140 items in a number of short passages gradually increasing in difficulty. Test A was given to students starting on the project. The results of this test determined the reading level they would begin on. Test B was given at the end of each term in order to measure any progress made over the 10 weeks.

- Each student was issued with a reading record book. For each book read, they were asked to record titles and how many pages were read, give a quality rating of 1-5 (1=terrible, 5=excellent), and write any comments they wished to make. These record books were collected in at the end of each term.

- Individual tutorials were held every two or three weeks in which students were asked about their general attitudes and approaches to reading in their first language and in English. The number of books they had read was checked and encouragement given by the tutor to continue reading as much as possible.

- Questionnaires were issued at the end of each term as further formative evaluation of the project, and also to act as confirmation of students’ attitudes to reading which had been discussed in tutorials during the term.

- Finally, structured and recorded interviews were carried out with a number of students at the end of terms 2 and 3.

From the results of the first questionnaire we discovered that there was a preference for non-fiction among some of the students – mainly the male students – and as a result we ordered a further 55 non-fiction books.

An important role of the tutorials was to maintain student interest and monitor the amount they were reading. In a 10-week term we found that initial enthusiasm began to flag around week 5, so in the second term we organised a Book Afternoon where students got together in an informal atmosphere over tea and cakes and discussed the books they had read and offered recommendations to others. This was well attended, and as a result we published a list of the recommended books (see Appendix 4).

**RESULTS AND EVALUATION**

We will consider answers to the questions below, using data from the following sources: (a) descriptive statistics (b) test scores, (c) questionnaires, and (d) recorded interviews.

1. Did students perceive any benefits from reading ‘easy’ material (i.e., simplified to allow at least 95% comprehension)? If so, what were they? Using sources (a), (c) and (d).

2. Did reading a lot of this kind of material help students improve their reading ability? If so, what aspects of the reading ability were affected? Using sources (b), (c) and (d).

3. Would EAP students be better equipped to read unsimplified material in their subject areas? Using sources (c) and (d).

**SOME BASIC STATISTICS**

Approximately 26 - 30 students took part in the project each term, with 17 students continuing over two terms and 8 over three terms. As noted in the introduction, this pattern reflects periods of student registration on courses: it does not imply a ‘drop out’ rate from the project as such. In total, 60 students took part in the programme over the year, but data from test scores and number of books read are complete for only 51. Out of the 60 students, 4 students whose Test A results indicated that they should read graded readers did not read any books.
Some figures for the Autumn and Spring terms are (n=43):

1. **Number of books per term:** Students read on average between 7.5 - 8 books, with a range of 0 to 26 (i.e. on average one book per week as instructed).

2. **Time per book:** They seemed to spend between 2 and 6 hours per book, some (4) spending less than 2 hours and a few spending more than 7 hours.

3. **Time spent reading:** They seemed to spend an average about 3 to 4 hours per week reading the reading project books (ranging from 0 to 10.5 hours). This represented approximately 10-20% of time spent working outside class. Over 7 days, it worked out at about half an hour per day. (Compare Hafiz and Tudor 1989, who report that in another project at schools in UK, pupils read graded readers for one supervised hour per day - i.e. 5 hours per week).

4. **Frequency:** Most people read the books 2 or 3 times per week. However, some students gave up reading the Reading Project books after a certain point in the term (weeks 5-7), mainly due to pressure of work (unfortunately I have no figures on this).

5. **Purposes:** Few students read the Reading Project books for pleasure only, slightly more than 40% read for language improvement only, while nearly half claimed to read the books for pleasure as well as language improvement.

6. **Time & place:** In general the books were read mainly in students' rooms, at night or in the evening, and often in bed or before sleeping, as shown in the table below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>When and where did you read the books?</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>at night/before sleeping/in bed</td>
<td>64.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>at home/in my room</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>other free time</td>
<td>11.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>at English Language Centre</td>
<td>7.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>travelling</td>
<td>2.4% (=1)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1

As can be seen, comfort and privacy are important in reading the books, as they are in L1 leisure reading. The books appear to have been treated as a form of useful relaxation.

**HOW MUCH TEXT DID STUDENTS READ?**

In order to estimate approximately how much text each student had read, a figure based on number of words was calculated by using the students' reading records together with data on word length of each book recorded.

**EAP vs General students**

One factor which might have affected how much was read was whether students were EAP or General. An important question for EAP students is whether it is worth spending time on this kind of material, given that is different in genre from the texts they are required to read for study in their subject area (see below).

Averages and ranges of quantity of text for EAP and General students for one term are as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Average quantity of text read in 000s of words (over one term)</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Range</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>EAP (n=29)</td>
<td>109.67</td>
<td>7-412.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General (n=23)</td>
<td>101.32</td>
<td>0-278.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2

As can be seen in Table 2, the average amounts of text read are not very different. If anything, EAP students appear to have read more, but the mean may be inflated slightly by the exceptionally large figure for one EAP student (he read 35 books). The next highest EAP students are closer to the top figure for General students. Given that EAP students had tough assignments to complete for their course (2000 word projects in their field), and that extent of participation in the project depended on individual volition, it seems from these figures that EAP students considered reading these kinds of texts worthwhile.

**Higher and lower abilities**

There was also no connection between a student's level and the quantity read, as can be seen from the correlations, shown in Table 3, between the amount of text read and scores on Test A. This means that it was not possible from the results of Test A to predict how much students would read. In other words, students at lower

**Correlations between Test A (first test) and amount read**

(Pearson Correlation Coefficients)

| Total Words Over 1 Term/Score On Test A (n=50) | r = -0.0960 |
| Total Words Over 2 And 3 Terms/Score On Test A (N=17) | r = -0.0549 |

Table 3
levels did not appear to read more text than students at higher levels, and vice versa.

**Progress**

In order to see whether reading graded readers had any effect on students' ability to perform better on the cloze tests, three sets of progress scores were made by calculating the differences between Test A scores (first test) and Test B scores (end of term test) for the three terms (ie progress score 1 = Test A - Test B1, Progress score 2 = Test A - B2 etc). These progress scores were then correlated with the quantity read. The correlations are shown in Table 4. As can be seen, the correlations show interesting evidence of progress over a period of time.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Correlations between progress scores and amount read</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(Pearson Correlation Coefficients)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Words Read Over 1 Term/Progress Score 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(N=50)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Words Read Over 2 Terms/Progress Score 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(N=16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Words Read Over 3 Terms/Progress Score 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(N= 6)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (two-tailed)
** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 Level (two-tailed)

Table 4

Obviously the numbers are low, especially in the last case. However, taken as a series, together with the figures in Table 3, these correlations give an encouraging indication that, firstly, the amount students read has a beneficial effect on their ability to perform on the cloze test, and, secondly, over time the effect increases. The results accord with those of others investigating in the same field, e.g. Hafiz and Tudor (1989), Wiley (1991).

It is perhaps difficult to know what these figures might mean as far as reading in general is concerned. One problem with cloze tests is that while they are a test of overall language ability, it has been argued that they are only partly a test of higher order reading skills, such as inferencing. (See for example, Alderson 1984:9, Williams & Dallas 1984:202). Thus here we may really be looking at the effect of reading on language acquisition, rather than the effects of reading on all aspects of the ability to read.

**Students' Evaluations Of The Reading Project**

In general, the majority of students were favourable in their opinions of the Reading Project, regarding it as enjoyable, useful and beneficial for their English. Some students were extremely enthusiastic and positively devoured the books, and a very few students found it hard to read the types of books contained in the Reading Project, or were unenthusiastic about reading in English in general.

Figure 2 shows the students' opinions on the usefulness of the project and how much they enjoyed reading the books.

![Figure 2](image)

As can be seen, the responses are quite positive and encouraging. On examining differences between EAP and General students (not shown), we found that 79% of EAP students rated the Project as useful or very useful compared with 91% of general students. The attitude towards 'easy' books is interesting: 24% of general students and 43% of EAP students were less than positive towards 'easy' books, liking them not at all or only a little.
Thus it seems that:
(i) Although General students were a little more positive than EAP students towards the Project, a substantial number of EAP students found it useful.
(ii) It looks as if the books were more useful than enjoyable, although this is very much a generalisation as opinions varied substantially between individuals.

Sometimes in interviews with the students, there did appear to be problems associated with the materials:

1. At lower levels especially, a few students appeared to feel "positioned" as juvenile by some of the texts.
2. At higher levels (e.g. level B upwards), one or two students claimed to be able to cope well with unsimplified material - these students were students of literature in their own countries. One student in particular was articulate and perceptive in her dislike for simplified materials: she liked to read critically, to appreciate a writer's language and to grapple with ideas. She maintained this was not possible with simplified materials.

On the other hand, many students came to appreciate the opportunity to improve reading skills, as in the comment below:

*But reading...at first when I reading RP books it is easier, I think so, but I think as the time pass, I think it very useful because when I read my major books in Korea I read from right to left - do you understand - because my country grammar is very different so I, from here and here and here.*

**Perceived Benefits of the Reading Project**

Comments relating to the benefits of extensive reading using graded readers were extracted from 29 recorded structured interviews with EAP and General students. The comments were then categorised using the list of potential benefits of extensive reading discussed in section 2 above. Table 5 shows these benefits arranged in rank order according to how often they were mentioned.

The students interviewed were extremely insightful on what is probably a very hard area to discuss anyway, let alone in a foreign language. It is also interesting that - with the exception of item 10 - all the comments could be relatively easily categorised into most of the areas in the scheme above. In two areas, however, it was not easy to tease out from students' comments whether being able to do something amounted to the same thing as improving in that area. Specifically, whether the fact that they could read the books fast or understand them easily meant that they felt that their comprehension and reading speed had actually 'improved'. Thus the categorisation in section 2 shows some modification here: there are two categories under speed and comprehension. If, however, we accept

### Benefits of extensive reading of graded readers in order of importance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>occurrences (ie no. of individuals mentioning)</th>
<th>% of individuals mentioning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. language improvement:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a build vocabulary</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>82.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b build structural awareness</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c exposure to language</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. speed:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a improve automaticity</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b can read the books fast</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. comprehension:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a improve comprehension skills/text attack skills</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>41.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b can understand books easily</td>
<td>9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. attitude: books develop positive attitude to reading, enjoyment</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>37.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a promote confidence</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b promote motivation</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. reading practice: 'get used to reading'</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>27.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. word attack skills: opportunity to employ 'good' ones</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>17.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. quantity: can read more, read whole texts</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>17.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. difficulty of unsimplified material</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>17.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. background knowledge: enhance</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. technique: can skim read</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5
that the repeated practice of a skill results in improvement, it should follow that being able to read faster and being able to comprehend easily will result in improvement in these areas.

Language improvement seems to be an important category for almost all the students, other significant areas being speed, comprehension and attitude. These latter three, coincidentally, are key elements of Nuttall’s virtuous circle.

In Table 6 below, the opinions of EAP and General students are compared:

| Interview responses: EAP and General students’ opinions on benefits of graded readers |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| EAP (n=18)              | General (n=11)          |
| %                       | rank order              |
| Language Improvement    | 100                      | Comprehension            | 64 |
| Speed                   | 55                      | Language Improvement     | 54 |
| Comprehension           | 28                      | Speed                    | 54 |
| Attitude                | 28                      | Attitude                 | 54 |
| Reading Practice        | 28                      | Reading Practice         | 36 |
| Quantity                | 22                      | Difficulty of unsimplified material | 27 |
| Word Attack Skills      | 17                      | Word Attack skills       | 18 |
| Background Knowledge    | 11                      | Quantity                 | 9  |
| Difficulty of unsimplified material | 11      | Background Knowledge | 0  |
| Reading Technique       | 6                       | Reading Technique        | 0  |

Table 6

Although the numbers are quite small, some interesting similarities and differences are indicated. Firstly, for both groups the first five categories are the same, albeit in a different rank order; and for both groups, reading technique is not especially important. General students appear to be a little less tolerant of unsimplified material.

Perhaps the most interesting difference is the item in first place: for EAP students the language improvement benefit is unanimously acknowledged, while for general students the key benefit is comprehension. These variations would seem to reflect the differing perceptions of language learning needs and priorities: for example, EAP students may feel a more urgent need to be able to cope with unsimplified texts, particularly in their subject areas.

In the questionnaires, the open-ended question “What benefit do you think you get from reading easy books?” produced broadly similar answers. It was clear that key areas are also language improvement, speed, comprehension. In the questionnaires, word attack skills received more importance than in interviews (4th in rank order), as did background knowledge (6th in rank order). Attitude was ranked 5th; and speaking, writing and spelling are suggested in the questionnaire responses, but not in the interviews.

Thus, I think we are justified in concluding that, in the view of students, reading graded readers provides them with a number of reading benefits, and most importantly an opportunity to practise reading fast, to understand easily and to improve their knowledge of language. It may also be possible that simply by reading faster and understanding more easily, the ability to process written text improves.

**Transfer To Other Language Skills**

There is also the notion that other areas of language, besides those associated with reading, might be affected by reading graded readers. For example, Wiley (1991) and Hafiz & Tudor (1989) found transfer effects to other language skills. Krashen (1993) goes so far as to say that writing is learned through reading, rather than through writing, and that spelling is more effectively learned through reading than spelling instruction. Table 7 below gives the results of questionnaire responses to a closed question: “Do you think you have improved in any of these areas as a result of the reading project?”

It will be seen immediately that a substantial proportion of the students (75%) were able to be fairly specific about the linguistic benefits accruing from the reading they did. Also, significantly, improvement applies to other areas of language, not just those associated with reading.

Some individuals were also very enthusiastic about the benefits in these areas, for example, J., from Hong Kong, who was a low intermediate student at the start of the project. She read 26 books in the first term and 14 in the second, and progressed from books at Level E when she started to Level B at the end of the spring term, although her cloze test results showed no improvement in her second term. As some support for the effect of reading on writing, it is worth looking at two of J’s written texts (see Appendix 3): the first was written in December - the end of her
Do you think you have improved in any of these areas as a result of the reading project?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>reading speed</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>64.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>vocabulary</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>44.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>reading comprehension</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>37.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>speaking fluently</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>24.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>grammar</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>22.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>speaking accurately</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>writing fluently</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>17.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>listening comprehension</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>13.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>writing accurately</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>11.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>spelling</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>11.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 7

First term - and the second during the following March. Even though the texts have been corrected, the degree of syntactic sophistication evident in the second text as compared with the first is quite marked. J. herself ascribed her improvement in her writing ability to her reading in the Reading Project: she was adamant that her ability to use relative clauses, for example, was a direct result of her reading. J.'s assertion seems plausible given that Grabe (1991, 394) reports research which found that "reading experiences improved writing more than grammar instruction or further writing exercises".

Transferability of Reading Skills: Preparation for Unsimplified Materials

Ultimately of course, students will need to move on from simplified texts to reading unsimplified material: is reading graded readers a worthwhile way to prepare for unsimplified material?

Writing on EAP, Hudson claims that:

while interacting with modified or simplified text, the student may develop strategies which work well with these texts but are not transferable to unaltered texts of the type they will need to read (1991, 84)

and that therefore students should work with unsimplified material in their subject areas. However, as we have seen above, Hudson has previously mentioned the fact that if the language level is insufficient, the learner will have problems with unsimplified text.

In order to ascertain learners' views on the subject, we asked students both in interviews and in a questionnaire whether reading the books in the Reading Project was a good preparation for reading unsimplified material.

In the questionnaires, opinions differed to some extent depending on whether the student was General or EAP. General students (n=13) were very positive, though 2 didn't know. EAP students (n=23) seemed less unanimous than General students: a large proportion (78%) agreed that the Reading Project books were a useful preparation for unsimplified material, while a small number disagreed (4) and one didn't know.

Figure 3 gives an analysis of interview responses to the same question by 20 EAP and 12 General students. Again, as can be seen, with the exception of one student, General students are favourable in their response to this question, but EAP students are less sure.

INTERVIEW RESPONSES

![Graph showing interview responses](image)

The scale represents the following categorisation of responses:

1: positive, unqualified: "yes, of course (because...)"); "I think so because..."
2: positive, qualified: "yes, but..."; "yes a little; yes, in some way; yes and no
3: unsure; maybe: don't know; not sure
0: no: the two activities are too different
This apparent difference in opinion between EAP and general students is perhaps unsurprising. Most graded readers are narratives, rather than expository texts, which results in a face validity problem for EAP students. According to some interviewees, the reading which they had to do for their subject studies was entirely different in genre, vocabulary, and techniques from that in the graded readers.

These insights are not without endorsement in the literature. Hari Augstein & Thomas (1984), for example, describe various patterns of reading depending on the purpose, and note that study reading is very different in approach from other types of reading, requiring frequent pausing for reflection and re-reading, evaluation of the content, checking that comprehension is accurate, note-taking. In graded readers, which are mainly fiction, the reading pattern is one of starting at the beginning and moving smoothly without stopping towards the end, as in novels. One student even mentioned the fact that she could 'skim'. This kind of relaxed reading is not that required for study reading.

Bensoussan (1987) found that different text types were associated with different sources of difficulty: the aspects of narrative texts which caused difficulty for students were not the same as the features of expository text which caused difficulty. Parry (1991) notes that vocabulary difficulties for ESL academic students were mainly caused by items typical of the 'register of formal expository prose' (such as: ensuing, vitally, rudimentary, circuitous, supplanted, lurid, repertoire, viable).

Thus for EAP students the situation is a little complex. Graded readers can offer a reading experience which is more like the leisure reading done in the L1, with the possibility of speed of reading, ease of comprehension, of enjoyment, and of sheer quantity of exposure to 'comprehensible input', and there are concomitant pay-offs in development and awareness of structure and vocabulary. As Bamford puts it:

> Extensive reading .....may be one of the few ways to increase exposure to examples of language use for the purposes of language acquisition, or to reinforce and recombine language learned in the classroom. (1984, 219)

I would maintain, therefore, that incorporating a systematic extensive reading scheme into the EAP language programme, as I have described, will go part of the way towards confronting Hudson's enigma: ie reading material at a minimum of 95% comprehension will help students to improve their structural and lexical knowledge, a vital prerequisite for dealing with subject texts. But, given the current situation in which the range of factual, expository material in graded reader form is somewhat limited, graded readers can probably best be characterised as an indirect preparation for study reading.

**CONCLUSION**

A systematic extensive reading programme is an important part of any language course. Classroom reading needs to be complemented by reading schemes in which the student can develop reading fluency, and independence and autonomy with regard to the task of reading in English, so that the business of L2 reading becomes an activity more like L1 reading and less a pedagogic means to an end. I would suggest that the self access model for extensive reading provides this alternative for adult L2 learners and goes some way to counteracting some of the problems of reading classes raised at beginning of this article. During the Project we had some real successes; students who would not otherwise have made much effort to read in English became confident and enthusiastic readers and progressed happily to unsimplified novels, magazines etc.

In the case of EAP students, it would seem wise to approach the development of the reading ability with as many tools at one's disposal as possible, and the use of graded readers, particularly at lower levels of ability, I would argue, is indispensable. At the same time, these students will clearly need the opportunity to practise the study reading techniques associated with academic texts. A reading programme needs to be devised in which practice in study reading takes place alongside a fluency reading programme where books can be treated as "useful relaxation", contributing to confidence building and motivation.

What also emerged from the project is that many students benefit from one-to-one tutorials which deal exclusively with their reading programme. Through tutorials we were able to ascertain what students did with their written texts, what methods they used to decipher them. The project had stressed the need to practise reading fluently, and in tutorials we were able to determine if a student was doing something which seemed ultimately detrimental to this, and to recommend accordingly.

As a result of the Reading Project, the extensive reading programme now in place in the ELC operates as follows:

1. Students are tested at the beginning and end of each term and are told their reading level.
2. They receive information about the 'Reading programme' and recommendations for reading material (see Appendix 2), and are asked to keep records of what they read.
3. Class teachers check in fortnightly one-to-one tutorials whether, how much and what students are reading outside class.
4. In a Study Review Tutorial once a term with a course director, each student discusses his/her reading programme.
5. The books are kept in a Reading Room, which is part of the ELC's Self Access Centre. The books can be borrowed on a sign-out and return basis during office hours.

Although I cannot find a reference for this assertion, it has certainly been my experience that, for example, in-service training courses, this view has been expressed.

REFERENCES


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APPENDIX I

THE EPER DATABASE

The Edinburgh Project in Extended Reading database of readers consists of 97 different simplified reader series. Each book is assessed for its level of difficulty, subject area, quality and readership age (adult, secondary/adult, secondary). The readability levels are based mainly on the vocabulary level, but also taken into consideration are the appearance of the printed page, the nature of the subject matter and the degree of explicitness (Hill et al. 1988). The 9 levels of difficulty are as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>EPER level</th>
<th>Average Vocab</th>
<th>No of pages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>H</td>
<td>(pre-extensive reading)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G</td>
<td>300</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>500</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>800</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>1,200</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>1,600</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>1,900</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>2,200</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X</td>
<td>3,000</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The quality rating is based on a six point scale as follows:

5 = excellent
4 = very good
3 = average
2 = not very interesting, usable only in special circumstances
1 = not to be used under any circumstances
0 = not suitable for inclusion in a programme of extensive reading

It was recommended to us that only books with a rating of 3 and above should be included in the library.
APPENDIX 2

EXTENSIVE READING PROGRAMME - INFORMATION FOR STUDENTS

GENERAL ENGLISH COURSE
ENGLISH FOR ACADEMIC PURPOSES COURSE

1. INTRODUCTION

In the English Language Centre we teach classes in reading comprehension. However, in a class we usually look at short pieces of text intensively, which means studying the vocabulary, grammar and discussing the meaning. But, it is a good idea to practice reading fluently and extensively, just as you do with speaking and writing.

"Extensive reading" means reading longer texts - whole books - for pleasure or information, without spending time looking at details of meaning.

What is "fluent reading"? Reading fluently means reading at a reasonable speed and understanding at least 95% of what you read. Keeping up a reasonable speed means not stopping to look up words in a dictionary.

The key to real improvement in reading is the quantity of fluent, extensive reading that students do, and this means the reading done outside class. Reading a lot has benefits for the other language skills too. Therefore we ask all students on our courses to take part in a Reading Programme.

2. READING PROGRAMME

The Reading Programme requires you to

- Read outside class for at least one hour every day (in addition to other homework you may be given)
- Plan carefully the type of reading you do
- Keep a record of what you have read in a notebook
- Show your reading record to your Language Development teacher in your Language Development tutorial

3. WHAT SHOULD YOU READ?

First, if you are to read fluently, the text must not be too difficult. You must also be interested in what you read. Ideally, the text should be so easy and interesting that you sometimes forget that you are reading in English. So, we will give you a test to find your reading level. From the results of the test, we can advise you on what type of material you should read.

There are two main types of reading material suitable for your reading programme:

1. Simplified reading books (the GRADED READERS in room 9)
2. Unsimplified material:
   (i) Unsimplified fiction and non-fiction books
   (ii) Books and articles in your particular academic field
   (iii) Newspapers and magazines

Unsimplified material may be very interesting to you. However, if your level of English is low you will read very slowly (because you may have to use your dictionary frequently); and secondly, therefore, you will not be able to read very much text. Remember that you need to read a lot of text to make a difference to your reading in English.

Newspapers are good reading material - but they are the most difficult type of reading material. You may feel frustrated if you read only newspapers.

The most important thing is that you enjoy reading and that you read a lot of text.

To conclude:

- Choose reading material that interests you
- Make sure you read material of which you can understand at least 95%
- Keep records of your reading in your Study Notebook
- Organize your time so that you read regularly every day

GUIDE TO READING LEVELS AND SUITABLE READING MATERIALS

- If your level is U, you should read only unsimplified material (e.g. newspapers, magazines, novels, academic subject material).
- If your level is X or A, you should read mainly unsimplified material (i.e. newspapers, magazines, novels, academic subject material). We recommend that you also try some of the Graded Readers at your level.
- If your level is B or C, you should read unsimplified material (as above) and simplified material (i.e. the Graded Readers at your level) in equal proportions.
- If your level is D, E or F; you should read mainly simplified material (i.e. the Graded Readers at your level). Of course, you can also try reading unsimplified material if you wish.
APPENDIX 3

STUDENT J DECEMBER 1993

I remember my childhood. I liked to make models, such as aeroplanes, cars and ships. I also liked to draw plans of a building surrounded by trees, flowers and a stone path, and to feed my chicks with the neighbour's children. My mother and I used to play on the slide in the garden.

From 5 to 11 I went to primary school. I was always playing ballgames. I enjoyed sports day at my school. I often used to go swimming, play table tennis and tennis, and then I liked to fly a kite on the roof of my house. Sometimes I rode my bicycle in the garden.

STUDENT J MARCH 1994

A Treasured Possession

One day, I was tidying up my things in my room. When I picked up a silver antique metal box, I remembered it contained lots of valuable things. After opening the box, my eyes stared at only one thing, it was a beautiful diamond ring. The diamond ring, which was made of two letter Cs back to back in three different colours, gold, silver and rose red, has fourteen tiny brilliant diamonds. When I lifted it up, I recalled the story of the diamond ring.

I got it as a Christmas present from my friend two years ago. It was a memento of our friendship because my friend was going to study in America. It was very nice of her to help to improve my English in Hong Kong and we always shared our problems and our opinions on everything. We were very, very close friends. It was very hard to use any words to describe our friendship. When I knew she had to continue her studies there, we were very depressed. It was because we wouldn't easily be able to keep in touch with each other anymore. Therefore, we gave a present to each other, so I got this diamond ring, which is of great importance to me. Now, we still keep in touch with each other.

APPENDIX 4

BOOKS RECOMMENDED BY STUDENTS AT A BOOK AFTERNOON 7.2.94

Level D
Sent Away
The Woman in Black
The Bronte Story

A Christmas Carol
Frankenstein
Robinson Crusoe

Level C
The Moon is Down
Don't Look Now
Persuasion
Sherlock Holmes

The Lady in the Lake
A Taste of Murder

Level B
The Doll's House
Farewell My Lovely
Wuthering Heights

Shelley
Rebecca
The Big Sleep

Level A
Rebecca

Jamaica Inn

Bleak House
The African Queen
The Inspector Calls

Earrings from Frankfurt
Charlie Chaplin
K's First Case

A Self Access Extensive Reading Project using Graded Readers