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Vocabulary Learning through Extensive Reading

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Reading is a source of learning and a source of enjoyment. It can be a goal in its own right and a way of reaching other goals. As a source of learning, reading can establish previously learned vocabulary and grammar; it can help learners learn new vocabulary and grammar, and through success in language use it can encourage learners to learn more and continue with their language study. As a goal in its own right, reading can be a source of enjoyment and a way of gaining knowledge of the world. As learners gain skill and fluency in reading, their enjoyment can increase.

However, because of the nature of reading and learning from reading, a reading development program needs careful planning and monitoring. There are two major language-based reasons for this. Firstly, reading requires considerable knowledge and skill. This knowledge includes recognizing the letters and words of the language, having a large vocabulary and substantial grammatical and textual knowledge, being able to bring knowledge of the world to the reading task, and developing a degree of fluency with the reading skill. Secondly, learning through extensive reading is largely incidental learning, that is, the learners' attention is focused on the story not on items to learn. As a result, learning gains tend to be fragile and thus it is important to have quantity of input with substantial opportunities for vocabulary repetition.

This quantity of input needs to be close to 500,000 running words per year, which is equivalent to twenty-five graded readers a year, or one and a half substantial first year university text books, or six unsimplified novels. This needs to continue over several years. In the following discussion of planning and running an extensive reading program, we will look at the conditions for learning that need to exist, the quantities of text that learners need to read, how to keep learners motivated, and the principles that teachers should follow in running the program. The article is organised around a set of guidelines for planning a program.

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Understand the Goals and Limitations of Extensive Reading

Extensive reading is a form of learning from meaning focused input. During extensive reading learners should be interested in what they are reading and should be reading with their attention on the meaning of the text rather than on learning the language features of the text. Extensive reading can occur within class time (Elley and Mangubhai, 1981), or outside of class time. In their very useful survey of extensive reading, Day and Bamford (1998) characterise extensive reading as involving a large quantity of varied, self-selected, enjoyable reading at a reasonably fluent speed.

There is now plenty of evidence (Elley, 1991) that reading can result in a variety of substantial proficiency gains. However, it is important to note that these gains require considerable time and effort. In their classic study of extensive reading, Elley and Mangubhai (1981) had 8-10 year old learners read in class time for no more than 30 minutes per day each school day for almost eight months. The results were remarkable with learners making the equivalent of 15 months gain in eight months. The time involved was, however, substantial, but not beyond the means of an English as a foreign language situation. Waring and Takaki (2003) used vocabulary tests at three levels of difficulty ("Which of these words did you meet in the text?", a multiple-choice test, and translation test) to measure vocabulary learning from a graded reader. The three tests all involved the same 25 words. These three tests represented different levels of vocabulary knowledge. On the word form recognition test, the learners scored 15.3 out of 25, on the multiple-choice test 10.6, and on the translation test 4.6. These results show that only a small number of words (4.6 out of 25) were learned well, but a much larger number (10.6 and 15.3 out of 25) are taken a useful step towards being known. Further meetings with these words should strengthen and enrich this knowledge. The Waring and Takaki study also showed that over a period of time without further reinforcement, the vocabulary gains from reading are gradually lost. It is thus important to make sure that there are repeated opportunities to meet the same vocabulary in reading, and these repeated opportunities should not be delayed too long. Teachers considering setting up an extensive reading program need to understand very clearly that such a program needs to involve large amounts of reading and needs to continue for a long time. If this happens, the results will be impressive.

Find Your Learners' Present Vocabulary Level

Extensive reading can only occur if 95%-98% of the running words in a text are already familiar to the learner or are no burden to the learner (Hu and Nation, 2000). Hu and Nation investigated learners' comprehension of a fiction text at different levels of known word density. Where only 80% of the running words were known, no learners gained adequate comprehension. Where 90% or 95% of the words were known, a few learners gained adequate comprehension but the majority did not. The degree of comprehension was predictable from the density of unknown words and the optimum density was 98%. That is, no more than two words in every 100 running words should be unfamiliar to the reader. If we relate these densities to the vocabulary size needed to read an unsimplified fiction text, we find that learners would need a vocabulary of well over 2,000 words to read the easiest fiction novels written for teenagers (Hirsh and Nation, 1992), or a vocabulary of well over 4,000 words to read novels written for adults. The clear message from this is that for learners of English to do extensive reading at the elementary and intermediate stages of proficiency, it is essential that they read graded readers that have been specially prepared for learners of English. It is only by reading such texts that learners can have the density of known words that is essential for extensive reading.

Graded readers typically cover a range of levels beginning at around 300-500 words and going to around 2000-2500 words. There are six vocabulary levels in the Oxford Bookworms series.

Level	New words	Cumulative words
1	400	400
2	300	700
3	300	1,000
4	400	1,400
5	400	1,800
6	700	2,500

In order to know at what level learners should begin reading, it is useful to measure their receptive vocabulary size. This involves measuring their knowledge of the most frequent 2,000 words of English. The test developed by Schmitt, Schmitt and Clapham (2001) provides a means of doing this.

Provide Plenty of Interesting and Appropriate Reading Texts

We have looked briefly at the Oxford Bookworms series. This is an excellent and well established series of graded readers with many interesting titles. However, it is only one of many series of readers that are available (see Hill, 1997; Thomas and Hill, 1993; Hill and Thomas, 1988, 1989 for reviews). Hill (in Day and Bamford, 1998) says that there are around 1,650 graded readers in print. These are in over 40 different series. Unfortunately, the levels in these series are not identical with each other in number of levels, the amount of vocabulary at each level, or the vocabulary lists on which they are based. But this is not as serious as it sounds. There seems to be quite a big overlap between the vocabulary covered in the different series, and any particular reader can only make use of some of the words available at a particular level.

It is thus not important to stick to only one series of graded readers. It is much better to choose titles from any of the available series that are interesting and well written. Hill (in Day and Bamford, 1998) provides a very useful list of what he considers to be the best graded readers and this is a very valuable starting point in building a collection of graded readers. Because there is no recent report of what readers learners enjoy most, it is worth collecting data on this.

If an extensive reading program is to be successful, it must provide books that learners are interested in reading or that will develop their interest in reading. Teachers' judgements of books are likely to be different from learners' judgements of books, and learners' judgements should get priority.

Set, Encourage and Monitor Large Quantities of Extensive Reading

Research on the vocabulary covered by different numbers of graded readers (Nation and Wang, 1999) suggests that learners need to read many books in order to gain control of the high frequency words of English, preferably at the rate of a graded reader every one or two weeks. There are several techniques and procedures that can be used to motivate learners to do this and to keep a record of their reading.

In an extensive reading program, reading should be the main activity and other activities should occupy only a very small proportion of the time so that time is not taken away from reading. For this reason, most extensive reading programs do not require learners to do elaborate comprehension tests or exercises on the books they read. Generally learners are simply required to fill out a short

record form indicating the name of the book they have just read, its level, the date, how long it took to read, and a brief comment on the quality of the book (Was it a good story? Would you recommend it to others?). Twelve or more of these short report forms can be printed on one piece of A4 paper, allowing the learner and teacher to see at a glance how much has been read over what period of time.

Additional activities to motivate reading may take a bit more time. There may be a slip of paper in the back of each book for learners to record their opinion of the book. Other learners considering whether to choose to read this book could look at this slip of paper to see what others thought of it.

Oral book reports involve a learner presenting a commentary on a book to the class or a reading group. The idea behind such reports is not to give away the story of the book but to encourage others to read it. These reports can follow a set format covering questions like what was the name of the book, what type of story was it (a mystery, a love story, etc), where and when was it set, was it enjoyable, who would like to read it?

Discussion groups can bring learners together who have all already read the same book. Such a group should consist of four or five learners. As a result of their discussion they may prepare an oral book report or a written review to present to others in the class. They then decide what book they will discuss at their next meeting.

Book awards are like the Oscars for movies. After the extensive reading program has been running for some time, learners can vote on what they thought were the best books they read. Labels can be stuck on the front of the winning books to indicate to those who have not read them that they are well worth reading.

As well as books getting awards, learners can get awards for the quantity of reading that they do. After reading five books, they can be given an award, after ten books, they can receive a further award, and so on.

The way books are displayed can encourage reading. Publishers now try to make graded readers as attractive as possible with colourful covers sometimes showing a scene from the movie based on the book. Displays can be arranged to show the different types of stories, the range of levels, new books, and books that have won awards or have been highly recommended.

The aim of all these activities is to keep learners excited about reading and wanting to read more.

Support and Supplement Extensive Reading with Language Focused Learning and Fluency Development

An extensive reading program is only a part of a language course. Teachers need to make sure that other parts of the course are supporting extensive reading and that extensive reading is supporting other parts of the course.

One of the most useful ways in which the course can support extensive reading is by providing training in reading faster. A speed reading program involves the learners reading texts that are well within their language knowledge, that is, they contain no unknown vocabulary or grammatical features. Their reading of each text is timed, and their speed and comprehension scores are recorded on graphs so that learners can easily see their progress and are encouraged to increase their reading speed. Properly designed courses are usually very successful with most learners soon doubling their speed. A good reading speed is around 300-400 words per minute. Most learners without training read at less than 100 words per minute. The essential requirements for such a course are (1) easy texts (Nation and Soulliere, 1991), (2) regular practice (about three times a week), and (3) a push to read faster.

One way an extensive reading program can contribute to proficiency development is through vocabulary growth. This can be encouraged in extensive reading by making the vocabulary learning more deliberate and less incidental. Care needs to be taken, however, that this vocabulary learning goal does not overshadow reading for pleasure. Here are some brief suggestions that may boost vocabulary learning from extensive reading. Before reading a text, the learner quickly skims it and selects five or six words to focus on while reading. This has the effect of raising consciousness about some words and thus making them more noticeable when they are met again in the text.

While reading, the learner can collect new words that are repeated in the text to put on word cards for later deliberate study. A more formal follow up to this is for learners to report to the class on a word that they met while reading - explaining what it means, how it was used in the text, its word parts, its etymology, and any unusual features about it.

The use of a dictionary while reading should also have positive effects (Knight, 1994), although this tends to increase the time it takes to read a text (Hulstijn, 1993).

After reading a graded reader, the learner can spend a few minutes reflecting on new words that were met in the book and looking back in the book to revise them.

Help Learners Move Systematically Through the Graded Reader Levels

Research on the occurrence of vocabulary in graded readers can provide useful guidelines for planning such reading. Nation and Wang (1999) in a detailed study of 42 graded readers in the Oxford Bookworms series reached the following conclusions, considering only the aim of vocabulary learning.

- 1 Learners should read at least one graded reader every week, no matter what level they are reading at. This rate of reading allows unknown vocabulary to be repeated before the immediately previous occurrence is forgotten.
- 2 Learners should read at least five books at a level (say Level 2) before moving to books at the next level (Level 3). This number of books provides a chance for most of the vocabulary introduced at that level to occur.
- 3 Learners should read more books at the later levels than the earlier. This is because the vocabulary of the earlier levels occurs very frequently in the books at the later levels. Books at the later levels thus provide good conditions for learning all the vocabulary of the graded reader series.
- 4 Learners should read at least 15-20 readers in a year. This number of graded readers provides plenty of repetition for the vocabulary and provides the opportunity to meet most of the vocabulary. A program where learners read only three or four graded readers per year is not an extensive reading program.
- 5 Learners may need to directly study the new vocabulary at the earlier levels or at least make use of a dictionary when starting to read books at a particular level. This is because the density of unknown vocabulary tends to be a little high at the earlier levels.

- 6 Learners should work their way through the levels of graded readers as the later levels provide excellent conditions for establishing the vocabulary of the earlier levels.

Extensive reading programs do not run as neatly as the guidelines described above. Learners often choose books according to their appeal without considering the level of the reader. So they may read a level 2 reader, then a level 5 reader, then a level 3 reader and so on. This does not matter too much as long as plenty of enjoyable reading is done. Some learners begin reading with enthusiasm and then stall when they see that the reading takes time and effort. Some learners have great trouble getting started. Others read very slowly and laboriously and are reluctant to increase their reading speed. All of these problems have solutions and teachers need to monitor learners' progress carefully by looking at their record sheets, observing them while they are reading, and talking with them individually about their goals, progress and problems.

Simplified and Unsimplified Texts

For some teachers and researchers, graded readers are seen as being unauthentic, watered-down versions of richer original texts. Vocabulary simplification is also seen to result in more complicated grammar, as what could be neatly expressed in one word is now expressed in several simpler words. These criticisms are largely true of the poorest quality graded readers but there are many high quality and very high quality graded readers (Day and Bamford, 1998).

Publishers and editors of graded readers would say that the most convincing argument in favour of graded readers is that there are numerous interesting well-written books, many of them not simplifications but original language learner literature. This is undoubtedly true. From a vocabulary learning perspective, however, the most convincing argument is that the vocabulary control required by the graded reader schemes results in texts where there are very few low frequency words and the high frequency words of the language get plenty of repetition. As a contrast, let us compare a simplified version of *Dracula* (written within a 700 word vocabulary at level 2 of the Oxford Bookworms series) and the original version (Nation and Deweerd, 2001).

Table 1: A comparison of the vocabulary in the simplified and original versions of *Dracula*

	Simplified version	Original
Length of the books	7,957 words	161,425 words
Percentage coverage by the first 2000 words of English plus proper nouns	98.6%	92.8%
Total word families	556	5,640
Number of word families not in the first 2000 occurring only once in the book	19	3,038

Table 1 shows that the books differ greatly in length. The simplified version is much shorter than the original. The coverage by the first two thousand words and proper nouns shows how accessible each book would be for a learner with a limited vocabulary. Proper nouns are included because these do not need to be known before reading the text. 98.6% coverage means that there is just over one unknown word in every 100, 92.8% coverage means that there are just over seven unknown words in every 100, or almost one in every line of the text. This is a heavy vocabulary load.

The total word families in the book is another indication of how accessible the book would be to a learner with a limited vocabulary. This figure is directly affected by the different lengths of the books, but even if the lengths were the same, the number of word families in the simplified version would be much less than in the original (The first 7,957 running words of the original *Dracula* contains 1,435 word families). The most striking contrast, however, is in the number of words occurring only once in the books. The original version has a very large number and when we look at the kinds of words that make up this number, it is easy to see how difficult and unrewarding it would be for an elementary or intermediate language learner to try to read such books. Here are some of the 3,038 words that only occur once in the original of *Dracula - solicitude, therapeutics, physiognomy, mundane, lugubrious*. If these words were looked up in a dictionary while reading, they would not help with later parts of the text because they occur only once. They are also likely to be forgotten before they are met again in other texts. Eventually, advanced learners may need to learn these words, but they should be learned when the more useful high frequency words are already very well known. Unsimplified texts have a very heavy vocabulary load

and for the purposes of extensive reading do not set up the conditions needed for successful learning from meaning focused input.

The Extensive Reading Program

This discussion of guidelines for an extensive reading program has focused mainly on learning conditions and research and has not given attention to more practical factors like how to organise and manage a library of graded readers, how to obtain graded readers, and how many are needed to set up a library. These issues are well covered in Day and Bamford (1998). The main purpose of this article is to convince teachers that it is worthwhile setting up an extensive reading program, making it a substantial, obligatory part of a course, and persisting with it in an organised way. The results of such programs (Elley, 1991; Waring and Takaki, 2003) are impressive.

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