

The Need for Extensive Reading in Language Education

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Introduction

By and large, most foreign language educators see a place for reading in their courses and curricula, and instructors commonly use reading textbooks that provide a number of short texts with many follow up comprehension questions and language-focus activities. However, scholars and proponents of extensive reading (ER) see its practice as much more than one part of a language program. As we will see below, these scholars view ER as an essential, foundational, and even indispensable aspect of good language programs. But why is this?

First, it is helpful to view ER within the framework of communicative language teaching where ER facilitates language acquisition through meaningful communication. Bamford and Day (1997, p. 8) state: “Extensive reading can be considered a communicative meaning-oriented, ‘real reading’ approach to reading instruction in contrast to form-oriented, discrete skills, or translation approaches.” That said, practitioners of ER do not have to disparage a focus on language and grammar, but we do need to value real communication as a means to promote language acquisition. Moreover, we can view the communicative aspect of ER as an expression of a clear language acquisition theory summarized as follows: “We acquire languages by understanding messages.” This, of course, is Krashen’s (1982) input ($i + 1$) hypothesis stated in natural language. Though Krashen has his detractors, who criticize an overemphasis on input (White, 1987) or who favor the necessity of output (Swain, 1993), or who advocate the conscious noticing of input (Schmidt, 1990), we take a minimalist, moderate, and eclectic view of input. That is, input is not supreme, but it is central, and there is no escaping it; and most importantly, ER

is one of the most effective ways to get it, particularly for Japanese students learning English. In addition, it is generally agreed and non-controversial that input is an essential element of the language acquisition process. Thus, according to Ellis and Shinitani (2013, p. 174): “Input is addressed in just about every theory of L2 acquisition reflecting the general assumption that no learning can take place unless learners have access to input.” Indeed, input plays a central role in the incidental learning hypothesis (Schmidt, 1995), the noticing hypothesis (Schmidt, 2001), and in the frequency hypothesis (Hatch & Wagner-Gough, 1976).

Although we value sound theory supported by strong empirical research, the goal of this paper is to succinctly introduce the benefits of ER to teachers and administrators who are not fully convinced of its benefits or to those who are not yet practicing it, and we have tried to add a new sense of clarity in the form of two mnemonic acronyms, BEE & MASTERFUL, which hopefully make the benefits more memorable. Hence, a clear question can help us focus our priorities: “What is the most important improvement a teacher can make to a language course?” Paul Nation (2013a, p. 18) answers: “adding an extensive reading program.” Nation amplifies this by stating: “An extensive reading program is the cornerstone of any well thought out language course” (p. 75). Other experts echo this view, claiming that ER is the “best-supported technique we have in the field of second-language pedagogy” (Krashen, 2003, p. 26) and “a completely indispensable part of any language program” (Waring, 2006, p. 44). In his comprehensive examination of L2 reading theory and practice, William Grabe (2009, p. 328) claims: “There is now considerable evidence from many sources to demonstrate that reading extensively, when done consistently over a long period of time, leads to better reading comprehension as well as improved abilities in several other language areas.” In the sections that follow, we present some of the evidential pointers that support these claims.

What is ER: BEE

First, we need to clearly define ER. Many good definitions exist (Waring, 1997; Grabe & Stoller, 2011; Day & Bamford, 2002; Nation, 2013a), but for simplicity and clarity, we will use the acronym BEE to define ER: ER is Big,

Easy, and Enjoyable. The word “Bee” can mean “a meeting for communal enjoyment,” and ER is a communal activity as readers commune with other readers, authors, and characters in stories. When we say that ER is “Big,” it helps to clearly define “big” as an amount. In their longitudinal research, Nishizawa, Yoshioka & Fukada (2010) claim that when students have read 300,000 words in English, they start to feel comfortable in reading English; they begin to increase reading speed and mainly use the target language for comprehension. This is also the threshold when these readers begin to see significant gains on the standardized TOEIC test. While many students and teachers may feel that 300,000 words is an overwhelming, unrealistic goal, it is not an unreasonable amount. For example, if a student reads just over 100 words per minute for about 15 minutes per day, she can reach 300,000 words in about six months, and if she increases her reading speed to 150 WPM, she can reach this goal in about 10 minutes per day. It is important to remember that ER is not hard, grammar-translation reading, but rather enjoyable and easy reading.

When we say that ER is “Easy,” we mean that readers need to know 98 percent of the words in a text. With this level of lexical coverage, readers can read texts without assistance (Hu & Nation, 2000; Nation, 2006; Laufer & Ravenhorst-Kalovski, 2010; Schmitt, Jiang & Grabe, 2011). For reading shorter texts, 95 to 98 percent lexical coverage may suffice for ER, and 90 percent coverage seems to be the outer limit of intensive reading. However, when teachers require readers to read with 70 to 90 percent lexical coverage or less, we are neither promoting extensive reading, nor intensive reading, but rather “torture reading.” In contrast, when we say that ER is “Enjoyable,” we mean that students (a) enjoy it because it is not too difficult; (b) because they find some extrinsic benefit from reading, such as getting helpful information; or (c) because they find reading the text intrinsically motivating, where reading is its own reward.

With these basic guidelines, we can now ask where ER fits in a language course. Though Nation calls it a “cornerstone,” he places ER within the four-strands of a language course, which consist of “(1) meaning-focused input, (2) meaning-focused output, (3) language-focused learning, and (4) fluency development” (2013a, p. 8). Nation suggests that teachers balance the four-

strands equally, and ER fits in the fluency strand and the meaning-focused strand along with extensive listening and other forms of input. Though Nation advocates what we may call a balanced view, others such as Krashen (2003) and Mason (2011) would strongly emphasize comprehensible input over the other strands. Either way, ER remains the cornerstone and the important change we can build into language courses.

Developing MASTERFUL Language Through ER

With our minimalist definition in place, we can look at the benefits of ER related to language acquisition and a life of learning, as summarized in this sentence and acronym: “ER helps students become MASTERFUL with English.” Thus, through ER, learners will experience the following benefits:

Motivation:	ER motivates reading and learning.
Attitude:	ER improves attitudes.
Syntax:	ER develops learner syntax and grammar.
Thinking:	ER improves thinking and writing.
Ears:	ER benefits listening skills.
Riches:	ER enriches the physical, emotional, and intellectual life.
Fluency:	ER increases reading automaticity and fluency.
Uber-text:	ER employs the supreme form of content, namely stories.
Lexis:	ER improves vocabulary and word knowledge.

(M)OTIVATION: ER motivates readers. Though motivation is psychologically complex, involving multi-dimensional factors (Mori, 2002; Takase, 2007; Komiyama, 2013), we must never lose sight of its simple side: human beings are intrinsically motivated to enjoy compelling stories. When we find a story interesting, the message compels us to keep reading. This is intrinsic motivation, where reading itself is its own reward. Harry Potter alone shows the compelling magic of books, having sold 400 million copies and making JK Rowling the first billionaire author in history (Guinness World Records Limited, n.d.). Though English learners may not be able to easily read Harry Potter, they can enjoy and find intrinsically motivating graded readers and online graded stories that motivates them to read more. This is because ER is primar-

ily (but not only) pleasure reading, and Nell reminds us exactly what this means: “Pleasure reading is a form of play. It is free activity standing outside ordinary life; it absorbs the player completely” (1988, p. 7). ER is the kind of play that brings wonderful benefits, which is why Krashen (2015, p. 34) announces “the end of motivation as a relevant factor in language education.” He means that we don’t need to cajole our students into believing it is worth the effort to learn English. Rather, we simply need to give learners compelling input (Krashen, 2011) that naturally motivates them.

(A)TTITUDE: While motivation concerns what moves students to do ER, attitude concerns how students evaluate it. For example, Yamashita (2013) has shown that after doing ER, students felt a decrease in anxiety and an increase in comfort while reading. Takase (2012) reported that remedial reluctant readers who disliked English gained more favorable attitudes about English after completing a three-month ER program. Attitude and motivation influence each other. In one large study, 224 elementary students were asked (a) if they liked to read, and (b) if there was one book or experience that sparked their interest in reading (Von Sprecken, Kim & Krashen, 2000). Nearly all students claimed to enjoy reading (96 percent), and over half (53 percent) claimed that one book sparked their interest in reading. This is the idea of the “homerun book” (Trelease, 2001), which can change learner attitudes about reading and motivate them to read playfully. Because ER is like play, we can understand that language learners like ER more than grammar study. Dupuy (1997) showed that learners of French overwhelmingly preferred extensive reading as more enjoyable than grammar instruction, which they viewed as dull and having short-lived effects, and they perceived ER as more beneficial than grammar study for language acquisition. Many teachers argue that deliberate grammar study has its place, but this study reminds us that learners can “learn a language without deliberately studying the grammar” (Nation, 2013a, p. 107).

(S)YNTAX: Extensive reading develops grammar and syntax. There is a glaring weakness in most grammatical syllabi that fail to have students do spaced review, recycling, and interleaving of grammatical points (Brown & McDaniel, 2014). Spaced review and recycling are common terms, but the idea of interleaving may not be as well-known. It refers to mixing up items for

retrieval. For example, ER students do not just focus on one grammar point like in a traditional lesson. Instead, they must passively retrieve and interleave numerous grammatical, lexical and morphological features as they read. Thus, extensive reading, by its very nature, allows readers to do receptive spaced review, recycling and interleaving of linguist features while they read for pleasure. This may be the main reason why learners acquire grammar through ER. In one case study, Mason (2011) shows that one learner increased 180 points on the TOEIC test after 217 hours of extensive reading, 30 hours of extensive listening, and zero deliberate grammar study. That amounts to a .73 increase on the TOEIC for every hour of doing ER. Nishizawa (2010, et al.) reported that students who read three million words improved on the TOEIC just as much as students who studied abroad for one year. In addition, Gradman & Hanania (1991) found that for a group of 101 pre-university ESL students, extra-curricular reading (ER) correlated most highly with TOEFL performance.

(T)HINKING: Good writing is good thinking. Good readers are good writers, and this axiom is backed up by anecdotal evidence from great writers. According to Stephen King (2000, p. 142), for example: “If you don’t have time to read, you don’t have the time (or the tools) to write. Simple as that.” This fits with Krashen’s “Reading Hypothesis” (Krashen & Lee, 2004), which includes the idea that the more one reads, the more one acquires the written language. While Krashen may downplay the role of deliberate writing instruction, ER can improve writing skills, and many studies back this up (Lee & Hsu, 2009; Tsang, 1996; Cunningham & Stanovich, 1991). For example, Hafiz and Tudor (1989) did a three-month ER experiment to see if reading for pleasure would improve reading and writing skills. “The results showed a marked improvement in the performance of the experimental subjects, especially in terms of their writing skills” (p. 4).

(E)ARS: ER benefits listening skills. A skeptic might raise a red flag at this claim; however, it is reasonable to assume that ER would not worsen listening skills and would at least build a foundation for listening. Nevertheless, the facts are more encouraging than our natural skepticism. In Elley’s (1992) famous “book-flood” research done in 103 schools in Singapore, experimental students outperformed control students in vocabulary, grammar, reading,

writing, and listening comprehension. In addition, students don't just read books silently. They also read aloud and they can listen to stories and audio books, so ER and listening have an organic relationship with each other. Students can easily listen to audio books online or on portable devices, and teachers can do extensive listening activities in class, on the condition that listening texts are easier than the "easy" 98 percent coverage level stated above; that is where listeners have at least 99 percent vocabulary coverage for the texts to which they listen.

(R)ICHES: ER enriches physical, emotional, and intellectual life. Language educators often focus on the linguistic benefits of ER, but reading is bigger than that. For example, reading is a key to international development. According to the literacy NPO Room to Read (roomtoread.org, n.d.), if all children in low-income countries gained readings skills in school, 171 million people would escape poverty. In the U.S., good readers tend to have higher paying jobs, and poorer readers find it harder to better their careers (Iyengar, 2007). Readers of literary fiction improve theory of mind and emotional intelligence (Kidd & Castano, 2013). In addition, literacy improves health and gender equality for women (Burnett & Packer, 2005), and good readers show better health-related knowledge and behavior (DeWalt & Pignone, 2005). Moreover, the lowest levels of literacy in developing countries correlate to the poorest health conditions (Weiss, et al, 1991). Stanovich and Cunningham (1991, 1993, 2003) have shown repeatedly that good readers have better practical knowledge, larger vocabularies, and more general intelligence. Obviously, we must note that these results from L1 research do not necessarily generalize to L2 learning. However, they point to the need for research in L2 students, and they also inspire and remind us of the general value of reading. In short, reading is vital for personal and international development, employment, health, as well as practical, verbal, general, and emotional intelligence. If reading only gave linguistic benefits, that would be enough, but we can remind students of these "riches" as they read in their native languages and in English.

(F)LUENCY: ER increases reading automaticity and fluency. Extensive reading increases reading fluency because "until students read in quantity, they will not become fluent readers" (Bamford & Day, 1997, p. 6). Nation (2013a) advocates three kinds of reading: 1) intensive reading, 2a) extensive reading,

and 2b) reading for fluency, where reading for fluency is a subcategory for ER. Students can develop reading fluency through a program of speed-reading activities where the “goal is to read the text as quickly as possible with a good level of understanding” (Nation, 2013a, p. 54). While most EFL learners read at speeds around 100 words per minute, Nation claims that through a speed-reading program, they “can easily bring their speed up to around 200 words per minute” (p. 61). In addition, students can improve reading fluency simply through ER, particularly through paired oral reading activities of easy texts.

(U)BER-TEXT: The supreme form of textual content, namely stories.

The coinage “uber-text” may never stick, but it reminds us that stories are uber-texts for language learners. Humans crave fictional stories because they match our Darwinian desires “to survive and reproduce” (Pinker, 2009, p. 541). People everywhere spend an exceptional amount of time telling and enjoying stories. It is thus a “cross-culturally universal, species-typical phenomenon” (Tooby & Cosmides, 2001, p. 7). We naturally prefer and better recall information in story form (Haven, 2007) because stories are “psychologically privileged” (Willingham, 2004) and match our cognitive preferences for narrative-like episodic memory (Tooby & Cosmides, 2001). Stories are perhaps the best form of “compelling input” (Krashen, 2011) available to the human mind. Numerous authors clearly define story for us (Haven, 2007; McKee, 2010; Cron, 2012). Gottschall’s version of “story’s master formula” (2012, p. 52) is especially succinct: “Story = Character + Predicament + Attempted Extrication,” with the most important element being predicament or *conflict*. Because story is psychologically privileged, it naturally motivates students, and ER is an ideal way for learners to experience the power of uber-texts for content and language learning.

(L)EXIS: ER improves vocabulary and word knowledge. Krashen has long argued that learners acquire lexis by input (and ER) alone, and that deliberate study doesn’t result in unmonitored and acquired vocabulary knowledge (1989; McQuillan & Krashen, 2008). But Cobb (2008) argues that learners cannot acquire enough lexis from reading alone because of time constraints. We know from the “Riches” section above, that learners can acquire vocabulary incidentally through ER. But is ER enough, or must students study words? Fortunately, both are true. At the 2013 Extensive Reading

World Congress, Nation (2013b) stated that learners can learn the top 9,000 English words by reading alone if they read at a moderate fluency of at least 150 words per minute. However, learners do not have to acquire vocabulary by reading alone. As Nation (2013a) also advocates, learners can study vocabulary cards using retrieval and spaced repetition to bootstrap their word skills. And if they do extensive reading, they will indeed acquire vocabulary, for as Stanovich (1986) has shown, more than oral language, we can trace differences in vocabulary size to amount that people read.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have briefly summarized the known benefits of extensive reading for those who might be skeptical or for those who have not yet used ER in their courses or curricula. That is, we have attempted to justify Nation's (2013a) claim that doing ER is the most important change we can make in language programs. If we have succeeded, then the next step is to encourage our readers to see the Extensive Reading Foundation's practical "Guide to Extensive Reading" (n.d.), which can be found at erfoundation.org, and which is available in English, Japanese, Korean, Spanish, and Farsi. We also recommend Hill's (1997) short article, "Setting up an extensive reading program: Practical tips."

For those interested in future research, we suggest the following questions: Can extrinsic motivators turn into intrinsic motivation, so that reading amount requirements actually supplement or help foster reading for pleasure? As demonstrated in L1 studies, does reading fiction in the L2 positively emotional intelligence? Are stories (uber-texts) read in the L2 also more memorable than non-stories? Of course, there are many more questions, but these interest us the most.

In sum, we have condensed the basic tenets of an ER program in the word BEE, that ER is Big, Easy, and Enjoyable. As stated above, the threshold for Big reading is 300,000 words. We define Easy as 98 percent vocabular coverage, and we liken Enjoyable reading to the idea of play. The word MASTERFUL summarizes nine benefits of ER, and we think that these benefits sufficiently demonstrate that ER is a cornerstone of good language teaching and the most important improvement we can make in any language course. Lastly,

these benefits should give ample justification to make that “most important improvement” for any educator who has yet to experience the benefits of extensive reading.

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