



# The Journal of Asia TEFL

<http://journal.asiatefl.org/>

e-ISSN 2466-1511 © 2004 AsiaTEFL.org. All rights reserved.



## Extended Reading: A Teacher-Directed Alternative to Extensive Reading

**Michael Fields**

*University of Delaware, USA*

### Introduction

Extensive reading programs have been shown to improve reading proficiency faster than traditional intensive reading programs alone (Nakanishi, 2015). Extensive reading programs are sometimes done *instead of* intensive reading courses, with reading done in class in an informal atmosphere, or alternatively, *in addition to* an intensive reading program, as a self-moderated out-of-class activity.

While the study described in this paper was done in the United States, it is directly relevant to Asian students and teachers, and to Asian teaching contexts, in two ways. First, extensive reading is very commonly used in Asia, and is perhaps nowhere more widespread than in Japan (Mason & Krashen, 1997; Reed & Goldberg, 2008; Stoekel, Reagan, & Hann, 2012; Nakanishi 2015). Second, the study was conducted with primarily Asian students so likely the results can be directly applied to Asian learning environments.

Sustaining an extensive reading program requires highly self-motivated students. If students entering IEPs are less motivated to study independently, it is doubtful whether they would follow through with an extensive reading program where outcomes are not directly assessed. The length of texts in an extensive reading program may also serve to frustrate many unmotivated students, so rather than fostering enjoyment of reading, such a program may only serve to discourage them more.

This report will review a technique, developed at an IEP in a large public university in the United States, which seeks to bridge the gap between intensive and extensive reading, and make independent reading of longer texts accessible to less motivated students at the intermediate level. This technique, called *extended reading*, also presents authentic texts to students who may otherwise limit their reading to textbook passages. Rather than asking students to read entire books (usually graded readers) which are below their level, extended reading requires students to independently read much shorter selections (4 to 10 pages weekly), and take short quizzes that test comprehension of main ideas. Results of a small-scale experimental-control design research project indicate that gains in reading proficiency are made by students using the extended reading method over those whose reading is restricted to classroom managed intensive reading.

## Literature Review

### Reading

While definitions of and reasons for reading may vary, one irrefutable concept is the centrality of meaning: we read in order to understand something (Nuttall, 1996). More specific reasons for reading include finding, integrating, evaluating, and critiquing information; in addition, we read for pleasure (Grabe, 2009). Reading foreign language texts, as opposed to native language texts, may be difficult for a variety of reasons, such as difficulty in understanding the code (either the script or the grammar), because the concepts being dealt with in the text are unfamiliar, because references to assumed knowledge are unfamiliar, or because the vocabulary is unknown (Nuttall, 1996). While difficulty in reading in a foreign language is usually a combination of these factors, all of these include difficulty accessing meaning.

Successful readers – whether in their own or a foreign language – activate schemata, are actively involved, and use a combination of bottom-up and top-down strategies. Schemata, or knowledge of the world that we bring to the text, refers to both domains of experience (such as knowing what happens when we take a bus, eat in a restaurant, or visit a doctor), and the vocabulary which may be encountered in any domain. Schemata help us to understand cohesion in a text. Through activating schemata and making assumptions and predictions while reading, readers take an active role in reading and are engaging in an interactive process with the writer (Nuttall, 1996).

Every reader engages in bottom-up processing through recognition of letters, words, and sentences in order to construct meaning from the text. At the same time, readers employ top-down strategies, such as making predictions, understanding paragraph and text structure, and making inferences in order to interpret a text. The simultaneous use of both strategies is referred to as interactive reading (Nuttall, 1996). Good L2 reading has both learning and linguistic properties in which the central goal is comprehension; it can be defined as being rapid, efficient, purposeful, strategic, and flexible (Grabe, 2009).

Teachers support both bottom-up and top-down processes through pre-reading activities. By pre-teaching vocabulary, bottom-up processes are supported. Through pre-reading discussion of the topic, teachers help to activate schemata, allowing students to predict content (Macalister, 2011).

### Intermediate Reading

While the goals of a reading program may vary based on level, the focus of this study is on reading at the intermediate level, which may be defined as

Enabl[ing] students to enjoy (or at least feel comfortable with) reading in the foreign language, and to read without help unfamiliar authentic texts, at appropriate speed, silently and with adequate understanding. (Nuttall, 1996, p. 31)

The intermediate level is where language, including reading, blossoms from tightly controlled, lexically and grammatically simplified short texts on a limited range of topics into a much wider range of themes, more complex structures, and vocabulary which may come from almost any non-academic genre. The Common European Framework of Reference describes advanced beginning readers (those at the A2 level) as understanding short, simple texts written in straightforward language using high-frequency vocabulary. For intermediate readers (at the B1 level), the demands of reading jump to comprehending straightforward texts at a satisfactory level, understanding relevant material for everyday communication, recognizing main points of newspaper articles, understanding printed instructions, and understanding information and feelings conveyed in personal letters (Council of Europe, 2008).

## Problems in Reading and their Causes

It is unclear whether difficulties of reading in L2 are a function of a language acquisition problem or a carry-over from L1 reading habits. What is clear is that L2 learners are not generally tested for their L1 reading abilities (Alderson & Urquhart, 1984). Students who come from backgrounds with poor L1 reading habits may themselves downplay the importance of reading skills and do very little reading on their own (Smithies, 1983). Reading is a culturally alien concept to some students (Grabe, 1991).

Frustration with L2 reading and the inability to increase proficiency are attributed to the vicious circle of weak readers (Nuttall, 1996). Readers who do not understand tend to read slowly. This in turn leads to not enjoying reading, with the result that they do not read much. This lack of practice leads to little understanding, and the cycle continues.

On the other hand, those who are better able to read, and with less frustration, follow the path of the virtuous circle of good readers (Nuttall, 1996). When comprehension occurs, they will tend to enjoy reading, and consequently read more quickly. This in turn leads to reading more, thus enjoying reading, which develops comprehension, and so the cycle continues. The key to developing this virtuous circle is the practice of extensive reading.

## Extensive Reading

Extensive reading is an approach that gives maximum freedom to students to read independently and as much as possible. In a traditional extensive reading approach, students read at least a graded reader every week in order to maximize reading practice. Students select their own texts, usually at a level slightly below their linguistic level. They are encouraged to read rapidly without using dictionaries. They read for pleasure and comprehension, and traditionally are not tested on what they have read. The teacher's role is to monitor their reading, keep track of their reading habits, and manage the program. Goals of such a program include developing positive attitude, confidence, and motivation, increasing reading speed and fluency, increasing word recognition ability, and understanding purpose in reading (Day & Bamford, 1998).

Simplified texts may be preferable to authentic texts. If authentic texts are too difficult, students will go back to old habits of focusing on deciphering the code, using dictionaries, not reading fluently, and developing negative feelings about reading. The level of *i minus 1*, just under their linguistic ability, is defined as students' comfort zone, and students should start out reading at this level, though over the course of an extensive reading program they should *ladder up* and read more difficult graded texts (Day & Bamford, 1998). Students should also read texts that interest them, and abandon them if their interest falls. They should not try to push ahead with difficult or uninteresting texts, as this may reduce the pleasure of reading (Day & Bamford 1998).

Successful results have been widely reported with extensive reading programs, with most research being carried out in Asia. Significant gains were made on TOEFL scores after a two-month extensive reading program in Singapore, and the use of extensive reading was a better indicator of reading progress than the amount of previous English study (Renandya, Rejan, & Jacobs, 1999). In Japan, low level readers who participated in extensive reading programs nearly caught up with high level readers in traditional intensive reading programs. This was shown to be true in both more prestigious and less prestigious institutions (Mason & Krashen, 1997). Yamashita (2007) demonstrated the use of extensive reading in Japan for improving general reading comprehension even when there was no corresponding increase in general linguistic ability, and Bell (2001) showed that the use of extensive reading in an in-class program in Yemen improved test scores more than a traditional intensive reading program. A comprehensive analysis (Nakanishi, 2015) of existing studies on extensive reading outcomes has shown positive results for the practice, indicating that extensive reading improves reading proficiency more than textbook-based study alone. Brown (2009) goes so far as to recommend that textbooks should promote extensive reading by including extensive reading material and by approaching reading with extensive

reading-style activities, rather than with the common focus on intensive reading.

Whether or not to test reading comprehension as a means of evaluating an extensive reading program remains controversial. Traditionally, extensive reading is not tested, as it would detract from motivation and the pleasure of reading (Day & Bamford, 1998). However, in a Japanese university, Reed and Goldberg reported that attitudes about reading did not differ between students taking quizzes on extensive reading and those who did not (Stoekel, Reagan, and Hann, 2012). Without short quizzes that help regulate commitment to reading, the gains made from an extensive reading program may never have the chance to materialize if students do not undertake the reading in the first place (Mathewson, 2004). Stoekel, Reagan, and Hann (2012) have argued in favor of the use of short quizzes focusing on main ideas as a way to assess extensive reading. In a study in Japan, they showed that four affective factors (discomfort, anxiety, linguistic value, and practical value) were not affected by testing, while intellectual value was actually positively correlated with testing.

## Extended Reading

Many students enrolled in university-based IEPs hope to eventually pursue studies in US universities. By the intermediate level, they should have some exposure to authentic reading materials. Students transitioning from lower-level controlled reading contexts to intermediate contexts may sometimes fail to begin reading independently, for meaning, and at the appropriate speed. Without attempting to read authentic texts, required ESL textbook selections may be their only exposure to reading in English. Students who do little reading in L1 are especially disadvantaged, because they are expected to learn new behaviors through a foreign language experience. While an extensive reading program may seem the obvious answer, many students simply will not participate in a program which requires a high degree of independent work and does not test outcomes traditionally.

To improve reading outcomes, an alternative program of *extended reading* was developed and implemented on a trial basis in a number of intermediate classes at the University of Delaware's English Language Institute. *Extended reading* is a teacher-directed variation of extensive reading, where students regularly read authentic materials independently, outside class, and take weekly comprehension quizzes. *Extended reading* was designed for classroom populations who may not voluntarily or actively participate in a traditional extensive reading program. The goal of *extended reading* is to read accurately for well-stated main ideas while gaining exposure to longer, authentic texts. *Extended reading* exposes students to a variety of genres written for a general audience, focuses on general comprehension, and provides more reading practice. *Extended reading* is done alongside traditional intensive reading.

While extended reading may be more teacher-controlled and directed than a traditional extended reading program, it allows students to read four to five times the amount of material as a reading course which relies solely on textbook-driven intensive reading practice. Extended reading should be viewed as fitting between intensive and extensive reading.

TABLE 1  
*A Comparison of Intensive, Extended and Extensive Reading*

	Intensive reading	Extended Reading	Extensive Reading
level	At level	Above level	Below level (i – 1)
materials	Constructed texts	Authentic texts	Graded readers
selection	teacher	teacher	Students
assessment	Formal assessment	Teacher-made quizzes	No assessment
purpose	To develop reading accuracy through vocabulary development, skimming, scanning, reading for main ideas, details, and inferences, understanding text organization, identifying opinions	To develop reading fluency through more reading practice, exposure to longer authentic texts	To develop reading fluency through more reading practice, to develop a positive attitude about reading
quantity	10-20 paragraphs/week	4-10 pages/week	Graded reader/week +

The extended reading program is conducted in the following way. Reading passages are teacher-selected, and all students receive the same text. Reading materials can be selected from an assortment of media including newspaper and magazine articles, easy-to-read novels, websites, FAQ pages, and travel brochures. They are authentic and unmodified, written for a general audience. Texts tend to be between four and ten pages, and are slightly above the reading level in their textbooks. There is very little explanation or discussion of the reading when the students receive the material, though it is usually introduced with a brief description of the source and the general topic, and to provide a reason for reading and encouragement.

Students have one week to read each text independently outside class. They are encouraged to use dictionaries, mark up the text, discuss it with classmates, and do whatever they need to do to understand the text. They are reassured that though the readings may be difficult, they are expected to understand the main ideas, not the entire text.

A short quiz on the reading passage is given at the end of each week. Quizzes consist of ten to fifteen multiple choice or true-false questions, which focus on main ideas and may also include prediction of vocabulary from context. Students may use their texts while taking quizzes. The quizzes are not meant to measure development of reading skill, but to encourage reading, so that skill development has a chance to take place.

To evaluate the effectiveness of the extended reading program, a small-scale study was undertaken among several intermediate level classes at the University of Delaware's English Language Institute, spanning the course of three eight-week sessions.

## The Study

### Research Design

The study was carried out over the course of three eight-week intermediate reading-writing classes in a university-oriented IEP at the University of Delaware's English Language Institute. Students received twenty hours per week of instruction in reading, writing, and grammar. Two instructors participated in the study. During each session, one class was designated as the experimental group, and the other as the control group. Classes ranged in size from 10-14 students, composed mainly of Saudi and Chinese students, though other nationalities including Korean, Colombian, Turkish, and Kuwaiti were also represented. Ages ranged from 18-32, with men and women being approximately equally represented. Both the experimental and the control group teachers delivered the course as usual, with similar amounts

of in-class intensive reading instruction, corresponding with course goals. This amounted to between 10 and 20 paragraphs per week of reading from standard intermediate-level ESL textbooks. . The experimental groups was also required to do weekly extended reading assignments followed by quizzes, while the control group was not.

The English Language Institute used the ACT COMPASS English as a Second Language Placement Test (reading section only) as an end of level proficiency exam for reading. Reading test scores from the previous session were accessed in order to compare pre-and post-exposure scores. Students who had not been enrolled in the program the previous session were deselected, making the total numbers for the study smaller than the class sizes. Table 2 presents student numbers in the experimental and control groups.

TABLE 2

*Numbers of Students Participating in Study, per Eight-week Session*

	Experimental groups	Control groups
Session 1	8	6
Session 2	12	7
Session 3	8	10
Totals	28	23

## Results

Data were analyzed in three ways. First, students were divided into an experimental and a control group. The average pre- and post- exposure scores were taken for the combined total of each group. Students in the experimental group began with an average of 69.6 on COMPASS, and ended, after eight weeks of the extended reading program, with an average of 74.4, indicating a gain of 4.8 points on the test. Students in the control group went from a pre-exposure score of 75.05 to a post-exposure score of 77.0, showing only a 1.95-point gain in their COMPASS score. While differences between experimental and control groups could be supported statistically ( $t(50) = 3.85 p < .05$ ), what is clear is that in both cases the gains were modest.

The experimental and control groups were then divided into two further groups: those who read above or below the class average. This was determined by dividing the classes into those who fell above and below the pre-exposure COMPASS reading score mean for their group. In this case, the results are more meaningful. For students reading below the class mean, the experimental group average score rose from 58.7 to 66.7 from pre- to post-exposure, an increase of 8.0 points, while control group average score rose from 65.92 to 70.08, indicating an average increase of 4.17 points. This represents a statistically significant difference between the experimental and control groups ( $t(21) = 1.9 p < .05$ ).

Students in the experimental group who began the class reading above the mean scored an average of 76.87 on the COMPASS, with a post-exposure score of 79.53, a difference of 2.67. The control group's pre-exposure average was 87.22, with a post-exposure score of 86.22, meaning that they had actually dropped in score by 1.0 point. No statistically significant difference can be shown between these two sets of scores ( $t(23) = 6.01 p < .05$ ). Table 3 presents a summary of the results.

TABLE 3  
Mean Increase in COMPASS Test Reading Scores

	Experimental groups	Control groups
All results	4.8	1.95
Below-level readers	8.0	4.17
Above-level readers	2.67	-1.0

### Limitations

Several obvious limitations exist with this study. First is the relatively small size of the data pool. This study should be replicated with larger sample sizes. Second is the fact that only two teachers participated in this study: the experimental groups were taught by the same teacher, and the control groups were taught by another teacher. More randomized studies should be undertaken to verify findings from this study.

Additionally, apart from assigning students into groups reading extensively (experimental group) or not (control group), reading instruction could not be controlled for in this study, although it was assumed that both teachers followed course guidelines regarding intensive reading materials from the textbook. Also, student reading outside of class could not be controlled or measured. However, it was assumed that the amount of extra reading beyond the scope of the study would have been similar between the experimental and control groups.

### Conclusion

For intermediate students, those who read below level are well-served by an extended reading program. Their post-exposure standardized test scores differed significantly from those who did not participate in an extended reading program. Students who read below level and who did not participate in the program also increased their reading scores, indicating that below-level readers do benefit in some way by a reading course which focuses solely on intensive reading. However, they are being underserved, compared to what they could potentially accomplish through an extended reading program. Students reading below level should be exposed to a greater *quantity* of material for reading practice. Based on the results of this study, a traditional, textbook-driven intensive reading program alone does not seem to benefit below-level readers as much as increasing the quantity of material read.

This study indicated that intermediate students who read above their level are not benefitting from a program based solely on intensive reading, or an additional extended reading program. Gains for both the experimental and control groups were quite modest, compared to gains made by their classmates reading below level. These students need more challenging reading and/or a greater quantity of reading in order to make progress in their reading proficiency.

This study implies that intermediate level reading teachers could divide classes into two groups, those reading above and those reading below class averages. Then each group can be given independent reading activities which would benefit them the most. Those who read below level may well be served by an extended reading program. Those who read above level may be better served by a traditional extensive reading program, or by a combination of extensive and extended reading programs. Alternatively, teachers may identify those students who do not read at level, and attempt to intervene using an extended reading program. But ultimately, all learners may benefit from the practice of adding an extended reading program to an existing ESL reading class.

## The Author

*Michael Fields* is an instructor at the University of Delaware, USA. His interests include extensive reading, assessment, language and culture, and engagement and cultural integration.

English Language Institute  
University of Delaware  
E-mail: mrfields@udel.edu

## References

- ACT COMPASS English as a Second Language Placement Test. Retrieved from <http://www.act.org/compass/tests/esl.html>
- ACT (2007) COMPASS English as a Second Language Placement Test [reading section]. Iowa City: ACT
- Alderson, C., & Urquart, A. H. (1984). *Reading in a foreign language*. Essex, UK: Longman.
- Bell, T. (2001). Extensive reading: Speed and comprehension. *The Reading Matrix*, 1(1). Retrieved from <http://www.readingmatrix.com/articles/bell/>
- Brown, D. (2009). Why and how textbooks should encourage extensive reading. *ELT Journal*, 63(3), 238-245.
- Council of Europe. (2008). *EAQUALS BANK—CEFR Comparison*. Retrieved from [http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/education/elp/elp-rreg/Source/Key\\_reference/EAQUALSBank\\_CEFR\\_EN.pdf](http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/education/elp/elp-rreg/Source/Key_reference/EAQUALSBank_CEFR_EN.pdf)
- Day, R., & Bamford, J. (1998). *Extensive reading in the second language classroom*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Grabe, W. (1991). Current developments in second language reading research. *TESOL Quarterly*, 25(3), 375-406. Retrieved from <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/3586977>
- Grabe, W. (2009). *Reading in a second language: Moving from theory to practice*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Macalister, J. (2011). Today's teaching, tomorrow's text: Exploring the teaching of reading. *ELT Journal*, 65(2), 161-169.
- Mason, B., & Krashen, S. (1997). Extensive reading in English as a foreign language. *System*, 25(1), 91-102. [http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0346-251X\(96\)00063-2](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0346-251X(96)00063-2)
- Mathewson, G. C. (2004). Model of attitude influence upon reading and learning to read. In R. B. Ruddell & N. J. Unrau (Eds.), *Theoretical models and processes of reading* (5th ed.) (pp. 1431-1461). Newark, DE: International Reading Association.
- Nakanishi, T. (2015). A meta-analysis of extensive reading research. *TESOL Quarterly*, 49(1), 6-37.
- Nuttall, C. (1996). *Teaching reading skills in a foreign language*. Oxford, UK: Heinemann.
- Renandya, W.A., Rajan, B.R.S., & Jacobs, G.M. (1999). Extensive reading with adult learners of English as a second language. *RELC Journal*, 30(1), 39-60. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/003368829903000103>
- Smithies, M. (1983). Reading habits at a third world technological university. *Reading in a Foreign Language*, 1(2), 111-118.
- Stoeckel, T., Reagan, N., and Hann, F. (2012). Extensive reading quizzes and reading attitudes. *TESOL Quarterly*, 46(1), 187-98. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1002/tesq.10>
- Yamashita, J. (2007). The relationship of reading attitudes between L1 and L2: An investigation of adult EFL learners in Japan. *TESOL Quarterly*, 41(1), 81-105.