Should you be Teaching Reading Intensively or Extensively?

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to articulate more clearly some of the major differences between intensive reading and extensive reading. These two approaches to reading differ in terms of their theoretical orientations and pedagogical applications, and because of that, they produce differential effects on students' reading and literacy development. Although both forms of reading are important in improving students' reading proficiency, L2 teachers are more familiar with intensive reading and are more willing to invest more time on intensive than extensive reading. For a more balanced approach to teaching reading, teachers should become more familiar not only with the theoretical underpinnings of extensive reading but also the practical aspects of implementing an extensive reading programme such as how to choose interesting books for the library, how to organize the borrowing system, how to monitor and assess students' reading and how to build students' interest and motivation in reading.

Keywords: intensive reading, extensive reading, L2 reading and motivation

1. Introduction

There are two main approaches to teaching reading in the L2 classroom: intensive reading and extensive reading. Although both are important in facilitating L2 reading development, teachers seem to be more familiar with the former than the latter, and are more willing to invest more time on intensive reading than extensive reading. This is despite the fact that in the past 20 years or so, the number of publications on ER that supports its implementation in ELT has grown exponentially. Both theoretical accounts and empirical research studies on ER have been catalogued by extensive reading archivists and can be freely accessed by both researchers and practitioners. Over 600 abstracts of extensive reading works (i.e., books, book chapters, journal articles, theses, etc.) are available in the Extensive Reading Foundation website: http://erfoundation.org/wordpress/er-bibliography/. Summarizing years of research about the impact of extensive reading on language learning, Bamford and Day (2004, p.1) conclude:

Good things happen to students who read a great deal in the foreign language. Research studies show they become better and more confident readers, they write better, their listening and speaking abilities improve, and their vocabularies become richer. In addition, they develop positive attitudes toward and increased motivation to study the new language.

The purpose of this paper is to articulate more clearly some of the key differences between intensive reading and extensive reading so that teachers can have a deeper understanding of these two forms of reading and become more confident in implementing them in their teaching. In the following sections, I discuss the differences in terms of learning aims, teaching materials, learning tasks and activities, roles of the learners and teachers, the theories of learning behind these two forms of reading and their differential impacts of language learning.

2. Aims of learning

Intensive reading is often defined as reading for detailed information. The main aim of reading is to help students extract information from a reading passage. As the process of comprehending a text is not always straightforward for L2 students, the aims of the lesson also include teaching students some language elements and comprehension-related skills and strategies. The aims of intensive reading can be summarized by the acronym LIST (MacAlister, 2011):

L – Language goals. These refer to the teaching of unfamiliar words and expressions found in the text and complex grammatical constructions that may cause reading difficulties.

I – Idea goals. These refer to the teaching of the contents of the text, both the main ideas and important details.

S – Skills and Strategies goals. These refer to teaching students skills and strategies that would help them read with greater comprehension (e.g., predicting, summarizing and checking for comprehension).

T – Text structure goals. These refer to teaching students various text structures (e.g., compare-contrast, cause-effect) to help them read the text more efficiently.

Extensive reading, on the other hand, is reading for general information and is often associated with the enjoyment that one derives from reading. When L2 students read extensively, they choose to read easy and enjoyable materials in order to build their fluency

in reading. The aim is not to teach specific language skills or comprehension strategies but to help them become fluent readers. According to the Guide to Extensive Reading published by the Extensive Reading Foundation (2011, p.1) the main aim of an extensive reading is for students to R E A D:

Read quickly and

Enjoyably with

Adequate comprehension so they

Don't need a dictionary

In order to get the most benefit from extensive reading, students must read regularly and abundantly. Research shows that, while variables such as variety and availability of reading materials are important, it is the quantity of reading that correlate most highly with students' reading improvements and general language learning gains (Renandya, Jacobs and Rajan, 1999). Thus, amount of reading is a key aim of an extensive reading programme. Also, since sustained motivation is needed for students to read regularly over a period of time, increasing students' motivation is also an important aim. Students who are motivated are likely to read more; and students who read more tend to be more motivated too. There is a reciprocal relationship between motivation and extensive reading (Day and Bamford, 1998).

3. Materials

Because of the different aims, the materials used in intensive reading and extensive reading differ a great deal. In intensive reading, the materials often contain language that is above (and sometimes beyond) students' current level of competence. The reading materials used in intensive reading tend to be short and dense in terms of content and language features. Students often have to read several times, often with the help of the teacher or a bilingual dictionary, in order to make sense of the surface meaning of the text and also to interpret its implicit meanings.

In extensive reading, the materials are generally less demanding. They may be just slightly above students' levels; but for weaker students who have had very little experience reading texts in English, the materials may also be at or even below their levels. Giving these students an opportunity to read very easy texts is a pedagogically sound practice. When they experience frequent success in reading, they become more confident and are likely to want to read more books. So, what is important to remember is that students need to be able to read a text with minimal or no help from others. If students read texts that contain a lot of unfamiliar language, they will not be able to read with sufficient speed and may not enjoy what they are reading.

Intensive reading materials are usually short, roughly about one or two pages long. The contents are not always interesting, partly because the students have no say in the selection of the intensive reading materials. More often than not, students find the topics of the school reading materials unappealing as they can't make meaningful connections to the contents.

In extensive reading, the materials tend to be longer (often a whole storybook) and more interesting in terms of contents. A variety of reading materials are made available and students get to choose the materials they like to read. This way, students are more likely to read with ease and enjoyment.

4. Task and activities

In intensive reading, teachers prepare a host of tasks and activities before, during and after reading. In the before-reading phase, teachers organize various activities to arouse students' interest and motivation and to get them to activate their schema by engaging them in prediction activities. In the during-reading phase, students are encouraged to take notes, make connections, visualize the text by building mental images, monitor and evaluate their comprehension. After they have finished reading, they check their comprehension by responding to teacher-prepared comprehension questions. This can then be followed by some language-related practice such as vocabulary building or grammar exercises. Because of the numerous activities that students have to do, some reading scholars (e.g., Field 2002) have questioned the relevance of these activities in supporting students' reading development. While these activities are not without values, they should not take up too much instructional time. L2 reading scholars (e.g., Day and Bamford, 1998; Renandya and Jacobs, 2016) believe that reading is best learned through reading, and not through doing reading-related activities.

In contrast to intensive reading, the main, if not the most important, activity in extensive reading is reading. Students read their selections in any way they like. They can stop reading at any point and continue reading at a later time. They can also finish reading the whole book in a day (if it is a small book), a few days or a week (if the book is longer). When they finish reading their selections, they should select new books to read. The teacher's job is to encourage students to do more reading, and not give students 'work' to do. In short, reading should lead to more reading.

Post reading activities may be organized for accountability purposes, i.e., to check if students have actually read the materials. However, we need to keep in mind that the main purpose of post-reading activities is to motivate students to read more books, and should be designed in such a way that they are not seen as an unnecessary burden by the students. Activities should be cognitively and affectively appealing so that students develop positive attitudes towards reading and associate reading with enjoyable activities. After reading a selection, students can choose to do any one of the following post-reading tasks:

- Design a poster that captures the gist of the book

- Role play the main event in the story
- Describe the most exciting scene in the story
- Draw a mind map depicting the plot of the story
- Think of 5 adjectives to describe the book
- Create a 5-line poem (haiku)
- Describe a scene that makes you laugh, feel sad, angry etc.
- Change the ending of the story
- Change the gender of the main character and discuss how the story would develop and end

5. Assessment

In intensive reading, students are typically assessed in terms of their ability to respond to comprehension questions. Some of these questions assess lower level comprehension skills such as recalling information explicitly stated in the text and higher level comprehension skills such as inferring relationships of ideas not explicitly stated in the text and synthesizing information presented in the reading passage. Other questions are language-related and assess students' understanding of important words, phrases and sentences found in the text. Thus, the assessment reflects the aims of intensive reading discussed above.

Since the aim of extensive reading is to nurture students' interest in reading so that they read more widely and enjoyably, the assessment usually focuses on students' level of reading motivation and the amount of reading they have done over a semester or whole academic year. To measure change in students' reading motivation, teachers can use Malloy et al's (2013) *Motivation to Read Profile* questionnaire. This instrument, based on Eccles' (1983) expectancy value theory of motivation, assesses students' perception about their self-concept and the value they place on reading. Students who score high on these two variables are considered to have a higher reading motivation than those who score low. Teachers can also have frequent informal conversations with the students to gauge their level of motivation, to find out more about the types of books that they like to read and the kinds of after-activities that students want to do to boost their nascent interest in reading. Schools in Singapore, for example, regularly organize various school-wide activities (e.g., meet the author sessions, story-telling sessions, character dressed-up sessions, weekly or monthly assembly presentations) to get more students to read extensively.

One way to assess the amount of reading is to use a reading log where students record the titles and the number of pages (or number of words) of the books they have read. The ideal number of books students should ideally read is not yet known, but extensive reading scholars suggest that students should read a book per week or every two weeks. Reading one book per week seems a lot, but since books for extensive reading are graded according to student proficiency levels, this suggestion is quite reasonable. Graded readers for lower proficiency

students are quite thin so it does not take a long time to finish reading a book. For higher proficiency students, the books can be slightly longer but since their reading skills have improved, they can also read the book fairly quickly.

6. Learner roles

Good readers, according to Freebody and Luke (1990), make use of four roles to comprehend a reading text more effectively. The four roles are: code breaker, text participant (or meaning maker), text user and text analyst. As a code breaker, students need to develop efficient word recognition skills so that they can read the text with ease and accuracy. As a text participant or meaning maker, they should understand the text by making use of their prior knowledge, by making connections between sentences and also between the various parts of the text. As a text user, they need to know the purpose of the text and how they should respond to the text. Finally, students play the role of text analyst in order to comprehend the text at a deeper level (e.g., to uncover the author's biases and subjective opinions on an issue). These four reader roles are usually taught in intensive reading so that students learn the language elements of a text, comprehend what they read, understand why it was written and can approach the text with a critical eye.

In extensive reading, students are not explicitly taught these four roles. It is not that these roles are unimportant, but it is just that the aim of extensive reading is different from intensive reading. As students typically read highly readable texts (i.e., independent level texts), there is little need for students to 'break the code' so to speak. Since students are already familiar with the language features found in the text, the aim of reading is to help them consolidate their previously learned language items and to give them ample opportunities to encounter familiar language in their reading. Through repeated experience with familiar language found in a wide variety of text, students can read faster, with greater comprehension and enjoyment. Also, students do not need to be explicitly taught to be a text participant, text user or critical reader. These roles are expected to emerge naturally as students gain more experience in reading.

7. Teacher roles

Teachers play vastly different roles in the two forms of reading. In intensive reading, teachers select reading materials for focused teaching of language skills, comprehension skills and strategies. They also take an active role in organizing student learning in the reading lesson. In extensive reading, teachers don't really 'teach' the students. Rather, their job is to create motivating environments for students to want to read more. They make available and accessible a wide variety of reading materials, help students select relevant and appropriate reading materials, motivate weaker readers to read very easy materials, encourage stronger readers to read more challenging books, monitor students' reading logs and organize sharing sessions where students can discuss the contents of the books they have read with other students. A critically important role of the teacher in nurturing a healthy reading habit in the

students is for the teacher to become a good model of a reader. By showing the students that they themselves are enthusiastic readers who read regularly, they stand a higher chance of motivating their students to read extensively in English.

8. Theory of learning

The two forms of reading are based on different learning theories. I summarize below the theoretical assumptions that underpin intensive and extensive reading.

In intensive reading, instruction follows the 'reading to learn' principle (Extensive Reading Foundation, 2011). Students read a short text in order to learn about information of various types, including topics of general interest (e.g., human emotions, communications, relationships etc) or those related to their academic subjects (e.g., social studies, literature and science). The reading theory that is often used to explain the comprehension process is that of social constructivism (Maclaughlin, 2012). According to this theory, the construction of meaning involves students making use of their prior knowledge (schema) in order to make sense of what is contained in the text. Comprehension is facilitated when students are able to make meaningful connections between what they know and what is in the text. Deeper comprehension is also possible when students read closely and use appropriate comprehension strategies such as visualizing, questioning, connecting etc. The social element of the theory suggests that students can extend and deepen their comprehension by interacting with other students. The opportunity to listen to different views from others enables students to monitor, revise and also refine their comprehension.

The main theory behind extensive reading can be traced to Krashen's (2011) comprehension hypothesis. According to this theory, "we acquire language and develop literacy when we understand messages, that is, when we understand what we hear and what we read, when we receive "comprehensible input" (Krashen, 2011, p. 81). Students become skillful readers when they read a lot of reading materials that are easy to comprehend. After a period of time (anywhere between 6 to 12 months), students begin to build up a stronger linguistic base which enables them to read more fluently (i.e., they can recognize words and read them in meaningful groups more rapidly) and with greater comprehension. Their general and topical knowledge also increases, which in turns helps them comprehend texts more effectively. Research shows that sustained exposure to comprehensible reading materials improves not only students' reading proficiency (Jeon and Day, 2016; Nakanishi, 2015) but also overall language proficiency (Renandya, Jacobs and Rajan, 1999).

9. Impact on language learning

It is clear from the discussions above that the two forms of reading are based on different theoretical orientations and are implemented differently in L2 reading. Because of this, their impact on language learning is likely to be different. A summary of the impact of intensive

reading and extensive reading on students' reading and language development is presented below:

Intensive reading	Extensive reading
• Students can use a variety of reading strategies to help them comprehend texts at a deeper level	• Students can become fluent readers, reading texts with ease and appropriate speed.
• They can become efferent reader and are skillful at extracting information from texts	• They can become aesthetic readers and find reading personally meaningful
• They become adept at answering comprehension questions.	• Their self-concept and value about reading may increase, which in turn nourish their reading motivation.
• They can perform well on traditional reading comprehension tests	• They may develop a healthy and positive reading habit
• They may develop negative attitudes towards language learning and stop reading once they finish school.	• They may become life-long readers who read not because they have to, but because they want to.

Since both types of reading facilitate students' literacy development, one might ask why teachers tend to pay more attention to intensive reading than extensive reading. Renandya and Jacobs (2016) provides the following reasons.

- Limited resources. Some schools may not have sufficient resources to purchase books and other materials for extensive reading. Finding curriculum time for extensive reading has also been cited as the main reason for not implementing extensive reading. Brown (2009) for example, notes, "The main practical concerns regarding ER are to do with cost, lack of time, monitoring students' reading, managing the library of books, guiding students to choose appropriate books, and getting students engaged in reading" (p. 240).
- Longer time investment. The language learning benefits of extensive reading are not immediately observable. It may take six to twelve months of daily reading for students to see the impact of extensive reading. Because of schools often feel the pressure of producing more immediate results, the delayed effects of extensive reading are not very appealing to them.
- Although many language teachers have intuitive understanding of the importance of extensive reading, they may not be too familiar with the practical aspects of implementing a school-wide extensive reading programme, e.g., how to choose relevant reading materials, how to monitor student reading, how to sustain students' motivation, etc.

- Unlike intensive reading, extensive reading is not formally assessed. Thus extensive reading is sometimes seen as lacking pedagogical legitimacy.

10. Conclusion

The purpose of this paper is to spell out more clearly the key differences between intensive reading and extensive reading. The paper has shown that the two forms of reading are informed by different theories of learning and, as a result, have differential impacts on students' reading proficiency. Research shows that the two forms of reading are needed to facilitate students' long term literacy development. Intensive reading helps students become strategic readers who can use their linguistic and cognitive resources to comprehend a text at a deeper level. Extensive reading helps students become good and enthusiastic readers and enable them to reap numerous linguistic as well as nonlinguistic benefits including improved reading skills, larger vocabulary and perhaps more importantly, wider and deeper knowledge about the world. As we all know, people who read widely are more interesting to be with and are more able to relate and connect with other people.

Note:

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