

# Extensive reading in ELT: Why and how?



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# What is extensive reading?

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Extensive reading (ER) has several defining characteristics which make it different to most reading that happens in ELT classrooms. First, the texts that are used are generally relatively easy for the learners to understand, with few unknown words. This is important because it means that longer texts can be used than would be the case in most classroom situations. A further characteristic is that ER should be an enjoyable experience, with learners free to select texts on topics they find interesting. Comprehension checks are typically kept to a minimum, as the process of reading is seen as more important than the understanding of particular details and also because such checks can be anxiety provoking and lessen the pleasure of reading.

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**Extensive reading should be an enjoyable exercise, with learners free to select texts on topics they find interesting.**

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Day and Bamford, who have been very influential in the research and promotion of ER in second language (L2) contexts, produced a list of ten principles<sup>1</sup> that they felt encapsulated its key tenets:

1. The reading material is easy.
2. A variety of reading material on a wide range of topics must be available.

3. Learners choose what they want to read.
4. Learners read as much as possible.
5. The purpose of reading is usually related to pleasure, information and general understanding.
6. Reading is its own reward.
7. Reading speed is usually faster rather than slower.
8. Reading is individual and silent.
9. Teachers orient and guide their students.
10. The teacher is a role model of a reader.

We will refer to these principles at various points throughout the paper. However, as Macalister<sup>2</sup> points out, ER is not strictly defined and may manifest itself differently in different classrooms (if it is used at all), with some practitioners focusing on the amount of text read, some on the amount of new text read (therefore excluding re-reading), and some focusing on the time spent reading.

ER in L2 learning is not a new practice and can be traced back to the 1920s<sup>3</sup>. However, despite evidence of the benefits of ER, it remains a relatively underused language teaching technique.

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1 Day and Bamford, 2002  
2 Macalister, 2015  
3 Day and Bamford, 1998

# Benefits of extensive reading

The research literature clearly demonstrates that ER gives great benefits in both L1 and L2 contexts. Numerous studies show that the amount of reading engaged in correlates with overall reading development<sup>4</sup>, and in particular, improvements in reading fluency. However, the benefits of ER are not limited to reading alone. Learners who engage with ER tend to be more motivated students, and this may in part be because ER promotes learner autonomy, which itself can have a powerful impact on motivation<sup>5</sup>.

In addition, many studies have shown that extensive reading also contributes to vocabulary development<sup>6</sup>, which obviously benefits the performance of all language skills. We could also speculate that seeing vocabulary items in context, as happens in ER, helps students' understanding of issues like collocational frequency and register, and that therefore the quality of a learner's vocabulary knowledge may improve, as well as the quantity.

Some researchers have also seen benefits from ER in terms of writing development<sup>7</sup> and grammar acquisition. Cognitive models of learning suggest that a great deal of input is required for acquisition to take place and ER can be a good source of this. More associative models of language learning, such as connectionism, suggest

that the more frequently associations between items are encountered, the stronger the links will become, and so this again would support the use of ER.

As well as the linguistic benefits of ER, learners are also likely to gain an increased knowledge of the world<sup>8</sup> and other cultures. In state education systems, this means that ER in an L2 context could be used to support the broader curriculum objectives if non-fiction texts were used to support other classroom content. For example, learners could read about science in L2 as a way of reinforcing knowledge gained in science class. Background knowledge of the subject derived from traditional subject teaching would support reading, although some grading of the reading material would likely still be required. The reading would provide a second encounter with the classroom content, thus making it more likely to be remembered. However, the use of reading in this way requires teacher direction and so can impinge upon learner autonomy (and motivation). Therefore, a balance needs to be maintained between the development of reading skills and the reinforcement of content knowledge.

Overall, research suggests that ER not only supports reading skills development, but also overall linguistic proficiency<sup>9</sup>.

4 L1 studies include Guthrie, Schafer and Huang (2001). L2 studies include Tanaka and Stapleton (2007), cited in Grabe, 2009.

5 Deci and Ryan, 1985

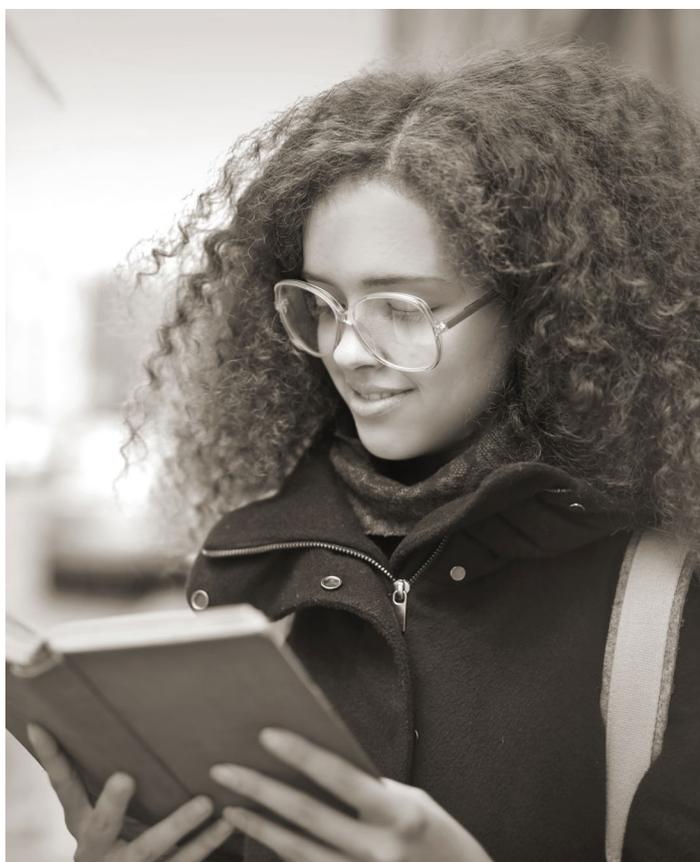
6 e.g. Nagy, Herman and Anderson, 1985; Horst, 2009

7 e.g. Hafiz and Tudor, 1989

8 Hedgcock and Ferris, 2009

9 Ellis and Shintani, 2014, p.185

# Barriers to extensive reading



Despite the support for ER from research findings, it remains a relatively underused language teaching technique<sup>10</sup>. There are several, sometimes related, factors that may explain this:

- In many teaching contexts there is a suspicion of learner autonomy, with a preference remaining for teacher-led classes.
- In many syllabuses reading development is subordinated to the explicit teaching of grammar and vocabulary.
- Where reading is included in a syllabus, fluent reading (on which ER is likely to have most impact) is rarely the stated goal, with the belief that it will naturally follow from the more intensive reading usually associated with classrooms.
- While many teachers believe in the efficacy of ER, many do not implement it in their own programmes<sup>11</sup>, most probably because of time constraints and the need to cover other areas of the syllabus.
- ER can be very resource intensive and it can be difficult to find appropriately graded material.
- Learners may not see reading as a pleasurable activity (Day and Bamford's fifth principle) and so do not engage fully with ER programmes<sup>12</sup>.

<sup>10</sup> Renandya and Jacobs, 2002, ask, for example, 'Extensive Reading: Why aren't we all doing it?'.  
<sup>11</sup> Macalister, 2010  
<sup>12</sup> Watkins, 2018

# Implementing extensive reading

The second of Day and Bamford's principles for ER states that there must be a wide range of material on a variety of topics available. This is clearly hugely important and is the cornerstone to introducing any ER programme.

As well as providing appropriate material, teachers also need to 'guide and orient' their learners (ninth principle), so this would include explaining the ER programme and its requirements, as well as ensuring that learners understand the potential benefits of ER. If learners understand the benefits, it is hoped that this will improve participation in the programme, regardless of whether they see reading as pleasurable.

**A wide range of material on a variety of topics is the cornerstone of any extensive reading programme.**

The tenth principle requires teachers to act as role models as readers. This may include sharing reading experiences, as well as taking part in silent reading activities in class. The rationale is that learners will be influenced by, and will pick up, the good L2 reading habits of their teachers. Grabe<sup>13</sup> emphasizes the need to make time for extended silent reading in class time so that good reading habits can be encouraged, which will lead to further reading outside class. However, as we saw above, it can prove difficult for teachers to find the necessary time in class.

<sup>13</sup> Grabe, nd

# Providing extensive reading material

In L2 learning contexts, most ER material has to be graded to meet the first key principle set out by Day and Bamford, which states that reading should be relatively easy. Various publishers have introduced series of graded readers that demonstrate that it is possible to create material for even low proficiency levels. These may include both fiction and non-fiction works, and on top of these, ER course designers could also use non-traditional forms of classroom material, such as magazines, comic books, and graphic novels.

However, it is sometimes argued that simplified material will not provide the quality of input required for second language acquisition. Allan<sup>14</sup> did a study on simplification in which she investigated lexical chunks in graded readers, comparing them to chunks in the British National Corpus and her conclusion was that graded material can in fact provide sufficient features of authenticity to be valuable to learners. The literature on reading development also provides support for the use of simplified texts<sup>15</sup>, with particular advantages seen in the development of reading fluency.

There has been some research on the differences between fiction and non-fiction texts in reading programmes,

although most studies are based on L1 contexts. Studies have tended to find that non-fiction texts are more difficult to read than fiction<sup>16</sup>. This may be due to the density of text or more complex discourse patterns and linking being used in non-fiction.

Overall, it does seem that throughout age groups at school, girls outperform boys in reading<sup>17</sup>, not least because boys tend to read less than girls. When boys read fiction it is often claimed that they are drawn to male characters<sup>18</sup> although Gupta<sup>19</sup> disputes this perception. Her quantitative data suggests that boys were equally drawn to male and female characters. Interestingly however, she did find that teen females, were drawn to books with female lead characters.

Gupta ascribes the success of her Hooked reading app (aimed at males and females) to three key principles:

- Reading material that is comprised of short sections.
- Reading material that is delivered to people's phones.
- Stories based entirely round instant messages from character to character<sup>20</sup>.

14 Allan, 2009

15 e.g. Grabe and Stoller, 2011

16 MacLean and Chapman, 1989; McQuillan and Conde, 1996; Topping, Samuels and Paul, 2008

17 Boffey, 2016

18 Jones, 2005

19 Gupta, 2017

20 Not unlike epistolary novels of the eighteenth century, perhaps.

Hooked is not specifically aimed at L2 contexts, although the principles outlined may provide opportunities for further material development for learners of English and also other languages.

In terms of providing ER material that optimizes language development, one area that offers opportunities is vocabulary expansion. Cognitive learning theory suggests that new linguistic items can only be acquired if they are first noticed. This may mean that there is benefit to highlighting words and collocations that are expected to be unfamiliar to learners. This may be achieved through using bold type, or some other highlighting effect, and thus promoting noticing through 'enhancing the input'. Alternatively, texts could be designed so that target items are encountered frequently. Webb, Newton and Chang<sup>21</sup> studied the learning of collocations from using graded readers and found that 15 encounters with a collocation resulted in sizeable learning gains. It is possible that vocabulary learning could be reinforced with vocabulary quizzes and the like, but again care must be taken to balance this with the principle of reading remaining pleasurable.

A relatively common design feature for graded reading materials is to provide an audio recording of the book. This can encourage reading fluency (as the reader has to follow at the pace of the recording, perhaps pushing them to read more quickly than would otherwise be the case). Learners whose L1 uses a different script system may also benefit from a recording, as it may help students make connections between written and spoken language.

Although it is common to think that material designed for L2 contexts must be simplified, that need not necessarily be the case. Where content is being communicated, for example if graded readers are used to support the work done in other curriculum areas, linguistic simplification can lead to content dilution<sup>22</sup>. An alternative to simplification is to elaborate, rather than simplify text through providing glosses and explanations for items that may be problematic, rather than removing the item altogether. To give a very simple example, The platform was busy (where platform is considered problematic and likely to be unknown) might become: The platform was busy, with lots of people waiting for trains – thus providing additional information that explains it is a place where people wait for trains.

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<sup>21</sup> Webb, Newton and Chang, 2013

<sup>22</sup> For example, Mackay (1993) looked at how simplified language reduced cognitive challenge in pedagogic tasks.

# Implications for teachers and course designers

- Provide varied material, ensuring learners can find texts that they are interested in and are of an appropriate level.
- Promote the benefits of ER, including linguistic benefits, so that 'reading for pleasure' is not the only motivation.
- Model good reading habits.
- Where possible, build foundations of ER in class time.
- Consider varied delivery patterns (e.g. material to be read on a phone).
- Consider formats for writing that a young audience can relate to (e.g. based around instant messages).
- Include material that has short sections, which are less intimidating for reluctant readers, and are favoured by boys.
- Consider enhancing input to aid vocabulary acquisition (e.g. highlighter effects for new items).
- Consider building in repeated exposure to key items.
- Consider providing audio material with texts.



# Recommendations for further reading

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Bamford, J. and Day, R. (2004). *Extensive Reading Activities for Teaching Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

This is part of the Handbooks for Language Teachers series and has a wealth of practical activities to use with learners.

Day, R. and Bamford, J. (2002). Top ten principles for teaching extensive reading. *Reading in a Foreign Language*, 14(2).

This short article sets out the nature of ER and the conditions that are likely to lead to successful programmes. It is available at: <http://nflrc.hawaii.edu/rfl/October2002/day/day.html>

Grabe, W. (2009). *Reading in a Second Language: Moving from Theory to Practice*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

This book gives a thorough, critical overview of reading research and includes a dedicated chapter on extensive reading.

Grabe, W. and Stoller, F. (2011). *Teaching and Researching Reading* (2nd ed.). Harlow: Pearson.

This book blends insights from research and their implications for teaching, with how reading can be researched, including outlines for classroom based action research.

Watkins, P. (2018). *Teaching and Developing Reading Skills*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

This is part of the Cambridge Handbooks for Language Teachers series. It briefly reviews the literature on reading and uses that literature to inform around 140 practical classroom activities. It includes a dedicated chapter on extensive reading.

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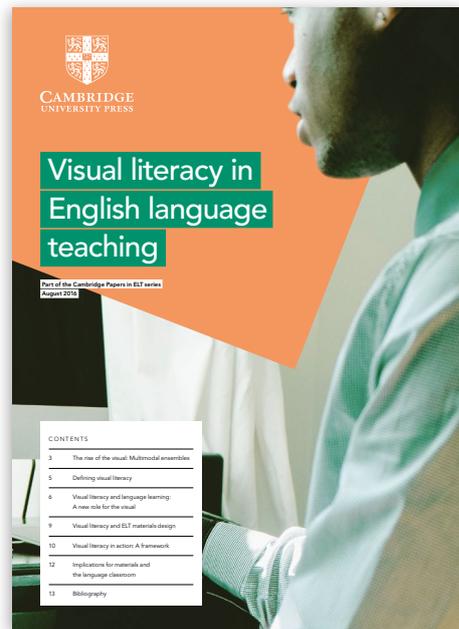
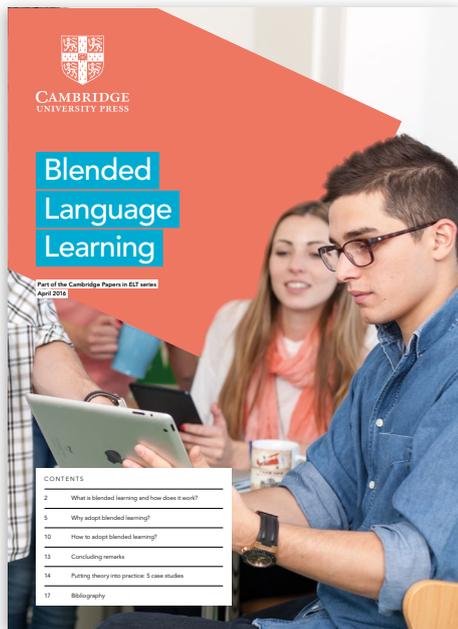
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