Blending Extensive Reading into the Curriculum
by Frances Boyd, Megan Chiusaroli, and Kathi Elizabeth

Extensive Reading (ER) can be defined as "reading a lot of easy, enjoyable books" (Helgeson, 2005), where "easy" means material that is at or slightly below one's reading level; "enjoyable" often means self-selected; and "books" can just as easily refer to news articles, magazine articles, or short stories. Students who engage in ER make gains in overall language knowledge and proficiency, improve their attitudes, and feel a sense of agency in their learning (Day, 2008; Kirubahar & Subashini, 2010). In fact, the gains are so far-reaching that one wonders why ER has not made greater inroads into English language learning curricula.

The explanation may lie in limits of time and/or money, or it may lie in the fact that the incremental, foundational gains of ER are not easily measured within the boundaries of a semester or course (Jacob & Gallo, 2002). Yet, by combining Extensive Reading with Collaborative Learning, it is possible to structure projects that blend well into different curricula. Here are two examples that form parts of academic, integrated-skills courses for international students in an Intensive English program.

The Short Story Project

The Short Story project includes an intermediate and advanced version. The intermediate-level project involves students reading short stories, writing their own story, and ultimately putting together a book of their stories. The advanced-level project involves reading and analyzing authentic short-story texts in small groups. Both projects inspire creativity and learner autonomy, and act as motivation for extensive reading of classic and original literary texts.

The intermediate project is in four parts: Read, Write, Edit, and Publish. Students first read a number of short stories, analyze their structure, and identify the major features of a short story. They are then set to write their own stories. Once their stories are written, they move on to the editing phase of the project, where they receive feedback from both the instructor and their classmates. Finally, the publishing stage involves putting their book together. They create a cover, write a letter to the reader, and organize the book as a group. The students themselves are responsible for creating the book; the instructor facilitates the experience, allowing their collective creativity to guide the project.

The advanced-level project involves reading short stories in groups of three or four. Each week, one member of the group acts as the discussion leader. As such, he or she must choose the story for the group to read by visiting the website www.americanliterature.com. Everyone reads the story for the week, but the discussion leader creates a discussion outline and leads his or her group's discussion in class. The project continues until each member of each group has acted as the discussion leader. In this way, each member has experience leading a discussion and choosing a curriculum content for the project. The project culminates with each group preparing a presentation of a unique theme present in all of their stories. This allows them to synthesize the texts, draw conclusions, and support their ideas with specific examples.

Outcomes of these projects have included exceptionally written original stories; the motivation for extensive reading, not only of authentic literary texts, but also of students' stories; and increased confidence in analyzing and synthesizing texts.

The News Group Project

The News Group Project is a weekly series of readings that the students manage and negotiate completely on their own through the guidance of the instructor. The ultimate goal of the reading series is to establish confidence, accessibility, and independence beyond the four walls of the classroom, while still achieving extensive reading that supports not only reading, but also grammar, vocabulary, writing, and discussion.

In groups of three, students choose an article from a periodical that the instructor deems level appropriate. For example, a beginner-intermediate class may use *News for You,* an ESL publication of current news; an advanced class may use *The New York Times.* Once an article has been chosen, the students allocate three roles: The Reporter, The Commentator, and The Editor. Each role corresponds to a worksheet that they must complete by the next class, which will then serve as the catalyst for discussion about the article. One of the most interesting aspects of this project is that each group will be reading different articles; this then offers the opportunity for members to mix and to casually present their articles to the other groups. Upon completion of the discussions, the worksheets are collected, a new article is chosen, and roles are rotated.

This project can culminate in a reflection exercise: an essay on the process, a presentation to the class, or a tool for assessment. Often, the students shine in these final reflections because of their confidence and comfort from the sense of accomplishment and empowerment. The instructor maintains a role of support, or can take a more active role in isolating teaching moments that can be brought before the whole class. Reflections of students in the past have often centered on three main points: learner autonomy, implicit embedding of learning objectives, and intrinsic motivation to continue reading after the project—and, even more important, after the breakdown of the four classroom walls.

While each learning context is unique, it appears that all language learners can benefit substantially from Extensive Reading. It is up to instructors and administrators to encourage the habit of reading through practical project design and enthusiastic modeling.

References

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