Extensive Reading: A Collaborative Approach
by Frances A. Boyd and Christopher Collins

In the digital age, ESL and certain other student groups are reading more than ever. Many young people, however, are more likely to surf, skim, and scan their way through hyperlinks than curl up with a book for a long, languid trip "not only to other worlds, but into [one's] own" (Quindlen, 1998, p. 6). Even if students do stop to read websites, the prose may be formatted in awkward chunks, bulleted lists, or picture-rich layouts. In addition, more often than not, learners are looking for specific information rather than for a reading experience that engages both the imagination and the intellect.

Yet, there is no evidence that students are less susceptible to the spell of a well-told tale or a moving memoir. For English learners, the benefits of what is called Extensive Reading are simply too great to ignore. Perhaps, even in a curriculum constrained by short-term, measurable proficiency goals, we can craft a popular all-proficiency-level project that puts the activities of reading, the enjoyment of reading, and the sharing of reactions to reading at the forefront.

Extensive vs. Intensive Reading

While all reading is good for language learning, it is useful to draw a distinction between the more familiar Intensive Reading (IR) in most textbooks and the practice of Extensive Reading (ER). Compared to IR, ER implies a greater quantity of reading material but a lesser degree of difficulty; in fact, research shows that the most effective ER material is at or just below the student's reading level (Day & Bamford, 2002). Unlike the IR passages that appear in textbooks, ER also implies choice for the students, even if from a very limited menu. In addition, in English language programs, ER is understood to be an out-of-class activity, with restricted in-class follow-up. As a result of all these factors—quantity, difficulty, choice, autonomy—ER offers a greater possibility than does IR of motivating students to read more and to take more pleasure in doing it.

A Collaborative Approach

In combining out-of-class ER with in-class collaborative learning, procedure and follow-up are what make it work. The essence of our approach is to combine out-of-class ER with in-class collaborative learning. In other words, students do the reading alone, but come together in class to report and discuss from different perspectives each week.

In the set-up phase, teachers usually elicit reading behavior of students in L1 and L2, share their own reading habits as a model, create a list of books for students to choose from, finalize the groups, obtain the books, and get students to create a reading and role-rotation schedule. In our program, students are generally expected to read each week, fill in a Role Sheet, and come to class ready to present their notes and discuss the book in weekly meetings (30 to 45 minutes). The Role Sheets vary, but they tend to include note-taking from such perspectives as Discussion Director, Character Educator, Conflict Identifier, Language Looker (vocabulary, grammar), and sometimes Beyond-the-Book Investigator (author biography, socio-historical context, feature film).

In the second phase, students are in control of the project. Over the next four to five weeks, teachers observe and listen as students run their weekly meetings, sharing observations from their role rotation of the week, issues with comprehension and vocabulary, or other reactions. Students are accountable for turning in their weekly Role Sheets and for attending to teacher feedback.

In the post-project phase, teachers find opportunities to exploit the ER activity for related assignments. For example, some assign a speaking task, such as an individual book interview or a collaborative book presentation. Others may assign a writing task: a summary, a book review, or an academic essay. Recently, an advanced learner and future EFL teacher in China remarked that "repetition in different forms" had been very beneficial. She noticed that the activities—at-home reading, in-class discussion with classmates, being interviewed by a teacher, essay writing, and delivering an illustrated presentation with classmates—all built upon one another to solidify her language skills and increase her enjoyment.

Benefits of the Collaborative Approach

The research is lavish in its praise for Extensive Reading (Day & Bamford, 1998; Grabe, 2009; Hedgcock & Ferris, 2009; Waring, 2006). In many places in the world and with many kinds of projects, ER is shown to aid comprehension, fluency, knowledge, vocabulary, grammar, and speaking, as well as to increase confidence and motivation (Hedgcock & Ferris, 2009). Yet, ER projects often present obstacles. How do we ensure that students actually do the reading, stay interested, and have adequate materials? How do we ensure that teachers are not burdened?

The collaborative approach provides a response to each of these challenges. Moreover, it is flexible enough to embrace the creativity of instructors. For example, among our faculty, some have focused on short stories, others have insisted on full-length novels, and still others have opted for a choice between fiction and nonfiction works. These days, most English language teachers are fortunate to have a wide array of reading choices for all proficiency levels.

Conclusion

Reading in a second language has the potential to consolidate language skills, open up unfamiliar cultural realities, stir deep emotional feelings, and boost confidence—and yet, Extensive Reading, for all the benefits it offers to support this potential and encourage empathy (Paul, 2012), remains underexploited:

> Rarely in language education do we find a teaching approach that is so universally hailed as beneficial, important, and necessary—truly an approach that has no detractors and many fervent advocates yet is so underutilized and even ignored in curricula, course/lesson design, and materials development. (Hedgcock & Ferris, 2009, p. 208)

It is our contention that a carefully designed book group project that combines Extensive Reading with collaborative learning can be one pedagogical practice to guide teachers, curriculum designers, and administrators to incorporate reading into the classes and into the lives of English language learners.

Suggested Genres and Titles

For lower levels (Common European Framework [CEFR] levels A1 to B1.1)

- Pearson's Penguin or Oxford's Bookworm series (*Apollo 13, Gulliver's Travels*)

For intermediate levels (CEFR levels B1.2 to B2)

- Young Adult books (*The Fault Is in Their Stars, Tuck Everlasting*)
- Contemporary novels (*The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Nighttime*)
- Memoirs (*The Diary of Anne Frank, In the Sea There Are Crocodiles*)

For advanced levels (CEFR levels B2 and higher)

- Classic novels (*Animal Farm, The Catcher in the Rye*)
- Contemporary novels (*The Joy Luck Club, Ragtime*)
- Memoirs (*The Color of Water, The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*)
- Nonfiction prizewinners (*The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks, Fast Food Nation*)

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See attached link

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