

# Implementing Extensive Reading in Chinese EFL Classrooms: Response to Beglar & Hunt (2014)

Wenpu Wang

Foreign Languages Department of Chengdu Technological University, Chengdu, Sichuan, 611730, China

**Abstract:** Drawing from the long-standing research tradition into extensive reading, Beglar & Hunt's (2014) is an empirical study into the amount of reading and the nature of reading materials in EFL context which shed much light on EFL teaching and learning. As a response to the study, this paper discusses the theories and principles behind it, its enlightenment to the present author, and its implications of the application of extensive reading in college EFL classrooms in China.

**Keywords:** *Beglar & Hunt's (2014), extensive reading, EFL in China*

**Project:** This paper is sponsored by Document No. [2018] 495 Sichuan Education Department 2018 Education and Research Project, Project title: Research into Deep Integration of College English Course and Information Technology Based on Blended Teaching

**Publication date:** July, 2019

**Publication online:** 31 July, 2019

**Corresponding Author:** Wenpu Wang, viola8297@qq.com

## 1 Introduction

Drawing from the long-standing research tradition into extensive reading, Beglar & Hunt's<sup>[1]</sup> is an empirical study into the amount of reading and the nature of reading materials in EFL context. Rather than simply replicating empirical study in L1 context, it went further by suggesting a minimum annual reading of 200,000 standard words of highly comprehensible texts, distinguishing simplified texts as a determiner of reading rate gains from the reading amount in general, and figuring out the greater contribution of lower-level simplified texts compared with that of other levels. This well-designed study shed much light on EFL

teaching and learning. In response to the study, this article discusses the theories and principles behind the study, its enlightenment to the present author, and its implications to her application of extensive reading in college EFL classrooms in China.

## 2 Theories and principles underlying this study

Large amount of extensive reading as a necessary determiner of learners' second language development finds solid foundation from Krashen's Input Hypothesis<sup>[2]</sup> and various studies in both L1 and L2 context<sup>[3-5]</sup>. In recent years, abundant empirical studies appear to support the positive effects of extensive reading on ESL/EFL acquisition<sup>[6]</sup>.

Abundant researches suggest the use of simple materials in developing learners' reading fluency<sup>[1, 7-9]</sup>. Reading simple texts appropriate to the learners' level allows the learners to read faster with better understanding. This can be explained with working memory theory in that once freed from struggling at the lower-level processing of difficult words as the result of automaticity achieved through constant repetition, the working memory with limited capacity<sup>[9]</sup> can focus on higher-level structures, which they may otherwise have less chances to notice.

Furthermore, when their attention is freed to focus more on "meaning"<sup>[8]</sup>, learners build proper schemata or background knowledge to facilitate their further reading, the lack of which often cause difficulty for ESL/EFL readers<sup>[10]</sup>.

What is more, learners' motivate can be enhanced when they are given the rights to choose, and when they can read faster and with more ease, which contributes to greater motivation and greater learning outcomes and student autonomy<sup>[11]</sup>. Thus, a virtuous circle is formed

to motivate them into continuous reading.

### **3 Enlightenment on me as an EFL teacher**

#### **3.1 Power of extensive reading**

In general, as an EFL teacher in China, I am positive about the effectiveness of extensive reading on my own success in EFL learning. I had indulged myself into reading *Oxford Bookworm Series* such as *Jane Eyre* and *The Thirty Nine Steps*. I had been a big fan of a wonderful magazine titled *English Language Learning* with interesting articles graded into different levels enriched my college. I have developed myself into an avid reader in English.

However, not until now did I realize that my benefits from reading extensively and reading graded materials is neither unique nor a privilege of the teachers. Rather, it can be a valuable resource to explore for my EFL students to benefit.

#### **3.2 Problems with our intensive reading dominant classrooms**

I also begin to look into the problems with our intensive reading dominant EFL classrooms in China. Though effective for students' language development, intensive reading deprives students of chances to experience genuine pleasure of reading<sup>[12]</sup>. After semesters' of learning, they neither show significant improvement in language performance (assessed by the national College English Test), nor develop their ability to read fluently. Once I observed a girl with MA degree in Computer Science and over 10 years of formal EFL teaching reading an English article. She tried to analyze the vocabulary and grammar of each sentence first before understanding the article. It is not surprising to find that the school-formed intensive reading habit inhibits her from reading fluently.

#### **3.3 Amount of reading**

Apart from reinforcing the importance of reading amount, Beglar & Hunt suggested a minimum annual amount of reading 200,000 standard words of highly comprehensible texts for EFL learners to achieve reading rate gains, which makes the picture of extensive reading clearer to us EFL teachers than the general description of "tens of thousands of hours"<sup>[13]</sup>.

With this goal in mind, it is the teachers' job to figure out how to achieve such goals, as what we will discuss in the next session.

### **3.4 Defining simple materials**

The word "simpler" is vague enough to cover many possible misconceptions and misconducts. What if the material is deemed easy by the teacher but not by the students? Or what if the material is easy for some students but not for students?

Neither commercial extensive reading books nor materials selected by teachers based on their intuition cater to the needs of every student. As enlightened by this study, a better solution is to determine the levels of students as well of the materials and seek a matching between the two.

### **4 Implementing extensive reading in my EFL classrooms**

#### **4.1 Including extensive reading in my classes**

In my university, non-English majors are offered College English course twice a week, once 90 minutes, for 16 weeks each semester, with all four language skills integrated in one course. Confined by limited class hours, the course focuses on intensive reading only. Though useful in exemplifying language features, it does not serve the purpose of training students into fluent readers.

Given that our students are busy with their other curriculum courses, and frustrated and less motivated in reading in English, I prefer to in-class extensive reading. I can allocate some time, say 20 minutes, each class time, to provide them with reading experience and activities, using simplified materials.

Though this is still far below the minimum reading amount suggested in this study, it is better than none. What is more, with simplified materials and less stress, students' interest and motivation in reading outside class is a possible outcome.

#### **4.2 Material choosing**

As what we have discussed, lower-level simplified materials with high frequency levels elicits greater reading rate gains. Tom Cobb's Lex Tutor (website: [www.lextutor.ca](http://www.lextutor.ca))<sup>[14]</sup>, which until now is freely accessible, serves as an effective and convenient tool to assess the learners' vocabulary size as well as detect the difficulty levels of the reading texts.

One readily source of materials is students' extensive reading course book. If time and fund permit, materials can come from other sources, such as graded books,

magazines, and Internet resources. Whatever the sources, the difficulty-level check is necessary. And it is important that the materials are relevant to students, and students' choices is allowed.

As for the relevance of the materials, one possible example is choosing news reports covering topics like employment and job market which is related to the students, or hot current issues. I would suggest the students to develop the habit of reading Chinese news, which may serve as useful background knowledge both for their reading in English and for their personal development.

Another possible suggestion is to consider the department background of the students, and incorporate materials related to their own majors. But this require more knowledge and time from the teachers.

## 5 Conclusion

The study discussed above shed much light on shaping my teaching belief and teaching practice. By discussing into the principles and theories behind it, its enlightenment on me as an EFL teacher, and its implications on my application of extensive reading in my college EFL classrooms, my confidence is gained in applying extensive reading. However, since the study is set in one university in Japan, while the general principles are applicable, more efforts needs to be made to find a better way to suit extensive reading in my College English classrooms in China.

## References

- [1] Beglar D. & Hunt, A. Pleasure reading and reading rate gains. *Reading in a Foreign Language*, 2014, 26(1):29-48.
- [2] Krashen, S. *The Input Hypothesis: Issues and Implications*. 1985. London: Longman.
- [3] Elley, W.B. & Mangubhai, F. *The Impact of a Book Flood in Fiji Primary Schools*.1981. Wellington: New Zealand Council for Educational Research.
- [4] Nation, P. & Wang, K. Graded readers and vocabulary. *Reading in a Foreign Language*, 1999, 12(2):355-380.
- [5] Waring, R. & Takaki, M. At what rate do learners learn and retain new vocabulary from reading a graded reader? *Reading in a Foreign Language*, 2003, 15(2):130-163.
- [6] Renandya, W. A. The power of extensive reading. *RELC Journal*, 2007, 38(2):133-149.
- [7] Day, R. R., & Bamford, J. *Reading reluctant readers*. University of Hawai'i Working Papers in English as a Second Language. 2000, 18(2).
- [8] Nation, P. Reading Faster. *International Journal of English Studies*, 2009, 9(2):131-144, 168-169.
- [9] Grabe, W. & Stoller, F. L. *Teaching and researching reading*. 2010. London and New York: Routledge.
- [10] Hudson, T. *Teaching Second Language Reading*. 2007. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- [11] Grabe, W. *Reading in a Second Language: Moving from Theory to Practice*. 2009. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [12] Nuttall, C. *Teaching reading skills in a foreign language*. 1982. London: Heinemann Educational.
- [13] Ellis, N. Cognitive approaches to SLA. In *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, 19:22-42.
- [14] Cobb, T. Commentary: Response to McQuillan and Krashen (2008). *About Language Learning & Technology*, 2008,