Using Popular Literature in Extensive Reading

Jim Burwell

University of Maryland Baltimore County

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Abstract

Extensive reading provides a pathway to reading fluency for second language readers. In addition to increasing their vocabulary through repeated exposure to words in different contexts, typical extensive reading programs develop reading fluency through the use of classical literature as the reading material. This paper promotes using popular literature as material for extensive reading, suggesting that it has advantages over the more traditional approach. Extensive reading of popular literature can develop cultural awareness, multiple language skills, and personal growth. Learners who incorporate popular literature in their extensive reading are apt to choose materials with a high degree of personal interest, which motivates them to read more. An added benefit is that learners are likely to find a native-speaking community of interest in mainstream culture, providing a connection that encourages oral and aural language development as well. In an ESL setting, popular literature has the advantages of being readily available, affordable, and culturally relevant.
Using Popular Literature in Extensive Reading

The primary consideration in all reading instruction should be for students to experience reading as pleasurable and useful. Only then will they be drawn to do the reading they must do to become fluent readers. And only then will they develop an eagerness to learn new skills to help them become better readers.


No matter where you look in language teaching journals these days, you find references to extensive reading (ER). Articles have appeared recently in the TESOL Journal and the English Teaching Forum. But ER is not new; its roots go back to the beginning of this century. Julian Bamford and Richard R. Day (1998), citing Louis Kelley, credit Harold Palmer with first using the term “extensive reading” in his 1917 book, The Scientific Study and Teaching of Languages. Michael West is credited with being more influential than anyone else in establishing the approach, termed “supplementary reading” by him, but embodying the principal characteristics of ER. Despite its 100-year history, ER seems to be finally gaining momentum and influence. Perhaps this reflects the growing attention being paid to reading as an important language skill.

The purpose of this paper is first to describe what ER is and then to look at the role of popular literature in an ER program. Before exploring these subjects, definitions of reading, ER, and popular literature are offered.

Bamford and Day (1998, p.12) define reading as “the construction of meaning from a printed or written message. Construction of meaning involves the reader connecting information from the written message with previous knowledge to arrive at a meaning - at an understanding.” Mikulecky believes reading is practically synonymous with comprehension, citing Johnston’s definition as “a complex behavior which involves conscious and unconscious use of various strategies, including problem-solving strategies, to build a model of the meaning which the
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writer is assumed to have intended” (Mikulecky, 1990, p.2). Christine Nuttall says, “Reading is like an infectious disease: it is caught not taught. (And you can’t catch it from someone who hasn’t got it….)” (Nuttall, 1983, p.192). In a general sense “reading is what happens when people look at a text and assign meaning to the written symbols in that text” (Aebersold & Field, 1997, p.15).

ER is “an approach to the teaching and learning of second language reading in which learners read large quantities of books and other materials that are well within their linguistic competence” (Bamford & Day, 1998, p. xiii). As an approach, teaching ER “is based on the belief that when students read for general comprehension large quantities of texts of their own choosing, their ability to read will consequently improve” (Aebersold & Field, 1997, p. 43). A comprehensive working definition offered by Susser & Robb is “extensive reading is… reading (a) of large quantities of material or long texts; (b) for global or general understanding; (c) with the intention of obtaining pleasure from the text. Further, because (d) reading is individualized, with students choosing the books they want to read, (e) the books are not discussed in class” (Susser & Robb, 1990).

Popular literature is simply literature that is popular in the culture. It includes fiction and nonfiction books, magazines, journals, and newspapers. It is what people read in their free time. The material need only be “linguistically accessible …and straightforward in content and language” (Bamford & Day, 1998, p.103). Dupuy, Tse, & Cook say that “Due to their mass appeal, we recommend popular novels. Also we suggest choosing books at various levels and across topics and areas of interest to ensure that there will be something for everyone” (Dupuy, Tse, & Cook, 1996, p.12).
Why Does Extensive Reading Work?

Christine Nuttall (1983) suggests that readers learn to read by reading. If they don’t read, it is because of what she calls the cycle of frustration. If learners don’t enjoy reading, they won’t read very much. If they don’t read very much, they won’t understand what they’re reading, causing them to read slowly for comprehension, which takes the joy out of reading. In this way, the cycle continues. ER breaks this cycle by encouraging learners to enjoy reading and, consequently, to read greater quantities of material. The cycle changes from one of frustration to one of growth. The learners come to enjoy reading so they read faster. The faster they read, the more they read and the better they understand, which leads to more enjoyment during reading. This can accurately be called a pleasure cycle, where successful reading develops fluency and confidence, which in turn encourages more reading, in an upward spiral.

The benefits of ER are numerous and far-reaching. Bamford & Day (1998) cite William Gabe’s discussion of these benefits written in a 1991 TESOL Quarterly: “Longer concentrated periods of silent reading build vocabulary and structural awareness, develop automaticity, enhance background knowledge, improve comprehension skills, and promote confidence and motivation.” These authors go even further in attributing to ER second language proficiency gains in writing, spelling and increased listening and speaking skills.

How Does Extensive Reading Work?

The definitions of reading cited earlier all recognize the paramount cognitive activity of the reader interacting with the text to interpret its meaning. This cognitive model of interactivity has three characteristics that are widely accepted as required for fluent first language reading. They are equally applicable to building fluency in a second language.
Sight vocabulary is the ability to automatically and instantaneously recognize a word as a symbol, and is necessary in order to recall the relevant meaning of the word from memory. Developing this skill requires a lot of reading, meeting words repeatedly in different contexts until they become a part of the reader’s general vocabulary.

By the time first language readers go to school, they already have an extensive general vocabulary. General vocabulary is accessed by beginning readers automatically and provides comprehension based on the reader’s prior knowledge of the word. Second language readers do not have a large general vocabulary available to them. Reading extensively improves the process of learning vocabulary as the reading ability improves, resulting in a greater general vocabulary.

The main reason Krashen states that ER should be done at slightly below the individual’s linguistic competence level, which he labels (i – 1), is to ensure that the material is well within the reader’s competence so that a greater amount of reading can be done enjoyably. Increased reading improves vocabulary and leads to even more reading. The cycle of growth and pleasure reading replaces the cycle of frustration.

Finally, the prior knowledge a reader brings to a text improves comprehension and therefore the pleasure in reading. Subject knowledge, language knowledge, world knowledge and text type knowledge are all part of the schemata that readers bring to the act of reading. Bamford & Day (1998) cite Gabe’s assertion that “the more reading done, of the greatest informational variety and range of purposes, the quicker the reader will achieve . . .the capacity for creating, refining, and connecting diverse arrays of cognitive schemata.” Just as first language reading can develop these schemata, so can second language reading.

Sight vocabulary, general vocabulary, and general knowledge all contribute to reading fluency, and conversely, fluent reading contributes to the development of these three key factors.
Outside the cognitive realm are two affective factors, attitude and motivation, that determine the success of the developing reader. Aebersold & Field describe typical second language reading classes. “In the world of real L2/FL reading classes . . . students are unsure of what they have read. They are apprehensive about being evaluated by the teacher and their peers. They elect to sit silently” (Aebersold & Field, 1997, p.116). ER can change this attitude because it lets learners read at the level at which they can easily manage and understand the text, Krashen’s (i – 1). And if the emphasis remains on the reader’s reaction to the text, rather than on testing, the classroom environment becomes supportive in its lack of judging and competitiveness. The reasons for learner apprehension disappear while a positive attitude toward reading begins to appear.

“I can’t read this book because it’s too hard” seems to mean that the reader is not going to try because of a lack of motivation to read in the second language. In truth, what it means is that the material is inappropriate for that learner, who, faced with material that is too difficult, has developed a negative attitude toward reading second language material. ER addresses this problem by providing reading material accessible to the reader. The frustration of text that is too advanced is eliminated. In ER programs, learners are free to read their choice of material on topics of their own choosing, which keeps them interested and motivated.

In summary, ER develops the sight vocabulary, general vocabulary and world knowledge on which fluent reading is based, while giving students confidence and a positive attitude toward second language reading. These cognitive and affective aspects of reading fluency argue persuasively for integrating ER into second language programs.
Why Use Popular Literature in Extensive Reading

Fluent reading is a culturally-based activity. Mikulecky states that while the reading process may be universal, “the resulting interpretation is cultural. In order for students to comprehend texts in Standard English, they need to develop new schemata of language, text, and interpretation, as well as schemata of alternative cultural practices and values.” In other words, it is not just language that is being taught but “an alternative cultural literacy” (Mikulecky, 1990, p.5). Being literate in a second language means having the ability, skills and knowledge to interpret a text in ways similar to members of the mainstream culture.

Second language readers typically share certain characteristics. Bamford & Day (1998) discuss three of particular importance. One is limited language ability, and the consequent fatigue and limited attention span when reading. The second is unfamiliarity with concepts and topics that are common knowledge in the target-language culture. Third, second language readers may be unfamiliar with particular culture-specific text types. On the other hand, certain generalizations can be made with regard to particular groups. Teenagers around the world may have certain commonalities that transcend specific cultures.

Given the cognitive model of reading and the characteristics of second language readers discussed so far, what material is most appropriate for ER to develop reading fluency? Textbooks, scholarly studies, and journal articles abound that discuss the use of authentic material. There seem to be as many definitions of authentic material as there are authors. One focuses on using unmodified text written primarily, if not solely, for native speakers. Another requires that the material must be meaningful, coherent, and well organized, displaying the characteristics of true discourse. Still another defines it as having the qualities of natural speech or writing.
Much of the literature on ER focuses on what constitutes authentic material. Bamford & Day describe authentic material as language learner literature -- reading material written with an audience of second language learners in mind. It refers to “books of all kinds, as well as magazines and newspapers produced especially for second language learners” (Bamford & Day, 1998, p.97), (emphasis added). The subcategories of language learner literature described include original works modified for easier language learner access or works written specifically for language learners. Mikulecky believes that “Students should read whole books by a single author, not magazines or collections of short stories by a variety of authors” (Mikulecky, 1990, p.14). Aebersold & Field (1997), in deciding what literature to use, suggest short stories, poems, and excerpts from longer texts.

I propose that popular literature has an important place in an ER program. It is not produced especially for second language learners, or devoted to a single author or limited to short texts and excerpts. But will it meet the objectives of second language readers? Aebersold & Field (1997) proposed that the goals and objectives of reading courses using literary materials can be described using three models: the cultural, the language, and the personal growth models. The cultural model provides a window to the practices and values of the reader’s environment, allowing them to develop the schemata necessary for fluent reading in a second language. Popular literature is a treasure trove of American cultural values and viewpoints. All levels of American society can be found within its pages as well as characters displaying the attributes of various niches within our society. In short, the Reader’s Digest will promote the development of these schemata even better than Herman Melville’s Moby Dick.

The language model provides for language development through the reading of authentic texts. Isn’t popular literature the most authentic text possible? Look at the number of copies of
best selling novels that are sold. Consider the subscription rate of the most popular magazines and the circulation of newspapers. This material contains the language of the current culture, rather than language from another day and age. In addition to aiding in the development of reading fluency, popular literature contributes to the development of other language skills as well. Popular novels, for example, can form the basis for dialogues with native speakers who have read the same novel. Dialogues provide the opportunity to practice listening and speaking skills as well as developing the vocabulary of shared interests, differing opinions, and affective as well as cognitive subjects.

The personal growth model emphasizes the learners’ connection to the text. The pleasure that readers get from material of their own choosing on topics of interest to them is the hook that keeps them reading. The Scientific American or American History magazines may produce more pleasure than the collected works of Jack London and provide a broader experience for the reader. Popular literature can lead to personal growth by providing descriptions of role models whose attributes lead to success in our society or by displaying characteristics to be avoided as unappealing or unacceptable in this mainstream culture.

The advantages of using popular literature in an ER program are numerous. Popular literature is readily available everywhere in an ESL setting. It can be found in public libraries, drugstores, bookstores, newspaper stands, the doctor’s office, and even grocery stores and fast food restaurants. Popular literature covers a wide range of topics, in many different formats, at any language level required. These qualities put the selection of material within the control of the reader, a key factor for developing voluntary readers. Popular literature is culturally relevant and knowledge of its contents opens the door to mainstream culture. It promotes communication, giving learners the opportunity to use all of their developing language skills.
Finally, the use of popular literature in ER programs demonstrates that reading in a second language can be fun and interesting, just as it is in the reader’s first language.
References


