

Guidelines or commandments? Reconsidering core principles in extensive reading

John Macalister
Victoria University of Wellington
New Zealand

There is little doubt that the term ‘extensive reading’ can be a source of confusion. Indeed, Bruton (2002) drew relatively early attention to the fact that ‘extensive’ can have multiple meanings when applied to reading. It has been used to include breadth of reading and time spent reading, as well as both amount of new reading and amount of text read; amount of text read allows for repeated reading of the same text. It is, therefore, perhaps unsurprising that teachers can hold differing views as to the nature of extensive reading (Macalister, 2010, p. 69) and that it manifests itself in different ways in the classroom, if it is present at all. Given the confusion that can exist let me say at the outset that, for me, the folk-definition of extensive reading as lots of easy, enjoyable reading is the best way of thinking about the practice, but underlying that simple definition lies my understanding of the ten principles proposed by Day and Bamford (2002). However, as these 10 principles may themselves contribute to the confusion I begin this article attempting to clarify them.

Clarity around the Top 10 principles

An exercise I often ask students to do is to look at the 10 principles (Day & Bamford, 2002) and group them into the categories that suggest themselves. The end result generally looks like this:

Table 1: Categorising the top 10 principles for extensive reading

<p>The nature of reading</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The purpose is usually related to pleasure, information, and general understanding - Reading is its own reward - Reading speed is usually faster rather than slower - Reading is individual and silent 	<p>What the teachers do</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Teachers orient and guide their students - The teacher is a role model of a reader
<p>The nature of the reading material</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The reading material is easy - A variety of reading material on a wide range of topics must be available 	<p>What the learners do</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Learners choose what they want to read - Learners read as much as possible

This little exercise achieves two purposes. First, it requires the students to process and think

critically about the 10 principles that are presented in Day and Bamford's (2002) article. Second, it separates out the implementation features of an extensive reading programme from the desired result. Another way of putting this is to say that it separates the outcome of the programme (i.e., the nature of reading) from the means of achieving it (i.e., the nature of the reading material, what the teachers do, what the learners do). The outcome of the extensive reading programme in turn contributes to the broader language learning goals of the course.

As these students are either pre-service or in-service teachers, the next step is for them to consider opportunities for and constraints on the implementation features in a language learning context they are familiar with. This next step also helps students to see that the principles are best viewed as guidelines, not as commandments.

The Role of Context

The traditional view of extensive reading as an isolated, stand-alone activity was nicely challenged by Christopher Green in an examination of ER programmes in Hong Kong secondary schools, where he found "the typical extensive reading lesson has all the appearance of a particularly monastic detention session with teachers sitting at the head of the class enforcing a rule of silence" (Green, 2005, p. 308). Rather, Green argued while advocating a task-based approach, extensive reading should be integrated into the language lesson.

At the same time, however, the traditional, stand-alone approach to extensive reading can have a place and has been used successfully, as I sought to demonstrate in a belated response designed to be a companion piece to Green's article (Macalister, 2008). The reason this approach worked in a New Zealand pre-university class may have been that 15-20 minutes of silent reading worked well as a change of activity and pace in a class that met daily for three or four hours. The point, of course, was not to argue that one approach was better than another but that any extensive reading programme needed to be responsive to the characteristics of the language learning context in which it was being implemented.

If extensive reading is to be better integrated into the language lesson that would seem to suggest that the reading becomes the springboard for some other activity or task, probably a spoken or written output activity. In order to prepare students to participate in such an activity then reading may no longer be being done solely for its own reward, and learners may not be choosing what they want to read.

Learner Choice

The idea that learners choose what they want to read links to the idea that the purpose of reading is usually related to pleasure, to the 'enjoyable' in the folk-definition mentioned earlier. There are, however, three main situations in which choice of what the learners read may be limited. The first is in resource-poor environments where there may be no funds for purchasing commercially published resources. In such situations teachers must fall back on their own resources. A second situation may be where resources are available, but the language proficiency

level of the learners precludes use of commercially produced materials (Tanaka and Stapleton [2007] describe such an experience with Japanese high school students). The third situation may be where teachers decide the reading activity will provide the input for a written or spoken output activity, which typically requires learners to be familiar with the same text. In Macalister (2014), I propose such a spoken activity framed within a resource-poor environment where teachers produce their own reading materials. In situations where funds are not an issue, publishers have produced resources designed for use in reading circles (e.g., Furr, 2007).

It may be worth asking whether, in teaching and learning contexts where there is little or no choice of reading material for the learners, the reading is moving away from being extensive. To answer that question, two important considerations come to mind:

- The content of the reading material
- The language level of the reading material

If there is little or no choice as to what is read, then steps must be taken in selecting the reading material to ensure that the reading is going to be enjoyable. Graded readers are the default material in extensive reading, and for any teacher with the resources to purchase these books the annual Learner Literature Awards run through the Extensive Reading Foundation provide an invaluable and very reliable guide as to suitable graded readers (<http://erfoundation.org/wordpress/>). If graded readers are not an option because of resourcing or other issues, teachers should base their selection or production of reading material on knowledge about their students. Pino-Silva (1992), as an example, created reading materials from magazine articles dealing with scientific topics for Venezuelan university students; as the students appeared to make heavy use of dictionaries during reading, it is probably worth acknowledging, however, that this instantiation of self-described extensive reading did not meet the ‘easy’ criterion considered essential today.

In order to satisfy that criterion, and before choosing reading materials, teachers do therefore need to know the language level of their learners, which, given the importance of vocabulary size to reading comprehension, can most easily be obtained through diagnostic testing. Examples of practical tests that can be used to gather this information and thus ensure reading material is at the right level for the learners are the Vocabulary Size Test (Nation & Beglar, 2007), the Vocabulary Levels Test (Nation, 2001), and the Vocabulary Placement Test for Cambridge Readers (Schmitt & Schmitt, 2004).

Applying Curriculum Design to Extensive Reading

In understanding the core principles of extensive reading, the underlying approach here is the application of a model of language curriculum design (Figure 1) to extensive reading. The principles of extensive reading are represented by the top circle, and factors relating to the learning context are represented by the lower right circle, labelled ‘Environment’ or environment analysis. The information about the learners’ language level gained from diagnostic vocabulary tests or other sources belongs in the lower left circle, labelled ‘Needs’ or needs analysis. The actual implementation of extensive reading is represented by the inner circle; in other words,

information from Environment, Needs and Principles determines what happens in the classroom. As a way of illustrating this, it is worth recalling that one of the early critiques of the 10 principles pointed out that students have lives; their lives outside the classroom may mean that reading is unlikely to occur elsewhere (Robb, 2002). This insight forms part of the environment analysis and its effect on the inner circle should be that time is made in class for reading to occur. This in effect is a format and presentation decision. If the reading is occurring in class, this may also trigger a monitoring and assessment decision. While this segment of the inner circle typically receives less attention in extensive reading, the key question for teachers to answer is always this: are my learners actually reading? When the reading is in-class, simply observing learners' behaviour can be sufficient.

As a further example of the application of this model, in a resource-poor setting where there are no funds available for purchasing graded readers, teachers may decide to make their own reading materials. This is another example of environment analysis informing the inner circle, in this instance making a content and sequencing decision.

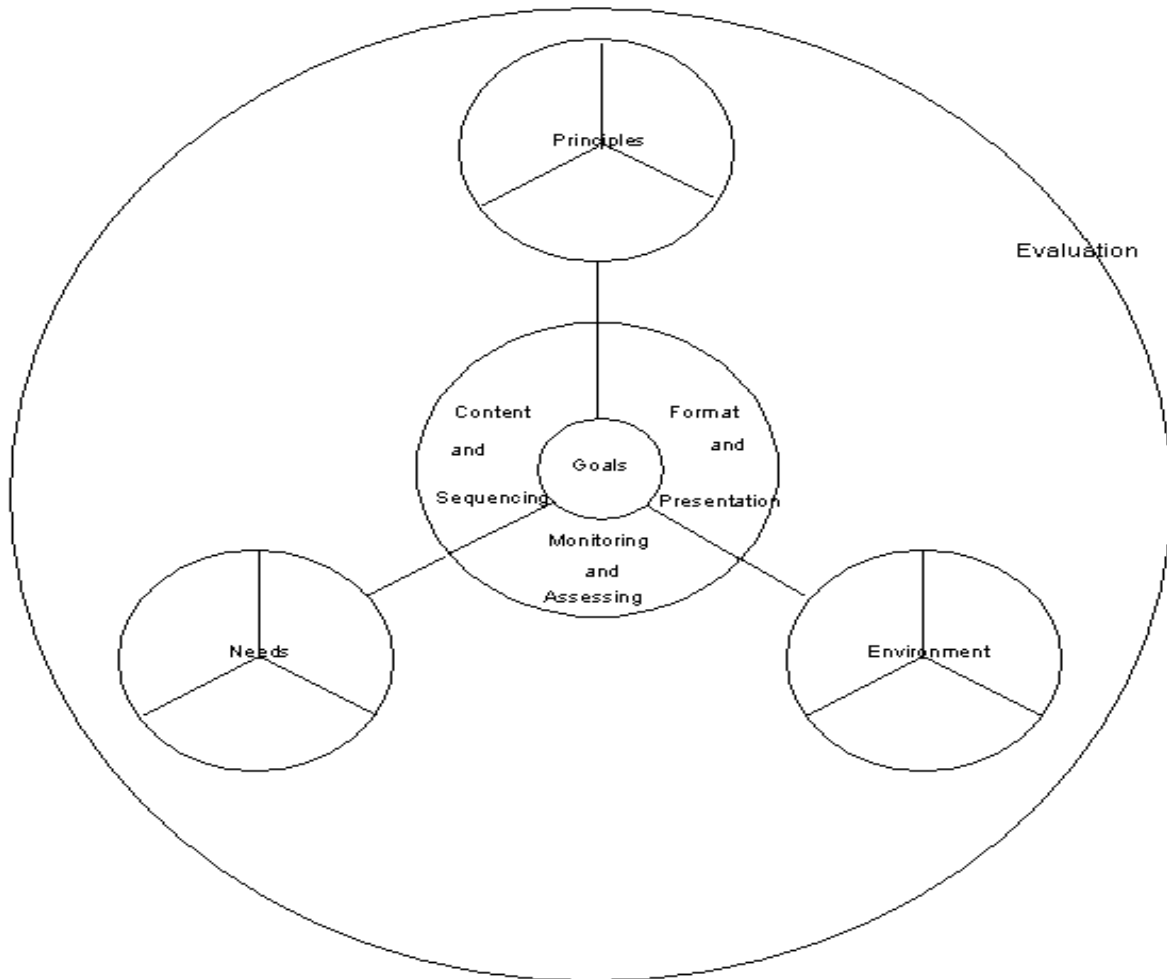


Figure 1. A model of language curriculum design (Nation & Macalister, 2010, p. 3)

Using a model such as this also allows teachers to answer other questions that sometimes lead to

confusion or uncertainty in discussions of extensive reading. For example, if learners are reading faster rather than slower, how fast is that? The answer is, inevitably, going to be different for every individual and an indication of normal reading speed may be provided through some form of needs analysis. The use of a speed reading, or timed reading, course (with examples being Millett, 2005; Nation & Malarcher, 2007; Quinn, Nation, & Millett, 2007) may also encourage learners to read faster, as well as being a means of obtaining a baseline measure of reading speed.

However, concerns about learners' reading speed are probably misplaced and a distraction in terms of extensive reading. If the reading material is easy and enjoyable, returning to the folk-definition mentioned at the beginning, then learners will be reading faster than they normally do. It is a case, again, of attention to the means facilitating the outcome.

From Ten to Seven

The discussion thus far confirms the idea that the 10 principles may be guidelines rather than commandments, and suggests further the 10 can be reduced to seven, as shown in Table 2. Learner choice and having a wide variety of materials available for learners to choose from may not always be possible, but these do not mean that extensive reading cannot happen. Similarly, extensive reading can occur even when the teacher decides that reading is not being done for its own sake, for the pleasure of reading, but as a springboard for another language learning activity. It may be, however, that these seven remaining principles are closer to being commandments than guidelines.

Table 2: The top seven principles for extensive reading

<p>The nature of reading</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The purpose is usually related to pleasure, information, and general understanding - Reading speed is usually faster rather than slower - Reading is individual and silent 	<p>What the teachers do</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Teachers orient and guide their students - The teacher is a role model of a reader
<p>The nature of the reading material</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The reading material is easy 	<p>What the learners do</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Learners read as much as possible

How much Reading

If there is one dimension absent from Day and Bamford's (2002) principles it may be any consideration of the length of time for which readers should be reading. In situations where classes meet for periods of 90 minutes, once or perhaps twice a week, it is not unusual to find claims in journal article submissions (that may not, however, reach publication) or conference presentations that learners read silently – that they 'did' extensive reading – for the entire time. These reports strike me as misrepresenting what was happening; it seems unlikely that learners maintained successful silent reading for 90 uninterrupted minutes. Eyelids would have drooped,

attention would have waned. Possibly such classes are tending towards Green's (2005) 'monastic detention sessions.'

I would not want to be prescriptive about the amount of time for which learners should be reading. There are factors in the environment (Figure 1) that will help determine how long is sufficient. The high school students in the Tanaka and Stapleton's (2007) study read extensively for five to 10 minutes at the start of each lesson. In my 2008 study (Macalister, 2008), students read for 20 minutes at the end of each class. While the amount of time spent reading was different, a crucial similarity in these two studies is that the reading was scheduled regularly.

This suggests a slight expansion of one of the remaining seven principles: learners read as much as possible in a regularly scheduled, time-limited period. While this may be easier to achieve within the classroom, it could also be agreed as an out-of-class activity through negotiation with learners, perhaps also drawing on support from parents and care-givers, if appropriate to the age group. The intention is that reading should become normalized, become part of the learners' everyday routine.

Concluding Remarks

Extensive reading is not a difficult concept but suffers at times from being differently understood by teachers and researchers, leading to some confusion in the literature surrounding it, and at other times suffers from attempts to over-complicate it. In this paper I have tried to de-mystify extensive reading, drawing on—and reducing in number—the principles proposed by Day and Bamford (2002) over a decade ago. These principles, and those proposed by Williams (1986) for teaching reading almost two decades earlier, continue to provide a sound basis for understanding and implementing successful reading practices in the language classroom.

References

- Bruton, A. (2002). Extensive reading is reading extensively, surely? *The Language Teacher*, 26(11), 23–25.
- Day, R. R., & Bamford, J. (2002). Top ten principles for teaching extensive reading. *Reading in a Foreign Language*, 14, 136–141.
- Furr, M. (2007). *Bookworms club silver: Stories for reading circles*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Green, C. (2005). Integrating extensive reading in the task-based curriculum. *ELT Journal*, 59, 306–311.
- Macalister, J. (2008). Implementing extensive reading in an EAP programme. *ELT Journal*, 62, 248–256. doi: 10.1093/elt/ccm021
- Macalister, J. (2010). Investigating teacher attitudes to extensive reading practices in higher education: Why isn't everyone doing it? *RELC Journal*, 41, 59–75. doi: 10.1177/0033688210362609
- Macalister, J. (2014). The say-it activity. *Modern English Teacher*, 23, 29–32.

- Millett, S. (2005). *New Zealand speed readings for ESL learners, Book One*. Wellington: School of Linguistics and Applied Language Studies, Victoria University of Wellington.
- Nation, I. S. P. (2001). *Learning vocabulary in another language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Nation, I. S. P., & Macalister, J. (2010). *Language curriculum design*. New York and London: Routledge/Taylor & Francis.
- Nation, P., & Beglar, D. (2007). A vocabulary size test. *The Language Teacher*, 31(7), 9–13.
- Nation, P., & Malarcher, C. (2007). *Reading for speed and fluency, books 1–4*. Seoul: Compass Publishing.
- Pino-Silva, J. (1992). Extensive reading: No pain, no gain? *English Teaching Forum*, 30, 48–49.
- Quinn, E., Nation, I. S. P., & Millett, S. (2007). *Asian and Pacific speed readings for ESL learners*. Wellington: School of Linguistics and Applied Language Studies, Victoria University of Wellington.
- Robb, T. (2002). Extensive reading in an Asian context – An alternative view. *Reading in a Foreign Language*, 14, 146–147.
- Schmitt, N., & Schmitt, D. (2004). Cambridge English readers level test, from http://cdextras.cambridge.org/Readers/RPT_last.swf
- Tanaka, H., & Stapleton, P. (2007). Increasing reading input in Japanese high school EFL classrooms: An empirical study exploring the efficacy of extensive reading. *The Reading Matrix*, 7, 115–131.
- Williams, R. (1986). 'Top ten' principles for teaching reading. *ELT Journal*, 40, 42–45.

About the Author

John Macalister is Associate Professor and Head of the School of Linguistics and Applied Language Studies at Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand. He researches and teaches in the fields of language teaching methodology and language curriculum design.