

# Setting Up and Carrying Out an Extensive Reading Assignment

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## Abstract

The traditional way to teach reading in a second or foreign language is for students to use an intensive approach, that is, to study a relatively short, usually difficult reading passage in detail, looking at grammar and vocabulary and translating parts of it. In contrast, in recent years, teachers and researchers have come to recognize the advantages of extensive reading, which involves students choosing a longer piece of reading that is comfortable for them to read and of interest to them, and reading it for pleasure or information. Researchers have found that through extensive reading, students can both improve their reading proficiency and develop other skills in the target language. In this paper, I discuss differences between intensive and extensive reading, look at the effects of extensive reading, and consider issues related to setting up an extensive reading assignment. I also suggest activities that teachers can use in the classroom.

Reading is widely taught using an approach called intensive reading – that is, teachers take a relatively short, often difficult, reading passage and go over it in detail, looking at the grammar and vocabulary and perhaps translating the passage or having students translate it. Sometimes this also involves asking the students comprehension questions to check their understanding of the reading. Using the intensive reading approach may also involve teaching reading strategies – for example, teaching students to skim (look over a passage before they read it to get an idea of what it is

about or how it is organized), teaching them to find the main idea and supporting details, teaching them to guess (figure out the meaning of unknown words), etc.

Intensive reading is not necessarily bad, though it does have some disadvantages. Students may think that reading is not enjoyable because they have to struggle through reading passages that are too difficult for them. They may think that reading is the same as translation and never try to read without translating. They may think that reading is just another way of studying English grammar. If their only exposure to reading English is through intensive reading, they do not read enough for reading to help them learn to read.

Another approach, Extensive reading (ER), has considerable advantages. In this paper, I will explain what extensive reading is and what its benefits are and then discuss some classroom activities that teachers can use to bring students together as they read individual books.

## **Extensive Reading and its Advantages**

Extensive reading is an approach to learning to read where students read a great deal from relatively easy books that they are interested in and choose for themselves for the purpose of enjoying the story or getting information (Bamford & Day, 2004).

The following chart shows some of the difference between extensive and intensive reading. Not all of these apply in all cases, but they are the general differences.

Though it is not their focus, as a result of extensive reading, students can improve their English language proficiency and reading ability (Joan &

**Table 1.** Comparison of Extensive and Intensive Reading

Extensive Reading	Intensive Reading
Overall understanding	100% understanding
Read a lot	Limited reading
Easy texts	Difficult texts
Fluent reading	Word-for-word reading
Read for meaning	Translate into native language
No direct study of grammar	Focus on grammar use and rules
No comprehension question	Many comprehension questions
No direct teaching of strategies (though teachers may make suggestions if there is a problem)	Direct teaching of strategies
Ignore unknown words (or figure them out from context)	Use dictionary (often interrupting reading)

Day, 2016). Day, et al. (2016) listed eight ways that research has shown that Extensive reading can lead to improvements related to language learning and language proficiency.

1. Improving vocabulary range and knowledge. Students learn more words and they learn more about how to use the words they do know.
2. Improving writing skills.
3. Providing positive motivation. Increases students' desire to learn English.
4. Improving attitude. Increases students' enjoyment of using English.
5. Improving speaking proficiency.
6. Improving listening proficiency.
7. Improving knowledge of grammar.
8. Improving reading proficiency. Students who do ER become better readers, learn reading strategies without being taught, and increase reading rates.

## **Issues in an Extensive Reading Assignment**

Teachers who want to introduce their students to extensive reading need to consider a number of issues.

1. The amount of reading to require. Scholars disagree on what it means to read a lot, or even how to measure the amount of reading. Some define what extensive reading is based on the number of words read, the number of pages read, the number of books/graded readers read, or the amount of time spent reading. However, as Day, et al. (2016), express it, the answer to the question of how much students should read is “as much as possible.” Teachers who are having students do extensive reading need to consider their own situation and their students’ level and situation. For a fairly advanced group of English majors at a university in Japan, might be required to read 500–1000 pages each semester and 500–1000 pages during the summer break. For lower-level students, for non-majors, etc., less could be required. The number of words or the amount of time spent reading (say, 20 minutes a day or two hours a week) might be better measures. If the library has a set of graded readers of a similar length, teachers could require the students to read one book a week.
2. The choice of materials. Available materials should suit students’ level of proficiency. For beginning and intermediate students, graded readers, which have different levels of difficulty and which are easy enough for students at lower levels of proficiency are a good choice.

More advanced students may read books written for native speakers. There should also be a wide variety of types of books (different genres, fiction and non-fiction), so that students can choose the type of books they like and enjoy reading them.

3. Activities related to extensive reading. Having students do activities related to their reading allows teacher to see whether students are reading and how they feel about it. Doing activities can also be fun, which motivates students and lets them know that learning can be fun. It can also help students develop other skills in English, such as speaking or writing. Students can learn what their classmates are reading and possibly find more books to read themselves.
4. How to integrate extensive reading into a curriculum. There are three ways to integrate ER into an existing curriculum – 1) create a new course that is completely ER ; 2) add to an existing course, along with intensive reading, training in reading strategies, etc., and 3) create an after school or lunchtime reading group.
5. Evaluation. Grades should be based on how much students read, and possibly their participation in activities.
6. Monitoring students' reading. Students should keep records of what they read. The teacher can also interview students individually or in groups about what they are reading and what difficulties they might be having. In these interviews, the teacher can also give students advice if they are having problems, for example, by suggesting that a

student who is stopping to look up words as they read instead mark words they do not know, try to figure out the meaning from the context, and go back and check the meanings of marked words at the end of each chapter or at the end of each day.

### **Introducing the Extensive Reading Assignments**

When introducing students to an extensive reading program, teachers should explain to students the importance of extensive reading and what they are going to be doing, for example reading one book a week, and explain the elements of the extensive reading program. In addition, here is some other important advice to give to students.

1. It is very important that students understand that they should choose books that they enjoy, and find a different book if they find they aren't enjoying the first book that they chose. It is helpful if students think about what kind of books they like to read of their native language – do they like mysteries? Do they like history? They can try to find those kinds of books for their extensive reading.
2. Students should also be sure to choose a book that is easy enough for them. They should be able to read it easily without a dictionary. Students often think that if a book is difficult for them, that's good. However, for extensive reading, that's not the case. They should choose a book that is comfortable and enjoyable for them to read without a struggle.

3. Students should not get bogged down in understanding everything or stopping to look up words that they don't understand. They should keep reading and if they understand the story in general, or the main points of a nonfiction book, then that is good enough. They don't need to understand everything. If they find this difficult, again, they should change to a different book.
  
4. When choosing a book, students should look at the cover, the title, and the picture on the front, and then turn it over and read about what the book is about. Does it sound interesting? If it does, they should read the first page or two. Is it easy to read? Are there many unknown words? If it seems easy enough then they should try reading that book.

## **Activities**

It is useful to have students carry out class activities related to the books that they read. As mentioned previously, activities allow the teacher to see whether the students are reading, they can be fun and therefore motivating, they can help students develop other skills, and students can also learn about what their classmates are reading and share what they are reading with their classmates.

### **1. Blogging**

Students can blog about the books that they are reading. They each start their own blog at <https://www.blogger.com/>. Teachers should assign the students to write a certain number of words each week (for example,

100 words), and give them suggested topics. Some good topics for blogging about extensive reading books include the following.

1. Describe your favorite character
2. Write a letter to a character
3. Write an alternative ending
4. Write one or more questions you'd like to ask the author and possible answers
5. Choose a gift for a character and explain why you chose it.
6. Describe the setting
7. Compare the culture the book with your culture
8. Write a diary entry for one of the characters
9. Write a missing scene
10. Write about what you think a character should have done differently and why
11. Give a character advice
12. Write about your favorite quotation or situation

Students can also be assigned to read each others' blog entries and respond to them.

In order to keep track of what students are doing, it is useful to have them fill out a form on which they record the number of words they read each week, the number of words they wrote in their blog, and which of their classmates they responded to.



## 2. Interviewing other students about the book they are reading

Part of the purpose of this activity is to give students a chance to talk about their book and also to find books that they might want to read in the future. The following handout is an example of one that can be used by students to record the information that they get about the books their classmates are reading. Depending on how many classmates the teacher wants each student to interview, the teacher can copy and paste these questions three times, four times, etc. Also, the questions can be varied.

### Extensive Reading Discussion

Talk to four other students (all of them outside your group) about a book they have read in English. Fill in the answers to the questions.

Book 1 — Student's name \_\_\_\_\_

Title \_\_\_\_\_

Author \_\_\_\_\_

What was the book about? (1-2 sentences)

What type of book was it? (science fiction, mystery, history, etc.)

Rate the book on the following scales.

uninteresting 1 2 3 4 5 interesting

easy 1 2 3 4 5 difficult

not recommended 1 2 3 4 5 recommended

Do you think you will read this book

definitely not 1 2 3 4 5 definitely

### **3. Give students time to read in class**

If there is time, even just 15 minutes, students can have at least a little time to read in class. To model for them, the teacher should read at the same time. This shows students that reading is important.

### **4. Reading aloud to students**

One way to introduce students to reading, or to motivate them to read at intervals, is to read a book aloud to them. The teacher can start by showing students the cover of the book and the title. The teacher can ask students what they think the book is about, or what they think of the illustration on the cover. While reading, the teacher can involve the students in reading by asking them questions. What do you think will happen next? What do you think about what a character just did? Which characters do you like/dislike? How do you think a character feels about something that happened?

### **5. Interviewing students**

It is useful for teachers to have conferences with individual students or small groups of students to see how they are doing. Questions that can be asked include whether the student is enjoying the book and why (if not, suggest that they change books); which character(s) they like and why; how much vocabulary do they encounter that they don't know; is the book easy or difficult, etc. If they are stopping to look up unknown words, suggest that they try to figure out the meaning from context. Make a note of unknown words and look them up at the end of the day or at the end of

the chapter.

## 6. Instant book reports

Write on the board:

I read a book called \_\_\_\_\_.

It's a/an \_\_\_\_\_ story. (adventure, mystery, love, detective, true)

It's about \_\_\_\_\_.

The main characters are \_\_\_\_\_. (names, jobs, personalities)

In the story, there was a problem. \_\_\_\_\_.

I liked/didn't like the book because \_\_\_\_\_.

Have students work in pairs or small groups. Partners and groups can ask questions about the book. After a time, partners can change.

(Adapted from Bamford and Day, 2004)

## 7. The 4/3/2 Technique

In this activity, students prepare to talk about the book they are reading in 4, then 3, then 2 minutes. They then form two concentric circles, with the inner circle facing out and the outer circle facing in. They tell the story of their book to the person they are facing in 4 minutes. Then one of the circles shifts one person to the right, and they tell the story of the book again, this time in 3 minutes. Finally, they shift one more time and tell the story in 2 minutes.

The times can be lengthened or shortened, depending on the time available and the abilities of the students.

(Adapted from Nation and Newton, 2009)

### **8. Drawing a picture/making a poster.**

Students can draw a picture or make a poster that represents some aspect of the book. They can talk to other students, explaining the book and the significance of the picture to a partner or a small group. Alternatively, some students' posters can be put up on the walls and other students can circulate and discuss the posters with the students who made them.

## **Conclusion**

Extensive reading is an approach to the teaching of reading that can both help students develop their reading skills and improve other skills. Teachers can guide students by giving them advice, such as suggesting that they do not stop and look up every word they encounter that they do not know. Students can also do in-class activities to share the books they are reading and learn about books that other students are reading.

## **References**

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