

Article

Student Voices on Weekly Extensive Reading Reports

Mathew White

Introduction

As Day and Park (2005) note, "In the last few decades, theories and models of reading have changed, from seeing reading as primarily receptive processes from text to reader to interactive processes between the reader and the text." The authors then proceed to assert that "it is critical that teachers help their students create meaning." (ibid) However, discussions with colleagues, in curriculum reviews, and department meetings, have often suggested that follow-up activities or tasks have a negative impact on students' extensive reading experiences as well as reduce the amount of time that students have available and will use for extensive reading. Colleagues often cite Principle 6 of the Top 10 Principles for Teaching Extensive Reading from Day and Bamford (2002), which states, "Reading is its own reward." However, Day and Bamford (ibid) acknowledge the value of follow-up activities for a variety of purposes, such as finding out what the student understood and experienced from the reading, monitoring students' attitudes toward reading, etc.

My hypothesis is that the assigning of book reports as a follow-up activity in extensive reading has been unfairly demonized. In fact, I believe that when implemented effectively (providing clear examples, novelty through a variety of types of reports, and giving students timely and meaningful feedback), extensive reading reports can and do have positive effects on student attitudes and practices of extensive reading.

This paper is a preliminary investigation into what Richard Elmore (2002 cited in Miller, 2009) describes as some of my "unexamined wallpaper - classroom practices and institutional policies that are so entrenched in school culture or a teacher's paradigm that their ability to affect students learning is never probed." Although I have discussed the use and/or omission of reports as follow-up assignments to extensive reading for many years, it has been some time since I have made a formal inquiry to my students about the impact such reports have upon their attitudes toward reading and the class as a whole.

Background

In two classes of First-Year Extensive Reading, students were introduced to the concepts

of extensive reading. They are expected to complete at least sixty minutes of reading outside of class each week, along with the completion of one of several types of book reports that are used to share about their books with partners in the following class.

Types of Book Reports

Each type of book report was A4 in size and included the following common elements: title, publisher, publisher's level, students rating of the book out of a possible 5 stars, assessment of the book's level as "too easy", "just right", or "too difficult". A question as to whether the students could read the book without stopping to look up words reminded them of one of the basic principles of reading fluently. Aside from these points, all book reports included space for a 7-word summary of the story to provide students with practice in demonstrating competency in what Barrett would refer to as the lowest level along the comprehension continuum (cited in Richards, 1999).

Beyond the common core elements of the book reports, I introduced various types of reports in order to avoid what Howard (2000) referred to as habituation, or, "the fatigue and boredom that can come from repeating the same task many times with little or no variation". Therefore, once students had experience in completing more than one type of book report, I often allowed students to choose between two types of reports (either Side A or Side B of the report paper distributed). For example, in one type of report, students could choose to explain the background and conflicts in the story, or select a passage from the story and explain the significance of the passage. On both types, there was also an additional section for students to write their thoughts and feelings. Another example is the type of report in which they had a choice of writing either a prequel, sequel or missing scene to the story. A third example is the type of report in which students were asked to write an imaginary dialog between themselves and someone else talking about the book, between themselves and one of the characters in the book, or between themselves and the author of the book (useful as an option when the story is nonfiction or an autobiography). A fourth type of report required students to make a graphic organizer or mind map of the book. For each of these reports, the students were provided with an example created by the teacher in order to clarify what was expected. Usually, the example used a story or extract that had already been read by the entire class, so that it would be easy for the students to understand.

Use of Reports in Class

Each week, in class, the students were arranged in pairs, and each partner would be responsible for using their reports to lead a discussion about the book that they had read.

Occasionally, students would be instructed to read their partner's book reports after discussing the books. The reports were collected and checked by the the teacher, and in addition to general feedback, grammar mistakes were corrected, with mistakes compiled and used for grammar clinics in class the following week. At the end of each semester, sample errors from the grammar clinics were used as items on grammar tests to hold students accountable for their learning. In addition, titles of books rated as 4 and 5 stars out of 5 were collected and distributed to the class as leads to possible books they might enjoy themselves.

Procedure for Collecting Student Perspectives on Reports

In the hopes of enlightening my teaching practices, at the end of their first year of Extensive Reading classes, I collected responses from 37 first-year students who were given fifteen minutes in class to write their own answers to the following question: "What do you think about completing book reports for this class?" The student responses were then compiled verbatim and identified as either being in favor of book reports, against reports or sitting on the fence regarding book reports. Next, the contents of the responses were categorized based on the type of effect the particular response suggested.

Absence of Malice

Thirty-five of the thirty-seven responses were identified as explicitly in favor of book reports. Two of the responses were identified as sitting the fence, as they included good points and bad points but did not include opinions as to whether the good outweighed the bad or vice versa. None of the responses were identified as being against book reports.

Responses Pertaining to Student Motivation to Read

As illustrated in Table 1, student responses suggest that the reports positively affected their motivation to read, with many acknowledging that they would not complete the reading assignment if such reports were not assigned. Students not only admitted that they would either embellish their reports on the amount of time that they spent reading, but that they might never learn to interact with books at all.

Table 1: The effect of reports on students' motivation to read

#2	I'm a lazy person and would never read English books if I didn't have this homework.
#3	If there were not the assignment of book report, I might not read book every week. I got into a habit of "edge reading"
#7	I try to read more books and read for longer time because of the exist of reports.
#8	By completing book reports, I can push myself to read more books. Deadline makes me serious about reading books.
#11	This homework made us to read more books.
#13	If the reports were not homework, I couldn't read books.
#14	If book report isn't homework I sometimes read book in English. But I read two books for a week.
#17	If it was not homework I would never read English books.
#19	... it give me a lot of chance read a lot of books.
#20	I think etensive reading homework is good for me. If you don't give me homework, I would not take time to read.
#23	I think this homework is good beacuse you or they can know that this man read a book and did homework.
#24	I think this report proves that we do homework and read books.
#27	If we don't have the reports, we can lie that we read more than 60 minutes, so we have to write reports to prove that we read.
#31	Also, if the book report is nothing, I'll not read books. I read books because I have homework about book report. I didn't want to write book report at first. However, I enjoy writing the book report and reading books. In this homework, I have to check time spent reading. Therefore, by checking the time, I tried to read the more book and understand the contents early.
#35	I think completing book reports is good for us. This is because we can get chance to read books. If there is no work to do so, some people will not read books, so it is good for us. If you just say, "Please read books.", people that do not read will be increasing.

Responses Pertaining to Depth of Understanding

As depicted in Table 2, students reported that the reports facilitated their ability to retain information, deepened their understanding, compelled them to be active readers, and prepared them for dicussing the stories in class. When reports are not assigned, students often claim that they are unable to remember even the basic storyline of the books. I would posit that one of the most valuable aspects of a good reading report prompt is that it helps students interact with the text. Students often need assistance getting beyond making only general comments, such as "It was interesting.", "I was scared.", or "I've never met a ghost, so I can't relate to the main character."

Table 2: Depth of understanding, ability to remember and discuss the story

#2	This helps me understand more.
#4	I think that completing book reports is useful because it could remain to write what we read. If we did not do it, we almost forget what we read until now.
#5	It always helps my understanding... if I write a book report before the class, I can tell a story without looking at a book or a report. ... it is helpful to prepare for telling a story to a partner.
#7	In addition, during class, I have to talk about the book I read. It helps me to build confidence to speak English.
#10	If homework is only reading book, I can't understand deeply because if I know the story, I can explain.
#12	Because mindmaps are help as to remember something.
#14	But I think that I don't like to tell about book for the first time. But now I like to tell and to hear about partner's book.
#16	I think book report is good for me, because I can remember inside of it.
#17	Of course, it takes long time to finish this homework to me. But I like to do this report. And I'm really happy when we share what we read, because I could feel like "I did"! strongly, and when my partner say "I want to read this book" like that I fell happy to. I really love this class, and I think book report is necessary for this class so I want to keep this book reports, whatever the reports style.
#19	I was able to read fast and understand characters' feeling in detail thanks to it.
#22	I think report is useful because we have to remember the context of the story to complete the report. However, if I don't have report I will just read and I won't read the same book again.
#27	I think completing books reports for this class is important for us because if we don't have to write reports, we don't try to understand the books which we choose and we just only read the sentences.
#29	If we have to just read book, we can't think about contain of book, what is the significant passage for me, and so on.
#31	I think this kind of report helps my learning because if I only read books, I will forget the contents soon.
#32	I think book report for this class is very useful because I can understand deeply.
#33	I think completing book reports for this class was very good. Because, completing book reports help me understand the contents further. And by doing this homework I can notice the new elements which I couldn't notice by reading the book only once.
#34	I think having a book report to write is a good thing. You look back to check the facts so it helps you remember the story.
#36	About completing book reports, I think it's really good. Because we can summarise the book. I don't summarise and read the book without this reports. The reports give opportunity to read, summarise, think more carefully about books.
#37	I think it is very good for me. First I think by doing this report we can remember the story and understand in a deep way.

Responses Pertaining to Positive Reading Experiences

As the responses in Table 3 suggest, students identify the reports as instruments for creating positive reading experiences, often transforming students from reluctant readers to enthusiastic ones. I think it is worth noting once again the importance of providing some variation in the types of reports in order to avoid the feeling of monotony that learners may experience if the same type of reports are required throughout the course.

Table 3: Responses pertaining to providing positive reading experiences

#2	I came to find interesting in reading books.
#8	Now, thanks to book reports, I like to read books.
#13	To read books in English every week is good for our custom to read books. I appreciate you that I became the person who likes books!
#14	I enjoy reading books.
#16	Before I wrote the book report, I read only and didn't write my opinion into the paper. I read one book and I read another book. Since I began to write the book report, I read the book and I put in my feeling like the main character. If we read the book without exciting, the book will change for a boring thing. It is important for us to read the book with my opinion.
#19	Also I am glad to see your comments or reviews. Thus they are one of the sources of my confidence.
#20	they are fun to think imaginary dialog and pre story or before story.
#24	... there are students who don't like reading English books, but this report is a chance to like reading.
#28	Thanks to the report, I like to read English books. I read books everyday, and as soon as I finished reading book, I started to write the report.

Responses Pertaining to Reports Improving English Skills

One of the most common types of student responses was in regard to the improvement of their English skills thanks to the reading reports (see Table 4). Some responses focused on vocabulary or grammar, while others included skills transferable to other subjects, such as summarizing, analyzing and expressing their own opinions.

Table 4: Book reports improving English skills.

#3	This is one of the significant homework assignments to enhance my English abilities. I believe my vocabulary developed by reading book without dictionary (predicting).
#4	... to write report could find my mistaken grammar. When it returned to me, it was corrected a lot. So, at that time I could notice my mistake and improve my English skills.
#7	I can expand my vocabulary. Moreover, these days, I can predict the meaning of the word and the story when I encounter the word I have never seen.
#11	Our analyzing, reading, writing and listening skills improved thanks to this homework.
#12	It is the useful way to keep in touch English and reading. Additionally, we can train our summarizing skills it is also relate to know how to read, understand and predict from the storyline. It's the most important think that thinking about "What happpens next." It is a predict future, next story and flexibility to connect the situation and background.
#13	Also, our reading skills will become great and we can learn a lot of words or sentences from the books. So, I think the homework is very good.
#14	I think that book report can improve my English skills. When I wrote book report I should read book, think character's thinking and write about book. And I speak about book. To write book report is good for me.
#15	I think it is troublesome to read a book. However, it is very useful to write book reports once a week. I think that my skills of English will improve by book reports. For example, I can improve my writing skill by writing book reports, my reading skill by reading a lot of books, and my speaking skill by sharing book reports with my partner. So, I enjoy writing book reports a lot and listening to my partner's book reports.
#17	I think Book Reports is really useful to improve my English skills. I really don't like English reading and I'm not good at English grammar, so book reports help me to read English books and write English reports. Of course, it takes long time to finish this homework to me. But I like to do this report.
#18	I can practice to write my opinion in English.
#19	I think book reports are very useful for me because to practice writing English, tell my opinions, learn a lot of English words...
#20	And, this homework makes me strong as to not only reading but also writing. Surely homework takes me a lot of time, but I think I need homework to improve my English skills for now.
#21	We can get use to reading English. We have to get 500 point on TOEFL test to go overseas to study English. So, it is good for us to read English books daily. We can learn unknown words. Using dictionary is good, but expect is more better than it.
#25	I think book report is good for us because writing book contents, conflict and my thought lead to my English improve. Actually, recently, I feel my English skills are improved, so I talked with my partner fluently before in this class. I also feel I can read book early before. Thanks to this homework, I can understand the passage and meaning of word without using a dictionary.
#26	We can understand our grammatical mistakes because we have Grammar Clinic. I believe grammar is most important factor if I want to be an English teacher. Another good point is

	Extensive Reading. We have to read at least one book outside the class. It maintain our English skills, and we can practice reading faster.
#27	Mat corrects our grammar mistakes, so we can also learn grammar.
#28	I think that book reports help my English. When I write book reports, I always write with simple English. I think using simple English is important to become an English teacher. Also, this homework help my writing skill. If I don't have this report, I can't write English sentences by myself.
#29	I think book report is good to develop our English skills. Because we can try to use many skills. For example, reading, writing, thinking (what should I write), listening (my partner's opinions) speaking (discribing my story to a partner).
#32	Writing report and telling the story for others is not easy but it is good tool to study English I think. I think writing report is also useful for grammar clinic.
#33	I think that doing seven word summary will be good effect no only for English skills but also for logical thinking.
#34	You can look back on your past reports and compare it to your latest report to know how much you have grown or compare what you thought of something, and this gives you a chance to practice your writing skills and explaining or describing things in English.
#37	I think it help me a lot to improve my English skills. When doing this report I try to use another words phrase to summary books. Sometimes it takes a lot of time, but we can learn some new words or some new expression. And I like doing this report.

Responses Pertaining to Increasing Learner Familiarity with Literature

Although less numerous, student responses also showed recognition of the potential benefits reports have in increasing their opportunities to gain information about good books. Indeed, one of the greatest challenges for a reading teacher is matching the individual levels and interests of students with the right books. Fortunately, reports can assist students in providing accurate and detailed introductions to their peers, so that they are able to articulate to their classmates why they may or may not want to read the books themselves.

Table 5: Increasing familiarity with titles, authors and series

#11	The book report for this homework made us know about interesting books and their moral lessons.
#15	My partner often recommend a book which my partner read and thought it is good. I read such books recently. I think that is is one of way to enjoy writing book reports.
#25	Sharing book report is also good fo us because we learn different opinion and we can find interesting book which partner has read.
#32	Additionally, pair activity is good for me because I can get information of good books which my classmates read.

Responses Pertaining to the Social Aspects of Reading Reports

By far one of the least in terms of frequency of types of responses, I think it is still worth noting that the sharing of stories with their classmates gives more meaning to the assignment of reading. In Response #9, the student made the following comment: "I think this homework is useful! I can not only write my impression but also share it with classmates. It is not meaningful just to read books. Sharing and report are good ways." When students complete an activity for a class, it is only natural that they expect there to be some inclusion or reference to that activity in class.

Responses Pertaining to More Options in Terms of Input

Five responses included a desire for more variety in terms of input, such as the use of intensive reading materials like newspaper or on-line articles, or allowing opportunities for extensive listening through media such as TED Talks or movies.

Conclusion

This preliminary investigation into student perspectives on the efficacy of reading reports resulted in an affirmation of the many benefits students receive from the completion of reports about their extensive reading. Contrary to some common criticisms of follow-up activities turning students away from reading, the study suggests that the reports do, in fact, help many students create meaning and reorganize their understanding of the stories in memorable ways, as well as create positive experiences by allowing them to tap in to their creativity when producing their own stories using the books read as springboards. In addition, students appreciate the benefit from the testing of their English language skills along with the feedback and corrections provided. I hope to continue taking students' voices into consideration while making more informed decisions about the tasks and procedures I incorporate in my classes.

References

- Barrett, T. C. (1972). *Taxonomy of reading comprehension*. Reading 360 Monograph. Lexington, MA: Ginn & Co.
- Day, R. and Bamford, J. (2002) *Top Ten Principles for Teaching Extensive Reading*. Reading in

- a Foreign Language. 14(2), 136-1.
- Day, R.R. and Park, J. (2005, May). Developing reading comprehension questions. Reading in a Foreign Language. 17(1), 61-73.
- Elmore, R.F. (2002, May). Hard questions about practice. Educational Leadership, 59(8), 22-25.
- Howard, P. (2000). The owner's manual for the brain: Everyday applications from mind-brain research. Atlanta, GA: Bard Press.
- Miller, D. (2009) The Book Whisperer: Awakening the Inner Reader in Every Child. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass
- Richards, J. (1999). The language teaching matrix. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.