



Well Begun is Half Done- Study on an English Extensive Reading Project in a Chinese University

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Abstract

Starting from the characteristics and the benefits of extensive reading, this paper gave a detailed description of an English extensive reading practice carried out in a Chinese university. It pointed out problems found in the process, and analyzed the results of a questionnaire survey at the end of the practice. The case study discovered that most university students have difficulty in judging their own English reading ability and cannot match their language proficiency with their reading levels efficiently. Teachers' participation in the project emphasized on teachers' helping students objectively measure their reading levels, recommending appropriate books, organizing diverse activities to enhance reading interest and persistence. Guidance focused on the establishment and maintenance of a dynamic reading list based on students' English reading levels including Graded Readers. In addition, teachers should carefully consider the evaluation means of reading practice, avoiding adding tremendous pressure to readers, for the ultimate goal is to develop students' extensive reading autonomy on a regular basis.

Key words: Extensive reading; Reading levels; Graded readers; Teachers' roles

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INTRODUCTION

As an indispensable skill of human beings, reading is fundamentally crucial to educational success, for reading comprehension provides the basis for most learning that takes place in the school setting or in the society. Reading is not only crucial in a mother tongue learning context, it is also "the crucial, and in some senses, the central component in successful foreign language acquisition" (Beglar & Hunt, 2005, p7). Reading has many forms, such as skimming and scanning, reading for gist, reading for fun, etc. For example, currently in Chinese universities, apart from English language majors, most undergraduate and postgraduate students have two English intensive reading and writing lessons (90 minutes in total) per week. During these two lessons, students are learning key vocabulary, sentence patterns and text structure by reading authentic or adapted English texts in deep. Students' reading flow is mercilessly interrupted by teachers' explanation of endless language points. The purpose of this type of reading is learning new words, usage of language structure and passing the final test! Yet, the real purpose of learning a foreign language is far from passing exams, for most of the Chinese university students, a good command of English is definitely helpful for their academic research, job hunting or overseas studies in a globalised world. Obviously, 90 minutes per week is far less than adequate to cultivate an efficient reader on university level who is facing a world where English is most widely used in all walks of life. The majority of those time-changing discoveries, scientific breakthroughs, and digital inventions are brought to us in English! Given this reality, many EFL teachers and students themselves turn to another type of reading-extensive reading, as a supplement to in-class intensive reading.

As the guest writer of British Council's *TeachingEnglish* website, Alan Maley (2009) was once

called to check what ER really involves. Based on Richard Day's list of key characteristics of ER (Day, 2002) and the supplement made by Philip Prowse (2002), Maley (2008) proposed a digest of the two lists of factors or principles for successful ER as follows:

- (1) Students read a lot and read often.
- (2) There is a wide variety of text types and topics to choose from.
- (3) The texts are not just interesting: they are engaging/compelling.
- (4) Students choose what to read.
- (5) Reading purposes focus on: pleasure, information and general understanding.
- (6) Reading is its own reward.
- (7) There are no tests, no exercises, no questions and no dictionaries.
- (8) Materials are within the language competence of the students.
- (9) Reading is individual, and silent.
- (10) Speed is faster, not deliberate and slow.
- (11) The teacher explains the goals and procedures clearly, then monitors and guides the students.
- (12) The teacher is a role model...a reader, who participates along with the students.

This long list includes both what and how. Following this list, Maley (2009), standing upon shoulders of many former researchers like Day and Bamford (1998), Waring (2000, 2006), and Krashen (2004), concluded that successful extensive reading will add up to many benefits, such as developing learner autonomy, offering comprehension input, enhancing general language competence, developing general world knowledge, extending vocabulary growth, sustaining motivation to read more and eventually, improving writing. A good writer must be an excellent reader first! The significance and benefits of extensive reading in learning foreign languages have long been studied and proved by many language teachers and researchers around the world. If old stories are too far away to make young people today believe the importance of reading widely and regularly in the target languages they are learning, some recent studies have done the same job. Davoudi, Zolfagharkhani and Rezaei (2016) examined the English language proficiency of students who did extensive reading and students who followed the ordinary reading course in an Iranian university, and found the two groups had a significant difference in the post-tests. Even though some extensive reading participants received authentic materials and others read simplified texts. There was no significant difference between their post-test scores. The researchers strongly recommended that extensive reading activities should be integrated into curriculum courses in order to develop EFL learners' English proficiencies. Boakye (2017) did a similar study among first-year students at a tertiary institute in South Africa, from which she concluded that ER increased students' affective levels,

as well as their reading habits and reading proficiency in both pleasure reading and academic reading. All the above studies told us that extensive reading works in English language learning process, however, some researches in Chinese contexts discovered challenges and problems of extensive reading among universities students. Chen and Sun (2014, p.64) found that it was difficult to improve Chinese university students' reading competence due to the unevenness of students' English levels, the lack of background knowledge and the ineffective reading habits. Whether the 12 tips are universally applicable? Hu (2016), when did an extensive reading project in a university in Taiwan, found that even students know clearly the benefits of extensive reading, most of them couldn't finish reading because too many new words discouraged them and hurt their patience. With so many benefits of extensive reading, why negative results happen in Chinese projects? The current study aims to figure out the following two questions:

- (1) What is the first step in an English extensive reading project in Chinese universities?
- (2) What exactly are the teachers' roles in an English extensive reading project in Chinese universities?

These two questions are connected since if teachers seize the first step correctly, the good beginning will push the project forward, then teachers can play their other roles in effect.

1. CASE STUDY

1.1 Samples

In the spring semester of the academic year 2017 - 2018, the author, as an English Reading & Writing course teacher, organized an extensive reading project in two postgraduate classes in a Chinese university. Each class had 45 students, and they were born and received their first and secondary education in more than 20 provinces in China. Later, they finished their undergraduate studies in universities across China. One class was majored in Social Work and the other was Teaching Chinese to Speakers of Other Languages. The geographic origin of the sample students generally covered broad areas in China and their past educational experiences varied from one another. The author also compared the entrance English test scores of the two classes, finding that the number of students categorized in each score section (e.g. 80-89, 70-79, 60-69, 50-59) did not have a sharp difference between the two classes. These two classes are seen as even sample groups in the study.

1.2 Project Initiation

At the first lesson of the semester, the author informed students of the extensive reading project and introduced some former research literature on the benefits of ER. Students were required to select a book to read by

themselves and fill in the book information form within one week time. The book information form differed in two classes. The form for Class 1 (Social Work) included student's name, book name, the author of the book and pages of the whole book. The form for Class 2 (TCSOL), besides all the information in the form for Class 1, had an extra column, which asked about their intended way to do a final report. The teacher listed some options, such as a book review in written form, presentation of book summary, character analysis of protagonists, excerpt recitation, etc. However, the teacher didn't include the project into any part of the final marks. The first step in this case study was asking students to choose a book by themselves, identical with Maley's proposal: "students choose what to read"; for Class 1, their luck was extended by reading with no pressure. The study hopes to explore the different outcomes of the ER project in these two classes. Which one will be more successful according to the suggested 12 tips? One noticeable thing is within the first week; the author came across students and received emails from both classes asking about how to choose a right book. The author told them to do some research on books based on their interests, their previous knowledge and their language proficiency.

All the students completed their forms in the second week, indicating that students know the importance of extensive reading to their English learning and have the motivation to begin the project. Remembering that the teacher should monitor and guide students and be a role model, the author showed the book she chose for herself to the classes and encouraged them to start reading on a regular basis right away.

1.3 Project in Course

It seems that the project had a good beginning since everyone had a book in hand and a will in heart. As an initiator and organizer of the project, the author seized the weekly meeting opportunity with the students to remind them of our project. Some students brought the books with them in the bag and squeezed time here and there to advance a few pages each day; some took full advantages of their phones to read soft copies; a few students joined reading programs through online APPs and checked in everyday so their reading could be recorded and displayed in their WeChat groups. The teacher read some wonderful sentences from her own book to the students as a cue of regular reading.

At the end of the semester, Class 2 made their reading reports using two 90-minute sessions. Most of the students prepared PPT, presenting highlights, story family trees, or illustrations of the books. All students had some personal views on the books they were reading; at least this proves that they were thinking when reading and this added value is rewarding. Even with no extra marks adding to their finals, students put efforts into reading and the report.

After the report, the teacher made a survey in both classes. The survey is in questionnaire form and includes a couple of questions, concerning students' reading time per week, reasons of choosing the books, expected roles of teachers in the project, challenges in completing the project, and the future reading plan, etc. All the 90 students completed the questionnaire.

2. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSIONS

Through analyzing the effective questionnaires, the author found even avid readers in Chinese are not necessarily regular readers in English. The time gap is up to 6-7 hours between the maximum time spent in Chinese and in English reading. The textbook reading has already been excluded. The responses to the reasons of selecting current books do not sharply differ. Three popular bases are book review (25.56%), experience of watching the adapted movies from the books (23.33%) and recommendations from friends or teachers (22.22%). A bit less than 20% students chose the books because they read the Chinese translations before. Just a few others read the books because they are related to their major research interests. It indicates that the majority Chinese university students haven't voluntarily set up a solid connection between their major studies and their English reading. This finding has been confirmed by Cai Jigang, a professor in academic English from Fudan University who recently studied how English has been taught in Japanese universities as an academic tool. As early as 1998, while Chinese universities considered English leaning as part of humanity and art education, Japan has invited prestigious scholars on ESP (English for Specific Purpose) like John Swales, Tony Dudley Evan and V.J. Bhatia to give lectures in Japanese universities to guide them to open ESP courses, helping students' major studies and research skills using English. They lead and guide medical students to read *Because We Care- English for Healthcare Professionals*; Science students read *Getting to Know SciTech Genres* and Sociology students read *The Real World Today*. (Cai, 2018). Chinese university students are not yet led and taught to read for academic and major purposes.

Another noticeable finding is that in both classes, less than 30% students finished reading their books, even though Class 2 had a bit higher percentage, which may be resulted from the report task. What hinders them to finish reading the books selected by themselves? When looking for challenges during the project, 67.78% students reported that they didn't have clear and accurate judgment on their English levels so they didn't know how to choose a right book. The following reason is that the new words, grammar and idioms block their way (61.11%), 58.89% students blamed their own weak control and poor discipline. Cultural differences, available reading resources and motivations came one after another.

Thinking twice on these reasons, it is not difficult to see how important the beginning of the project is. The biggest problem is that students don't know how their English is! Even though they know their CET (College English Test) marks, they have no idea how to match the marks with their reading levels. This is not modestly highly approved by our traditional culture, this is a harsh reality that many university students in China don't know exactly their own English reading proficiency. Answers to another question-What roles should English teachers play in an extensive reading project?- confirmed this situation. 75.56% students agreed that teachers should help students assess their English language levels and recommend books according to different levels. The first research question is thus answered here: the first step in an English extensive reading project in Chinese universities is assessing readers' language proficiency which can match their reading levels. From survey responses, we also know the first step needs teachers' assistance.

There are many ways for teachers to assess students' language levels, such as standard examinations of English Proficiency; College English Test Band 6, IELTS and TOEFL are typical and widely acknowledged. However, the book market doesn't provide books classified by readers' IELTS bands or TOEFL marks. Some publishers like Macmillan and Pearson do provide reading level test and level-coded books – commonly known as Graded Readers. When asking respondents their knowledge about Graded Readers, only 6.67% of them knew well and tried before; 34.44% of them knew a bit yet never tried before and all the others (58.89%) knew nothing about it. Strikingly, among those tried Graded Readers before, 50% considered Graded Readers helped them tremendously in improving their English. Based on this, teachers may introduce readers level testing resources to students for them to test themselves before choosing books. Some publishers, such as Cambridge University Press adopt Cambridge English Proficiency levels A-C. Equivalence between A-C system and IELTS band system can be found¹since IELTS exams are more widely taken in China right now. Students can be guided to translate their IELTS bands into CEFR levels. Besides, these publishers offer genres and series of books which help readers target their interested books. Basically any readers in EFL context could start from Graded Readers. When readers go as far as they could in Graded Readers, they would enjoy more freedom in choosing what they want to read in the real sea of books without being confined too much by vocabulary, genres or poor discipline, for reading has become a habit.

According to the survey, apart from the role of helping students evaluate their English level and recommending right books for them, teachers are expected to organize diverse reading activities to stimulate and maintain

reading interest(56.67%). However, among the 90 respondents, only 30% of them agreed that the project should be strictly monitored and included into the final marking system. The others preferred reading with no tasks and assessments. It is safe to conclude that on the postgraduate level in Chinese universities, students emphasize more on autonomous reading and quality activities which can inspire them to read sustainably.

CONCLUSION

Through the English extensive reading project for postgraduate students in a Chinese universities, the author achieved many valuable findings, among them the most striking discovery is that most Chinese university students do not have adequate knowledge on their own English reading proficiency. For them, the first step to begin a reading project is to test their reading levels and choose books accordingly. Thus, Graded Readers and reading test designed by big publishers are recommended as ready-made products and services. Teachers are particularly expected by students to help them assess the reading levels and recommend books. Moreover, diverse reading activities rather than strict inspection and marks are greatly needed by students for the purpose of reading with interest and persistence. More studies on effective reading test method and intriguing reading activities are expected in Chinese university context so English reading will be truly promoted in the long run.

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¹ Common European Framework: <https://www.ielts.org/ielts-for-organisations/common-european-framework>

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