

WE'VE GOT OUR NOSES IN A BOOK: IMPLEMENTING EXTENSIVE READING IN THE ESL COMPOSITION CLASSROOM

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ABSTRACT

The cornerstone of instruction in the English as a Second Language (ESL) composition classroom is providing opportunities that nurture and encourage language acquisition. Students engage in written assignments, collaborative projects, class discussions, and instructor-selected readings, all with the end goal of increasing students' English language acquisition. An oft-overlooked opportunity is extensive reading. Bolstered by research by Hedgcock and Ferris (2018) as well as Krashen (2018) and others, an extensive reading project was implemented over two semesters at a midwestern metropolitan university as part of an ESL composition course. The guiding principles and lessons learned are shared to help other ESL instructors see practical ways to implement this fundamental, but sometimes tricky-to-implement learning tool.

INTRODUCTION

In postsecondary English as Second Language (ESL) composition courses, the primary focus is writing, including the complex aspects of form, genre, style, etc. Writing instruction, however, does not exist in a vacuum; it is generally accepted that strong writers are also strong readers with extensive vocabularies. For ESL students, these are heavy expectations, yet they clearly support each other: reading mastery lends itself to heightened semantic and vocabulary exposure which, in turn, paves the way to mastery of academic writing, and subsequently,

academic success (Lems et al., 2009). By the same token, the NCTE Policy Brief on Reading and Writing Across the Curriculum (2011) echoes the importance of the link between writing and reading, stressing that mastering concepts becomes difficult for students if they are lacking or have underdeveloped strategies for both reading and writing about course material. Thus, the question arises: do postsecondary ESL writing instructors have a responsibility to expand their curriculum to ensure their students build the *reading* skills necessary to succeed in their academic pursuits? If yes, how do ESL writing instructors decide where to begin incorporating more reading instruction into their courses? And which kinds of reading instruction should be added? One viable solution lies in the incorporation of extensive reading (ER) into the postsecondary ESL writing curriculum.

Extensive reading (ER), often called “pleasure reading, free voluntary reading, and sustained silent reading” (Jeon & Day, 2016, p. 246), can be defined in a multitude of ways. Hedgcock and Ferris (2018) explained that the variety in definitions for ER are often dependent on if and how ER is viewed through the lens of theory and/or practice. However, we have employed their explanation as our working definition: “[ER] is, put simply, the process of reading for quantity, specifically in contrast to *intensive reading*, in which a specific text is read closely and carefully for academic or informal purposes” (p. 219). While ESL writing courses may incorporate some intensive reading along with instruction on related vocabulary and skills such as annotation, ER is often excluded and is described by Hedgcock and Ferris (2018) as “underutilized and even ignored in curricula, course/lesson design, and materials development” (p. 221). Jeon and Day (2016) go further and explain that despite the clear benefits of ER, it is largely not practiced in school settings, even in ESL or EFL programs, where students are positioned for great gains stemming from ER. We argue that ER is an essential component of

postsecondary ESL writing courses, due to its countless benefits as presented in the next section. Based on the lessons learned from its inclusion over two semesters, we then offer insights on how ER was incorporated in our curriculum and how it could be implemented in practical ways in other instructors' classrooms.

BENEFITS OF EXTENSIVE READING

ER, while less commonly utilized than its counterpart of intensive reading, has countless benefits for ESL learners. This is becoming more widely known, as support for ER and its benefits to writing has grown since Day and Bamford's (1998) reminder that we learn to write through reading. From a language learning standpoint, Lao and Krashen (2000) demonstrated how reading for pleasure not only increases students' accuracy, but also rate of reading, and Krashen (2018) more specifically explored how the benefits of ER extend into "nearly all aspects of literacy, including reading comprehension, writing style, vocabulary, grammar, and spelling" (p. 17). Similarly, Hedgcock and Ferris (2018) explored how it is through ER that ESL writers gain the exposure to important language patterns and that "ER naturally exposes readers to naturally occurring phrasal and clausal patterns, repeated and alternate uses of lexical items and their spellings, and a range of other graphological features such as paragraphing, punctuation and capitalization conventions" (p. 226). Finally, from a composition standpoint: one way that students gain the confidence needed to try new writing patterns is by first seeing them and understanding them in reading (Lems, Miller, & Soro, 2009).

Support for this approach as a learning mechanism has grown with Hedgcock and Ferris (2018) strongly stating: "rarely in language education do we find a teaching approach that is so universally hailed as beneficial, important, and necessary—truly an approach that has *no* detractors and many fervent advocates" (p. 221). Because of these benefits, ER should find its

way beyond ESL reading classes and into those for writing and composition. However, there may be many reasons, including a lack of time, resources, and administrative support, or even an absence of understanding on how to administer a program for ER (Hedgcock & Ferris, 2018), that keep instructors from incorporating ER into their curricula.

ESL instructors have a responsibility to support their students' growth in writing through the incorporation of not only intensive reading but also more sustained reading for pleasure. If the goal is to provide students with tools for their academic careers that enable them to sustain their learning inside and outside of the classroom, ER must be one of those tools. Hedgcock and Ferris (2018) continued that "it seems fair to assume that having tools at one's disposal through reading is not only *helpful* to L2 production but *indispensable* to it" (p. 227). However, if ESL instructors expect students to read extensively, it is not sufficient to simply ask students to read on their own. Instructors must create a meaningful curricular component in their writing courses that demonstrates the value of extensive reading for students through its carefully designed implementation as students may not inherently see the benefits on their own (Stoeckel, Reagan, & Hann, 2007).

APPLICATION: EXTENSIVE READING AS A CURRICULAR COMPONENT

Convinced of the benefits listed above, an extensive reading pilot was created for our department's English as a Second Language II course —the ESL credit-bearing writing course that precedes the mainstream composition sequence. This was a wholly new curricular component for the course and required careful crafting. While we did not doubt that an ER component would be beneficial to students' learning, we were also driven by the desire to include ER in such a way that students might come to acknowledge the benefits and not feel like ER was simply busy work. While Silent Sustained Reading endeavors of younger grades have

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appeal for their specific age levels, we felt that college students would not inherently see value in class time framed as “read whatever you’d like for a certain amount of time.”

Furthermore, we were careful to consider our varied student population: exchange students, refugees, and immigrants. Academically, international exchange students have been admitted to the university either via IELTS or TOEFL with scores of at least 6.0 and 600 respectively; refugee and immigrant students gain admission via ACT scores and high school GPAs. Both student groups are placed into the ESL courses after taking an English Department placement exam which assesses their language skills as a non-native English student. Moreover, we knew from previous discussions with students that most were not familiar and/or comfortable with traditional American library interactions (finding books, checking out books, etc.) A final note about our students is that overall they can be likened to what is often called a “reluctant reader,” albeit not always for the same reasons as native speakers. ESL students have varying experience with reading in English, but from our experience the students in our classes were likely to have read no more than one or two full books in English. Many students admitted they had never completed a book in English at all, and some admitted they had never read a full book in their native language either.

In addition to carefully considering how to frame the program for our student population, the second goal was to ensure that the ER program was manageable for instructors. Therefore, after implementing a one-semester pilot on a smaller scale (with limited participation with two instructors), the ER component was extended into a second semester with instructional revisions made based on the instructors’ and students’ experiences in the first semester. Revisions focused on ease of implementation for instructors and ease of participation for students. Our process and lessons learned are explored in the remaining sections of this paper and can be grouped into the

following four categories: 1) naming, 2) parameters, 3) library involvement, and 4) assessment. Each section details major considerations that we made—and that we believe must be made with an ER program—as well as outlines how we handled such considerations. These four topics are presented in an order that mirrors how this program was introduced to students. We hope that by detailing our experience, other ESL instructors might feel more empowered to try extensive reading in their writing classes and also have a better sense of how they could logistically implement the program.

Naming: What to call this course component

Deciding what to name this course component is critical to its success. It was clear from the beginning that we could not call the course component “extensive reading.” The name needed to be easily understandable by students, both giving a clear understanding of what they would be doing as well as the purpose behind the component. Thus, “independent reading” was used. We found this descriptor to be more accessible for students and less “academic-sounding” than “extensive reading” or other common iterations (e.g. free voluntary reading). “Independent” connotes student-led learning as well as student choice—both positive aspects for any course component. Additionally, we found it important to include a description on the syllabus. Here is the syllabus description we used:

With guidance from the instructor, you will choose one novel-length book to read over the course of the semester. The instructor will help you narrow down appropriate options, but you will also have freedom to choose the topic based on your interests. We will go together to the [campus] library and check out books for free using your [student ID card]. We will use this independent reading as subject matter for some of our writing, both on Canvas discussion boards and during in-class writing. This component of the

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course is motivated by 3 main reasons: 1) Reading books that you're interested in has a hugely positive impact on language development; 2) We value having additional content to write about beyond our textbook; and 3) Becoming familiar with [our campus library] and its functions is an important part of being successful in your studies at [our university].

The ER program was previewed on the first day of class and then started a few weeks into the semester once all students were settled.

Parameters: What will they read and how much?

One challenge to implementing an extensive reading component is deciding the parameters, especially when it comes to reading choice. What should/can students read? How much should they read? What other parameters should be put in place to keep everything fair, but also manageable? If students are given too much freedom, this learning component feels futile. If every student is required to read the same book, one of the core tenets is taken away: student choice. Gallagher (2009) detailed the ways mandatory high school reading can kill students' interest in reading, which he called "readicide." Huynh (2016) applied this worry to the ESL classroom. Both scholars advocated for students choosing their own book selections and claim that there is higher student buy-in when they can choose their own reading material. However, even though they need to have choice, students still want parameters, especially ESL students who are new-to-college. Parameters help them feel secure and feel like the assignment or course component is well-thought-out as Speck (2000) explained that "the more an assignment asks students to exert themselves in a variety of directions, the more 'errors' will be evident." In our case, an "error" could be a student choosing a book that is too long and difficult for them, which may lead them to feel overwhelmed and defeated early on. For this reason, we

narrowed their choices in ways that were non-intrusive and pedagogically sound (i.e. page length of book). For the pilot, students were asked to choose a book of at least 200 pages to read over a 10-week span. (More information on book selection is given in the next section: “Library Involvement”). A 200-page book over 10 weeks equals 20 pages per week or about 3 pages per day. Our courses last 16 weeks and we chose 10 weeks for the ER program because the library checkout period is 12 weeks. This allowed one week to make sure students like the book and one week to write about it after finishing.

In addition to book length, reading level is also an important consideration. Due to this, the book selections need to be high interest and at an accessible language level. These necessities, plus the ideal range of about 200 pages, led us to focus on the Young Adult (YA) and Juvenile (JUV) section of our library collection.

Before searching for books, students were introduced to common genres and then asked to complete a questionnaire including the following questions:

- What do you like to do in your free time?
- What are some of your favorite movies?
- What are some of your favorite TV shows?
- “I enjoy movies and television about...” (choose all that apply)
 - Science fiction or fantasy
 - Romance or love
 - Children and family
 - Comedy
 - Mysteries
 - Sports

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- Animals
- Other

Students took their questionnaire answers and created keywords to search in the library catalog in the YA and JUV collection. Some students who felt they had stronger reading skills chose adult fiction or “popular fiction” from the main stacks in the library. Still other students, perhaps more reluctant readers, chose graphic novels. In all cases, the scaffolding they were given with the questionnaire coupled with the freedom to choose any book of appropriate length that interested them, made one of our core objectives—choosing a high-interest book—transparent to the students and easily obtainable.

As with any pilot program, we experienced some unforeseen obstacles. Many students chose YA books that were over 200 pages (sometimes even extending into the 300-page range). Also, some students chose nonfiction books. Both of these choices created extra hurdles. An ESL student who chooses a 300-page fantasy YA novel would need to read 30 pages a week to finish the book in 10 weeks. The unique challenges of fantasy novels made even this 30-page goal tough for some students to manage. In short, some students chose novels that were too difficult for them because of the subject matter, writing style, linguistic level, or a combination of all of the above. As for nonfiction books, their incredibly varied nature led to one student choosing a book about the start of Google, which read very much like one cohesive narrative, to another student choosing an informative book about sharks, which was mostly small essays. This mainly created an issue when it came to assessment (see the “Assessment” section below for more on this).

As with any teaching component, more specifics were added to the parameters in the second iteration. After the pilot, we made several updates, including the following:

1. **Shortening the required page amount to 150.** This allowed for more JUV books to be chosen since they often fall just short of 200 pages. A 150-page book requires 15 pages of reading per week, which is more manageable for novice readers. The language level is also easier to manage.
2. **Focusing on fiction, rather than allowing non-fiction.** This allowed for the assessment measures to be more streamlined across all students. It also encouraged continued reading due to the nature of one long storyline.
3. **Giving a suggested reading list of 150-200 page books in our library's YA and JUV collection.** For the second time around, we curated a list of appropriate books and included their titles, authors, summaries, and genres. We focused this list on books with decorative covers. Many libraries strip hardcover books of their dust jackets and then the books are left very plain. We found that students had low interest in picking up a book with no cover. Therefore, we focused on paperback books and the few hardcover books with decorative covers that were roughly 150-200 pages. At the conclusion of our pilot, we asked students if they would recommend their book to other ESL students and added those titles to the list as well. Students are still allowed to suggest or find book choices of their own, but the guiding list seemed to reduce anxiety of choice.
4. **Not allowing books based on popular movies** (e.g. *Harry Potter* or *The Hunger Games*). In retrospect, we determined that it was simply too easy to “cheat” and read a book that was also available in a movie format. It was equally difficult for us to assess if a student had actually read the book or was drawing on information from the movie. Furthermore, it seemed that the students who chose books that were made into

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popular movies did not read as much as students who chose books that were new to them.

One final note about book choice: some students chose adult fiction, or “popular fiction,” which was also allowed. The key is that the instructor and librarians need to help guide students into high-interest books.

Library involvement

An extensive reading program is made infinitely easier with access to a campus library. This course component would not have been possible without the usage and involvement of our own campus library. Fortunately, our library has a robust YA and JUV collection. This may not be the case at all university libraries, in which case an extensive reading component could be enacted in partnership with local public libraries. We found it important for students to be able to check out the books for free. We did not have the means for a classroom library, and we did not want students to have to buy another book for the class (there is already a course textbook and ordering another book a few weeks into the semester presents delivery issues). Plus, learning how to utilize the campus library and check out books was one of the founding objectives of this course component.

In addition to utilizing the campus library for the books, we also worked closely with campus librarians. Students spent one day of class in the library. Some of the librarians' roles included:

- Explaining genres
- Demonstrating use of the course catalog
- Explaining the call number system
- Recommending titles to students

- Helping students search for and find books on the shelves
- Explaining checkout and renewal procedures

Depending on class size, having librarians available to help students find books on the shelves is indispensable. One instructor cannot help an entire class search for and find books at once, and since call number systems can be incredibly tricky, it is crucial that students receive help with finding books on the shelves. If possible, two days at the library would be ideal. We recognize that two whole days of class might not be available though.

Assessment

Perhaps the most complex question in regard to an extensive reading component is: does it need assessment? And if so, how should it be assessed? Advocates of ER claim that the goal is the reading itself, not assessing the reading. But practical college teachers also know that their students are extremely busy and spread thin. An extra course component that is not tied to any assessment measures or tangible course points is unlikely to receive buy-in from students. It would begin to feel like busy work and easily get pushed to the bottom of their priority list.

We have now tried two different models for assessment:

1. In-class writing
2. Out-of-class discussion posts

During the pilot semester, students wrote about their book three separate times during class for roughly 45-60 minutes each time. The first in-class writing asked them to summarize and respond to the first 60 pages of their book. The next two in-class writings provided several questions/prompts for students to choose from, such as “Write a letter to the main character and give him/her advice on solving the main problem in the story.” One key benefit of this model is that students had the opportunity to produce more pieces of authentic writing. They were also

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held accountable for having read significant chunks of their book for each writing. One main negative of this approach is that instructors can feel pressured to read summaries of every book in order to check the correctness of what students write. This eats up a lot of time and is largely impractical. Without doing this, though, some students will try and fudge their summaries. We do not want to police every students' reading, but we *do* want to hold students accountable in some way. Another drawback of this model is that with only three main touchpoints, spreading out the writings allowed the books to possibly be set aside for weeks.

The second semester model was weekly out-of-class online discussion board posts. We gave a prompt each week and students wrote 150 words. For example, the first week students described what book they chose and also gave some insight into their reading histories. Other discussion board prompts included: "Choose 3 adjectives that describe your book. Then give examples from your book that show why you chose each adjective" and "Make a prediction about how the story will end." This model seems to be more instructor-friendly because the focus is on students engaging deeply with their books on a weekly basis.

Book talks

One other mechanism we used was incorporating book talks into the classroom, due in large part to Hedgcock and Ferris's (2018) reminder that "the experience of reading a good book is heightened when it is shared with others" (p. 241). Throughout the semester, one of the instructors would update students on her progress with her own independent reading book, sharing ideas or plot points that excited her. She would finish her brief book talk by assigning a letter grade (A, B, C, D, or F) to the book and explaining her rationale for that choice. Then, students were required every few days to update their classmates and teacher about what was happening in their book and their reactions to it as well as their grade for their book and the

justification for that grade. This also enabled the instructor to intervene if students were unhappy with their book and encourage a new selection as the independent reading should be enjoyable. One important thing to note: this particular instructor was teaching an accelerated version of the course, with more contact hours per week. The other instructors wanted to implement book talks as well, but struggled to find the class time, once again highlighting one of the main hurdles of ER: having enough class time.

CONCLUSION

While research clearly shows the immense benefits of incorporating extensive reading for English language learners (Day & Bamford, 1998; Hedgcock & Ferris, 2018; Krashen, 2018), it can be challenging for practitioners to determine how to begin. From our thorough review of the literature and our experience in our pilot, however, we have gleaned four key components for ESL writing instructors to consider: naming, parameters, library involvement, and assessment. Our final key takeaways about extensive reading include these points:

1. Instructor enthusiasm goes a long way. If instructors are excited about reading books, students will feel that excitement.
2. Some students will choose a book too quickly, without much care, and need to be questioned and encouraged to choose something truly interesting to them.
3. Having more small touchpoints with the book seems to be preferable to fewer, large check-ins.
4. Students who finish a book in English gain a sense of pride that does not necessarily come from reading several articles in-depth.
5. Using a tracking system to remember which book each student is reading is helpful because then instructors can periodically ask the student about their book.

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Overall, we find implementing an ER curricular component to be a meaningful and manageable task in an ESL composition course. Important next steps would be to assess the effectiveness of the program, both in terms of student interest and in student reading proficiency. This is a recognized deficiency of the current status of our curricular addition but was a necessary shortcoming as we had to prioritize developing a program to implement before creating the mechanisms to assess the results. As an instructor, it can be very easy to say, “there’s not enough time for that,” but isn’t a reading habit one of the greatest gifts we as instructors can give ESL students? If we believe that, then we owe it to our students to figure out the logistics.

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