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JAMES COOK UNIVERSITY AUSTRALIA

Extensive Reading, Narrow Reading and second language learners: implications for libraries

SHARON R BRYAN

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Implications for best practice

For Policy:

- Collection policies should include direct reference to how they are addressing the need for second language learners to access large numbers of books at various reading levels – either by outlining how they will provide this service, or by justifying why they will not.
- Collection policies should include a provision to work collaboratively with other libraries to provide material for Extensive Reading and Narrow Reading programmes in order to support Second Language Acquisition

For Practice:

- Libraries should collaborate to provide Extensive Reading and Narrow Reading programmes in addition to their other reading programmes
- Librarians should provide Second Language Learners with advice regarding book selection based on the principles of Extensive Reading:
    - Read as much as you can, and select books for interest and pleasure,
    - Choose books that are within your current reading level to improve fluency or slightly beyond your current reading level to improve vocabulary, using a method such as the five-finger-rule to determine if the book is suitable,
    - Choose books that are easy and do not frustrate you

  and Narrow Reading:
    - Choose fiction books written by the same author or within the same series
    - Choose non-fiction books dealing with the same theme or subject.

Abstract

Extensive Reading is a resource heavy technique used in second language acquisition in which language learners read large amounts of texts for enjoyment, with the expectation that they will improve their vocabulary and fluency as a result of exposure to the written language. Narrow Reading is a similar technique in which the texts have a common element – such as theme or author – to expose learners to more textual redundancy. Evidence from the literature suggests both techniques can be effective and valuable to second language learners and foreign language learners. Librarians should be aware of these techniques in order to ensure that

collection policies and advice to patrons can assist learners with creating their own Extensive Reading or Narrow Reading programmes. Libraries should also consider working in co-operation with each other to supply Extensive Reading or Narrow Reading projects to areas where there is a known need for material in a given language.

Author Defined Keywords

Extensive Reading, Narrow Reading, Five-Finger-Rule, Second Language Acquisition, Autonomy, Library Support, Library Services, Informed Practice.

Introduction

During the Twentieth Century, and particularly over the past thirty years, many of the principles applied to teaching children and first language learners to read have been adapted and applied to teaching second language learners (2LL) to read in the target language – both to improve reading skills, and to acquire vocabulary and syntax 'incidentally' (for example, Day and Bamford 1998; Hedgcock and Ferris 2009; Taguchi, Takayasu-Maass, and Gorsuch 2004; Tierney and Readence 2005). Two of the methods most commonly encountered in the literature are Extensive Reading (ER) and Narrow Reading (NR). These methods have, at their core, a belief that repeated exposure to words used in context will cause the readers to accumulate an ability to recognise and understand those words and be able to recognise appropriate ways to use them in sentences (for example, Brown, Waring, and Donkaewbua 2008; Elley 1989; Krashen 1982; Krashen 1993). Librarians need to come from a position of informed practice in order to best cater to the needs of language learners, and this focus on reading as a language learning tool has obvious implications for libraries. An understanding of Extended Reading and Narrow Reading can potentially influence decisions made concerning material acquisition, information literacy and reader's advisory. This literature review will provide an overview of the issues and considerations involved with Extended Reading and Narrow Reading, and then consider the implications that such approaches to language learning can have for library services.

Extensive Reading

Extensive Reading can be defined as 'reading in great amounts for the purpose of a general understanding of the text or the enjoyment of the reading experience' (Rodrigo et al. 2007). As a method, it has much of its origins in the Input Hypothesis of Stephen Krashen (1982), which Zheng (2008, 54) refers to as 'the most deeply and broadly researched approach to [second language acquisition]'. The Input Hypothesis builds on the concept that language is acquired, rather than learned – that is, that language is best gained through a kind of osmosis, with learners picking up the language from repeated exposure, rather than a specific study of the language and its linguistic features (Gass and Selinker 2008). Krashen's Input Hypothesis states that learners are most likely to acquire new language if it is only 'a

bit beyond our current level of competence' (Krashen 1982, 21). This is true for both the first language and any second languages. Krashen (1993) tends to advocate a version he refers to as Free Voluntary Reading (FVR), which holds that second language learners (2LLs) must be able to select their own reading material within the target language, they must be able to choose from a wide and varied selection and should, ideally, read for enjoyment. This approach has been influential on subsequent theorists such as Day and Bamford (1998, 2004) and Nation (2001).

It is Krashen's assertion that language is acquired through exposure, and that the more one is exposed to words as they are used in context, the more one is likely to acquire an understanding of them (1982). It relates to 'the belief that exposure to large quantities of written material combined with the effort made in reading helps to develop reading ability' (Robb 1989, 239). For ER to be effective, the context of the words must be interesting and largely effortless (Day and Bamford 1998). Reading should not be a chore, but rather an enjoyable past-time, in order for incidental language learning to occur (Krashen 1993). Several other writers have experimented with the concept of reading large amounts of text on a voluntary basis, and there are many studies concerning the results – most of which found that reading extensively did improve 2LLs ability to not only read, but also write (for example, Elley 1991; Lai 1993). These studies all indicated that Extensive Reading and Free Voluntary Reading can greatly improve 2LLs' language acquisition. It is important to note, however, that while many theorists have built on Krashen's theories to develop Extensive Reading programmes and courses, none of them has been able to make Krashen's original proposals work without heavy modification.

Extensive Reading Programmes

Extensive Reading Programmes (ERP) were developed in the 1980s through the efforts of theorists like Hill and the Edinburgh Project on Extensive Reading (EPER) (Davis 1995; University of Edingburgh 2010). In an ERP, a class is given a collection of books and the opportunity to read whichever books they choose, with the expectation that they read a large number of books in the target language within their reading level (Day and Bamford 1998). Reading levels were mostly identified by the participants working with the teachers. Day and Bamford were largely instrumental in solidifying the role of ERPs in second language courses, and their 1998 book is frequently cited in most discussions of ERPs. They suggested ERPs should follow ten principles:

1. The reading material is easy
2. A variety of reading material on a wide range of topics must be available
3. Learners choose what they want to read
4. Learners read as much as possible
5. The purpose of reading is usually related to pleasure, information and general understanding
6. Reading is its own reward
7. Reading speed is usually faster rather than slower
8. Reading is individual and silent
9. Teachers orient and guide their students
10. The teacher is a role model of a reader. (Day 2002, 137-139; Hitosugi and Day 2004, 21-22)

The idea is to avoid directly teaching grammar or language points, but rather to expose learners to as much language as possible in a way that is so enjoyable that they will want to understand the message in the text without paying overt attention to the text itself (Hedgcock and Ferris 2009). Extensive Reading is largely concerned with books rather than other written forms of language, although in theory newspapers and other popular texts can be used within an ER programme. Importantly, close attention must be paid to the reader's existing vocabulary level in order to provide books that will encourage them to acquire new words and usages without taxing them (Day and Bamford 1998; Nation 2001).

It is a central tenet of ER that reading should not be a difficult challenge. When more than 95% of a book's vocabulary is unknown to the reader, he or she is likely to struggle with the material and resist incidental language acquisition (Hill 2001; Horst 2005; Min 2008; Nation 2001), and therefore 'no more than 5% of the running words (or one word in 20) should be unfamiliar (Horst, 2005, 361). It is important that the texts offered to the readers use vocabulary that is mostly within their competence while still providing words they do not know but will be able to infer from the text. Some writers suggest that, for fluency and vocabulary growth, the percentage of known words should be closer to 98% (Day 2002; Hill 2001; Rodrigo et al. 2007), and Day and Bamford (1998) have suggested that if fluency and automaticity (that is, the ability to instantly recognise a word) is the goal of ER, then the texts should contain as close as possible to no unknown words – being either equal to the reader's current competency, or comparatively easy.

Most ER programmes have been based on the models proposed by the EPER or Bamford and Day, although there have been variations in each of the published studies, such as the amount of teacher support given or the use of intensive reading activities. The teacher offers readers a variety of books within the ideal vocabulary range – providing a mix of narrative and factual books – and the students self-select their own reading material. Class time is devoted to reading with some time given to reflecting on the content of what has been read. It is important that students are asked to talk about the *content* of the books: the message, rather than the language (Bamford and Day 2004). There are no comprehension tests or questions, although there may be book-club-style discussions in which the students talk about what they did and did not like about their chosen books (Rodrigo et al. 2007). Students are expected to engage in Sustained Silent Reading (SSR) (Darby 2008; Lee 2007; Rodrigo et al. 2007; Taguchi, Takayasu-Maass, and Gorsuch 2004), although there may be discussion times included in the programme. While the teacher is on hand to answer questions and may read out loud from a shared book, he or she is not expected to explicitly teach any aspect (Day and Bamford 1998). Students may or may not have access to a bilingual dictionary while in the class. The expectation is that they will steadily acquire vocabulary and grasp syntax through inference from the context.

The Efficacy of Extensive Reading

The efficacy of this method is under some debate. The literature continually reiterates the fact that there is more anecdotal support for this method's

effectiveness than empirical evidence (Elley 1991). The general consensus is that ER is an effective means of gaining vocabulary but is not necessarily more effective than methods that involve direct instruction. In fact, Min (2008), writing more specifically about Narrow Reading, suggests that the method is more effective when undertaken in conjunction with activities designed to provide some direct instruction. Laufer (2003) points out that the assertion made by Krashen that reading is sufficient to improve vocabulary without needing augmenting exercises (1993) relies on a number of assumptions which have not been empirically proven, and most writers concerned with classroom applications also believe an ERP is more effective if augmented with intensive reading practices (Day and Bamford 1998; Hedgcock and Ferris 2009).

Laufer and Coady are among the few writers in the field who point out that a reader must have a basic working vocabulary of some description before an ERP can be applicable (Coady 1997; Laufer 1997). Coady believes ER, as a method, is only appropriate for intermediate learners and above, as it is only effective after a basic vocabulary has been gained through some form of instruction. He refers to this as the 'beginner's paradox', as they must 'learn enough words to learn vocabulary through extensive reading when they do not know enough words to read well' (1997). Davis (1995) believes ER is applicable to every educational level of language learner – primary, secondary or tertiary – but does not address whether it is applicable to every stage of language learning from beginner to advanced. In fact, very little has been written about how this method is applicable to absolute beginners, although writers like Day and Bamford (2004) mention reading material suitable for use with beginners who must, clearly, already have some vocabulary at their disposal. However, it is difficult to find papers that challenge Coady's (1997) assertion that beginners should receive explicit language teaching until they gain a minimum vocabulary of 3000 words, although Maxim II (2002) ran a study which showed absolute beginners can read a novel with intensive teacher support.

While the extent of the efficacy of Extended Reading may be under some debate, the fact that it is effective, however, is not. The overwhelming majority of the literature on the subject is in favour of ER as a method of language acquisition, and while there is some contention over whether it is applicable to absolute beginners or if the material used should be authentic or consist of carefully controlled, graded readers, all authors are in agreement that the method is useful and should be used to some extent in language learning programmes. The term 'authentic' or authentic text' is generally taken to refer to material produced for the native speakers of the target language – that is, works not specifically designed for second language learners (Peacock 1997).

Narrow Reading

Narrow Reading is a subset of Extensive Reading and is applied to 'reading in only one genre, one subject matter, or the work of one author' (Cho, Ahn, and Krashen 2005, 58). Within the concept of Narrow Reading, the emphasis is still on Krashen's theories regarding the Input Hypothesis and the belief that exposure to large amounts of meaningful text will lead to incidental language acquisition (Gardner

2008). However, the argument of Narrow Reading is that a shared context across the different texts will make incidental learning more likely to occur (Cho, Ahn, and Krashen 2005). This approach hinges on the concept of text redundancy: books written by the same author or about the same topic are more likely to repeatedly use a certain range of words and constructs (Gardner 2008; Maxim II 2002). Authors have a certain vocabulary pool and favoured words, they use the same turns of phrase several times and in a series they use the same characters and backgrounds established in previous books – all of which contribute to readers finding books by the same author easier to read (Krashen 2004). As Gardner (2008, 98) states, 'it has been broadly accepted that text collections written by one author (uniauthor) are more efficient in recycling vocabulary than text collections written by multiple authors (multiauthor)'. By the same token, books written about a given theme will have a lot of vocabulary in common and enable readers to receive a greater repeated exposure to that vocabulary in use (Min 2008).

A frequently cited study in Narrow Reading was undertaken by Cho and Krashen (1994) in which a very small number of students were asked to read as many *Sweet Valley Kids* books as they could. As described in the study, the students – all adult females – became fond of the series, reading several books each. Some even progressed on to the *Sweet Valley Twins* and *Sweet Valley High* books, showing an ability to advance to a higher reading level after familiarising themselves with the style and contextual background of the stories. The study was in no way statistically significant, and was methodologically flawed, but can be taken as anecdotal evidence that reading within a series can aid the progression of reading ability. Laufer (Laufer 2003) pointed out that the most successful students in this study were those who also undertook vocabulary exercises or activities, rather than relying on reading alone, as Krashen and Cho had intended.

The two main concepts in the Narrow Reading model are books linked by author and books linked by theme. These concepts are applied to both narrative works and expository material. Gardner (2008, 108) came to the conclusion that narrative works were more effective when they shared the same author, while expository material was more effective when linked by theme: Authentic children's narratives written by the same author have substantially more specialized vocabulary recycling than narratives written by several different authors, but authorship has no observable impact on specialized vocabulary recycling among authentic children's expository materials.' It may be worth noting at this point that the books in the *Sweet Valley* series were, like the *Nancy Drew* and *Hardy Boys* series before them, written by ghost writers (Pattee 2008). Therefore, while the characters and settings were redundant, the books were unlikely to have the kind of repeated vocabulary that books written by the same author would have. In this way, the narrative books were linked by theme, but a very tight thematic link.

Self-instructed Narrow Reading

While most discussions of Extensive Reading and Narrow reading involve class-based programmes, Krashen (2004, 1993) suggests a number of elements that could be used by individuals to design a self-instructed Narrow Reading programme:

- ‘Lower your standards’ – reading should be easy and enjoyable, and preferably ‘light’ in nature. There is also no need to avoid translations in favour of authentic texts
- ‘Don't worry about pushing ahead rapidly to harder and to different material’ – the reader should gradually move from one field to another as he or she feels comfortable
- ‘If the book or magazine is too hard, or not really interesting, stop reading and find something else’ – this is one of Krashen’s primary arguments regarding his Input Hypothesis, and he comes back to it repeatedly. The book must always be enjoyable, and never so much of a challenge that the reader would rather not read it.
- ‘Carry the book or magazine with you everywhere’ – a reader is more likely to find time to read a book if she or he carries it throughout the day.

This last point is something of a departure from the classroom based programmes, in which students can borrow the books to take home, but often read them in class during scheduled reading time. However, Rodrigo et al (2007) suggest one of the primary considerations for purchasing books for an Extensive Reading programme should be the physical properties of the books themselves, and that regard should be given to books that can be easily carried in a pocket or backpack.

Along with Extensive Reading, Narrow Reading relies heavily on the students' ability to self-select works based on their existing reading level. With both approaches, it is necessary to provide a clear and easy to follow system for classifying the reading level of the books, comics, magazines and the like.

Implications for Libraries

A knowledge of the importance reading can play in language acquisition can assist librarians with providing a more targeted and beneficial service to second language learners (2LLs). Although it would be unlikely that a librarian would need to know Krashen’s Input Hypothesis, at the heart of both the Extensive Reading and Narrow Reading approaches is a belief that 2LLs need to have access to a wide range of enjoyable and comprehensible reading material, and have the option of choosing material according to their tastes and existing reading level.

This is clearly an area in which libraries can excel in terms of providing support. There are clear and obvious overlaps between ER and NR programmes and reading programmes that many libraries already run, such as book clubs and children's literacy schemes. Lee (2007, 152) refers to an ER programme as a ‘literacy club’, and Hedgcock and Ferris (2009, 233) put forward the idea of creating book clubs or ‘literacy circles’ to provide motivation for readers. For 2LLs learning English as a second language, a public library in an English speaking country is well positioned to not only provide the resources needed for an ER or NR programme but also to offer such a programme, depending on the abilities of the staff. Indeed, Darby (2008) worked in conjunction with teachers at an Intensive English Centre to create an Extensive Reading Programme for students attending a dual purpose college in Western Australia. It is highly likely that other, similar, projects are being undertaken

in libraries, but these have yet to be reported in the literature. This is an area of language instruction that plays to a library's strengths, and it should be seriously considered by librarians.

Both academic and public libraries in locations where there is a known need for material in a particular language – for example, in a locality where a course in that language is taught, or where many residents speak the language at home – should consider developing their collections for possible Extensive and Narrow Reading within that language in mind. Academic libraries supporting language degrees should particularly consider the inclusion of children's literature, young adult literature, comics and magazines in the target languages (as per Day & Bamford, 1998; Cary, 2005; Gardner, 2008). Non-fiction texts in the target languages should also be included – be they instructional texts such as craft-books and the like, or informational books such as picture reference books (Gardner 2008). Such books should also be available at a variety of reading levels. Although these items are not normally held as part of an academic collection (Cary 2004; Day and Bamford 1998), they clearly have a role in supporting language learners. Public libraries may have more difficulty justifying a wide collection of such material in languages other than English; they can, however, also use the same material to support community language groups, and consultation with language schools and community groups may indicate whether such collections are feasible. It is highly likely that individual public libraries will not be in a position to develop such collections on their own. Ideally, public libraries should consider developing such collections in co-operation with each other, creating a central catalogue for this material, relying more heavily on interlibrary loans, and educating patrons as to what to look for and how to order it. Both public and academic libraries may benefit from tapping into local community groups and international organisations for donated items as a way to bolster the collection without overtaxing the budgets (Bissett 2010).

It is also important to consider multiple formats, as evidence in the literature suggests 2LLs get great benefit from hearing books and texts read aloud (Brown, Waring, and Donkaewbua 2008; Elley 1989; Horst 2005; Rodrigo et al. 2007). Where possible, libraries should take advantage of books that come with audio recordings (Brown, Waring, and Donkaewbua 2008; Hill 2008). They should also consider making contacts with local native speakers of the target languages who would be willing to read aloud – at least for the purposes of being recorded, but also with a view to having them read to a live group should a ‘literacy club’ be created.

Many of the studies involved with both extensive and intensive reading methods for English learners relied heavily on graded readers. Those that used authentic texts also developed systems to classify and grade the texts so that readers would be able to self-select within their reading abilities (Elley 1991). Hitosugi and Day (2004) noted the fact that, while English is well served with graded readers, other languages do not have these resources readily available. However, Hill (2008) notes that there are some publishers producing good series of graded readers in some of the most popular languages, such as French and German. Cary (2004) encourages the use of comics and graphic novels in order to give 2LLs the ability to select reading material that match both their linguistic level and their reading maturity, pointing out that comic books written for adults can have complex stories without necessarily using dense text. Many reading programmes for non-English languages rely heavily on

children's books, young adult books, comic books, magazines and other forms of 'light' entertainment (Krashen 2004), and for many languages other than English, this would seem to be the only practical way to provide books at appropriate reading levels. However, the reading level of the books needs to be clear in order to aid the 2LLs' ability to self-select. Elley (1991) is among several writers who call for labels or stickers on the covers or spines of the books.

In the studies in which it was necessary to apply a grading system to an ungraded collection, the researchers themselves graded the books and applied the system to the books – often using basic concepts like colour coding (Hitosugi and Day 2004). As libraries are increasingly moving towards a more globally co-operative model in cataloguing one suggestion could be to include reading level in the bibliographic data. Such information would then need to be made searchable through the catalogue in order to allow students to self-select, and some guidance would need to be offered to help students use that information effectively. Using social networking programs similar to LibraryThing, libraries may even be able to use patron feedback to provide an indication of a book's reading level.

An alternative suggestion would be to encourage patrons to self-grade their reading material using an approach like the Five Finger Rule. The Five Finger Rule is well known amongst teacher-librarians working in primary schools, although little seems to have been written about it in the literature. Indeed, most references to the Five Finger Rule can be found on school and library websites in regards to holiday reading programmes, but only one article could be found suggesting its use in a language learning context – Darby's (2008) paper regarding her library reading programme. Using the Five Finger Rule, a reader would open a book to a page with a large amount of text. For every word they did not understand, they would hold up one finger – two to three fingers would indicate the book is at an appropriate level of difficulty, three to four fingers would indicate it may be too difficult, while five fingers or more indicate the book should be left, for the time being, in favour of an easier book (Padak and Rasinski 2007). A similar technique has been mentioned obliquely by Hedgcock and Ferris (2009), and Day (2002) refers to a 'rule of hand', which is never fully explained. It is intriguing that this simple approach has not been addressed in the literature, nor formed the basis of a study.

The most important, and most easily implemented, suggestion libraries can adopt, however, is to 'inform the patron', rather than improving the collection – that is, to provide patrons with the metaknowledge necessary to make better selections from the existing collection. It is believed that students, particularly older students, are unlikely to remain motivated in a reading programme that may involve reading works they do not regard as age appropriate unless they know how and why it will benefit them (Dörnyei 2001; Hedgcock and Ferris 2009). This is where some knowledge of the Input Hypothesis and other reading theories such as Repeated Reading can come into play. Many language learners do not know how to learn a language (Jones 1993) and while students undertaking a course with a teacher have some assistance with learning how to learn a language, self-instructed language learners do not. They do not have a meta-level understanding of what is involved with successful language acquisition. Providing a guide for these students which explains what resources are available to them, how they should use them, where they can

find them and how they will help them with language acquisition could be one of the simplest, yet most effective forms of support libraries can offer.

Conclusion

If language learners learn to read by reading, and the vast majority of evidence suggests that they do, then providing them with the material to read and some guidance regarding book selection is a basic yet highly effective form of information support. Academic and public libraries are both in a position to encourage Extensive Reading and Narrow Reading among their patrons, and may find that developing a reading culture amongst language learners to be of great benefit to all parties concerned.

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Sharon Bryan (GDILS, BEd/Ba(Hons), AACM, ALIA) is a former English teacher and is now the liaison librarian for the Schools of Pharmacy and Veterinary Sciences at James Cook University. She has completed a Masters project looking at library support for second language learners, is currently completing a Diploma of Modern Languages (majoring in German) and has experience with studying languages independently and with private tuition.

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