

What is the secret of extensive reading? Philip Prowse



Would you like to know a way for your learners to improve their English enjoyably and effectively without you having to do any work? How about a way for learners to learn on their own, in their own time, at their own pace, without teachers or schools? How about a way of autonomous learning that beats being taught?

Sounds subversive, doesn't it? Or too good to be true. Yet there is now a substantial body of research which supports these claims for extensive reading. The benefits of encouraging our learners to read for pleasure are now a matter of fact, not belief. Pleasure is the key word here. We are not talking about having a class reader, useful as that may be in its own right. We are talking about students reading books on their own, books that they have chosen to read for enjoyment, in or out of class. Certainly a class reader can be the springboard for many useful language activities, but in this short survey of current classroom research we will focus on reading for pleasure.

A good starting point for looking at research into extensive reading is Stephen Krashen (yes, him again) and his book, *The Power of Reading*. Krashen reviews research studies worldwide and comes up with this typically understated conclusion:

'When [second language learners] read for pleasure, they can continue to improve in their second language without classes, without teachers, without study and even without people to converse with.'
(Krashen 1993 p. 84)

So where is the evidence? Krashen summarises studies comparing the achievements of students who received traditional reading comprehension classes with those who simply read on their own. His conclusion is that in 38 out of 41 comparisons (93%) those students who just read did better than those who were taught reading. Pretty convincing though the research was done on students learning their first language, not an L2. What Krashen shows here is what Christine Nuttall in *Teaching Reading Skills in a Foreign Language* calls 'the virtuous circle of reading'. Successful reading makes successful readers: the more students read the better they get at it. And the better they are at it the more they read. Contrast the vicious circle of reading failure where lack of success (often associated with forced reading) leads to lack of interest in reading.

What about the primary second language classroom? Warwick Elley has reported on 'book floods' in the primary classroom in Fiji and Singapore (Elley 1991). In Fiji in 1980/81 the research involved 500 nine to eleven year olds in 12 schools (eight experimental and four control). The control schools followed their

normal audiolingual classes while the experimental schools used 250 largely illustrated story books with students either reading for pleasure for 20–30 minutes a day or having a ‘shared book experience’ with their teacher who read aloud and discussed the books with them. After two years there were extensive tests and in Krashen’s words the experimental groups were ‘far superior in tests of reading comprehension, writing and grammar.’

In 1985 in Singapore a similar study of 3000 six to nine year olds was carried out by Elley over three years and Krashen summarises his results thus: children in the experimental classes ‘outperformed traditionally taught students on tests of reading comprehension, vocabulary, oral language, grammar, listening comprehension and writing.’ Elley himself says:

‘In contrast to students learning by means of structured audiolingual programs, those children who are exposed to an extensive range of high-interest illustrated story books, and encouraged to read and share them, are consistently found to learn the target language more quickly.’
(Elley 1991 p. 375)

‘Perhaps the most striking finding is the spread of the effect from reading competence to other language skills – writing, speaking and control over syntax.’
(Elley 1991 p. 404)

The two significant points here are that reading improved all the language skills and that these experiments contrasted using a textbook with reading programmes.

However conclusive these results may be at primary level, what about at secondary level? Can we do away with the secondary textbook, or were the primary results something to do with child development? We stay in Singapore and look at a project called PASSES reported by Colin Davis in *ELT Journal* in 1995. The project was very straightforward and involved 40 of the weakest secondary schools in the country. PASSES included a number of components of which extensive reading was the most significant. In each school students read silently for 20 minutes a day and had an extensive reading lesson a week for more reading and talking about the books (which could also be borrowed for home reading).

After five years (1985–90) the project was assessed by checking the schools’ English Language examination pass rate and it was found that these ‘weakest’ schools now had results above the national average. Colin Davis concluded:

‘Pupils developed a wider active and passive vocabulary. They used more varied sentence structure, and were better at spotting and correcting grammatical mistakes in their writing and speaking. They showed an overall improvement in writing skills and increased confidence and fluency in speaking.’
(Davis 1995 p. 330)

Very convincing evidence – and note that here reading supplemented the textbook rather than replaced it.

But what about adults? Is there any evidence there? Inevitably less because adults are often outside formal education and are therefore less likely to be experimented on. However there is one fascinating, and controversial, study into vocabulary acquisition for us to look at. This is the famous Clockwork Orange Study of 1978 by Saragi, Nation and Meister. Briefly the experimenters gave a group of American adults copies of Anthony Burgess's novel *A Clockwork Orange* and asked them to read it in their own time and return a few days later for a comprehension test and a literary discussion. The key thing about the novel is that Burgess's teenage characters use an invented (although heavily Russian based) slang called 'nadsat'. There are 241 'nadsat' words in the book, repeated on average 15 times. This extract gives the flavour:

I opened the door of 10-8 with my own little klootch, and inside our malenky quarters all was quiet, the pee and em both being in sleepland, and mum had laid out on the table a malenky bit of supper.

However, when the readers returned they were given a multiple choice vocabulary test on the 'nadsat' words rather than comprehension questions and literary discussion. The results were stunning with scores of between 50 and 96% and an average of 76%. These adults had learnt the new words from context, without trying to, just by reading.

There have been attempts subsequently by Krashen and others to replicate these results in an L2 context with limited success. Others have criticised the relevance of the Clockwork Orange study by pointing out that the 'nadsat' words are set in English syntax. The latest challenge comes from Horst, Cobb and Meara (1998). They report an experiment where 34 university low-intermediate students in Oman were read aloud to by their teachers as they followed the printed text of a simplified version of Thomas Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. On conclusion the students were given a 45 item multiple choice test and a 13 item word-association test which showed that from the 21,232 words in the book the students had learnt on average only five words which were new to them. They therefore conclude that extensive reading is not a time-efficient way for learners to acquire vocabulary. It is my view, however, that the methodology of the experiment may have influenced the result. Being read to aloud in class is not the same as reading in your own time at home and more significantly there is a massive cultural gulf between the students and the background of nineteenth century English society. Contrast the gripping nature of *A Clockwork Orange* and its modern relevance. You must draw your own conclusions.

One further study is worth mentioning as it links extensive reading with successful examination results. Gradman and Hanania (1991) report that extensive reading was 'a strong predictor of TOEFL scores'. This is something that teachers preparing students for FCE and CPE have always known intuitively but it is nice to see it proved through research.

And that is where we came in! Research shows that extensive reading works. But how are we going to get this keyboard obsessed, video-game playing generation to start reading? As a teacher commented to me 'They don't read in their own language. How on earth can I get them to read in English?' In the following sections we will look at how to organise a reading programme and share ideas from successful teachers around the world for activities to enable our students to benefit from the secret of reading.