

Why and how textbooks should encourage extensive reading

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Extensive reading is believed to have considerable benefits for learners both in terms of learning gains and motivation and seems to be becoming ever more popular in the ELT world. So far, however, there seems to be almost no integration of extensive reading and textbooks.

This article argues that textbooks should be encouraging extensive reading, since this will confer further legitimacy on extensive reading and may ease many of the practical difficulties that adopters of extensive reading face. The article then shows how textbooks could encourage extensive reading: directly, by including material involving extensive reading; and indirectly, by approaching textbook reading activities in ways more in tune with extensive reading. A number of proposals for each of these approaches are discussed.

Introduction

Extensive reading has been proclaimed as, ‘the single most effective way to improve language proficiency’ (Maley 2005: 354). Extensive reading is thought to lead to considerable learning gains in the areas of reading, writing, vocabulary learning, and overall proficiency while also increasing motivation (Day and Bamford 1998), and judging from the number of journal articles, conference presentations, and new series of graded readers available, an ever greater number of teachers and institutions seem to be adopting it. As yet, however, extensive reading is almost wholly ignored by textbooks. The vast majority of textbooks, with only a few exceptions, make no reference whatsoever to extensive reading, meaning that it is up to individual teachers and institutions to convince others of its merits, integrate it into the curriculum, and deal with the practicalities involved.

This paper argues that extensive reading should be incorporated into textbooks. It begins by reviewing the case for extensive reading, before then explaining why textbooks should be encouraging extensive reading. It then looks at how textbooks can encourage extensive reading. It suggests that they can do this directly, by including material involving extensive reading, and indirectly, by approaching reading activities in the textbooks themselves in different ways from the current norm. Various proposals for each of these ideas are discussed and positive moves in a small number of current textbooks outlined.

The case for extensive reading

A substantial body of research has shown that extensive reading has considerable benefits. Day and Bamford summarize a number of investigations into the effects of extensive reading thus, 'Students increased their reading ability in the target language, developed positive attitudes toward reading, had increased motivation to read, and made gains in various aspects of proficiency in the target language, including vocabulary and writing' (op. cit.: 33).

Nevertheless, a number of criticisms have been made against extensive reading. One concern is extensive reading's delayed impact on learners' progress. Davis (1995: 330) has noted that, '[The benefits] do not emerge immediately in terms of straightforward examination results' and Krashen (1993: 73) admits that, 'Short-term projects are not as consistently successful'. However, this is less an argument against extensive reading as much as a concern that extensive reading programmes be properly conducted, and the research noted in Day and Bamford (op. cit.) attests to the benefits given sufficient time; Krashen suggests at least one school year is required.

A second concern is the unfamiliar roles that extensive reading entails for both learners and teachers; Day and Bamford (op. cit.) note that teachers like to teach. Similarly, introducing extensive reading does involve some very real practical problems (further detailed below). Again, however, these concerns are not really arguments against extensive reading, but rather issues to be overcome, and as Davis points out:

Ultimately, whether or not these problems are overcome is a matter of priorities. Teachers and education planners first have to become convinced of the enormous boost such a programme can give to their pupil's command of the language in order to feel it worthwhile committing the resources required. (op. cit.: 331)

A far bigger challenge to extensive reading is the criticism that it is inefficient. Laufer (2003) has noted that studies of extensive reading's impact on vocabulary have found very small gains in terms of the number of new words learnt, and she thus argues that the amount of reading required for substantial vocabulary gains to be made is simply unrealistic, particularly in instructed second language teaching contexts. There is no doubt that for simply learning the meaning of words, direct intensive methods are far more efficient than extensive reading. However, the gains from extensive reading even in the area of vocabulary are wider than this, and Laufer herself acknowledges that extensive reading does result in vocabulary learning, while also aiding in the consolidation of partially learnt items and in deepening learners' knowledge of items. Laufer is also careful to point out that she is not arguing against reading, but against the idea that reading alone is sufficient.

Reviewing extensive reading, Davis concludes that:

Any ESL, EFL or L1 classroom will be the poorer for the lack of an extensive reading programme of some kind, and will be unable to promote its pupil's language development as effectively as if such a programme were present. (op. cit.: 335)

This paper agrees and believes that extensive reading has clear benefits for learners that make overcoming the obstacles that prevent the adoption of extensive reading worthwhile. This paper does not adhere to Krashen's (op. cit.) bold claim that reading alone is sufficient for language acquisition, but believes that extensive reading should be one part of the language learning curriculum, and aims to suggest how this can be realized through textbooks.

Why textbooks should encourage extensive reading

Textbooks form the core of many teaching programmes and in many cases actually take the place of or become the curriculum. They are also effective agents of change since they allow innovation, which is inevitably disruptive and threatening, to be introduced in a familiar and structured format (Hutchinson and Torres 1994). Textbooks are, thus, an excellent vehicle through which to encourage the adoption of extensive reading. At present, extensive reading is often regarded as an addition to the language learning programme rather than a central part of it; textbooks can help make extensive reading an integral part of it.

Extensive reading should also be integrated into textbooks because doing so would help overcome many of the concerns about extensive reading that discourage more institutions and teachers from adopting it. Various concerns have been outlined, which fall into two broad categories: doubts about the legitimacy of extensive reading and concerns about the practicalities of setting up an extensive reading programme.

Doubts about legitimacy

Prowse (2002: 144) sums up this problem when he notes that sometimes:

a class of students reading silently is not perceived as a class learning, let alone being taught, both by the students themselves and the school administration.

Textbooks can help overcome this problem by giving credibility and legitimacy to extensive reading. Textbooks are powerful legitimizing tools, for teachers, for learners, and for institutions. Littlejohn (1998: 190) describes them as 'the most powerful device' for the transmission of ideas through the ELT profession and Nunan (1991: 210) notes that, for both learners and teachers, 'what gets included in materials largely defines what may count as "legitimate" knowledge'. Textbooks, then, play a crucial role in defining the type of content and the type of learning activities that are credible. Incorporating extensive reading into textbooks will legitimize extensive reading for all the users of those textbooks as a credible way for learners to spend their time.

Concerns about practicalities

The main practical concerns regarding extensive reading are to do with cost, lack of time, monitoring students' reading, managing the library of books, guiding students to choose appropriate books, and getting students engaged in reading (Davis op. cit.; Bell 1998; Day and Bamford op. cit.). While textbooks may not be able to assist with the problems of cost or managing the library of books, they can certainly ease some of the other concerns.

Lack of time

This is probably an issue of legitimacy more than anything else. If teachers and institutions are convinced that extensive reading is a credible activity, priorities are adjusted and time is found for it, and as explained above, textbooks can play a powerful part in conferring this credibility.

Monitoring students' reading

Textbooks can ease this problem considerably with the provision of reading logs and of activities in which it becomes clear whether students are reading and what they are reading.

Guiding students to choose appropriate books

Textbooks can help by first ensuring that recommendations for books are at an appropriate level. They can also recommend and introduce titles of interest in various ways (see more below).

Getting students engaged in reading as an activity

Textbooks can readily do this by providing activities allowing students to discuss their reading in various ways (see more below).

How textbooks should encourage extensive reading

To this author, extensive reading means reading as much as possible and reading material at a comfortable level for the learner; in practice for the majority of students, this means reading graded readers. Extensive reading means that students choose what to read and it means they do most of the reading by themselves outside of class; in class some reading is done and students also talk about their reading.

Textbooks then cannot actually provide this type of extensive reading—the resulting books would be large ungainly things—but they can encourage it, both directly and indirectly.

Direct approaches

Textbooks can directly encourage extensive reading by explicitly recommending to learners that they do it. Many textbooks today include study tips and advice, and occasionally extensive reading may be mentioned. *Language to Go* (Crace and Wileman 2002) has a recommendation for a single-graded reader on the back cover, though within the textbook itself no reference to this could be found. *English Firsthand* (Helgesen, Brown, and Mandeville 2004) suggests reading what it calls easy English books or magazines in its 'It's up to you!' sections, and the teacher's manual makes it clear that this refers to extensive reading. In the vast majority of books, however, this simple recommendation is curiously absent.

Clearly, this kind of advice alone, with no further backing, is unlikely to have much impact. A more powerful way textbooks can encourage extensive reading is to directly provide activities that let students begin reading or that allow them to discuss their reading. The major ELT textbook publishers all publish series of graded readers, and there are a variety of ways textbooks could include parts of these readers or otherwise encourage learners to begin reading them.

- 1 Textbooks could provide reading logs where students record the dates, book titles, and pages read. This would be a very simple addition to a textbook, though without additional support would probably have little impact.
- 2 Textbooks could provide a book choice flowchart; a series of questions in flowchart form, about for example the preferred genre, the sex and age of the lead character, the temporal setting of the book, and more, that lead to book recommendations.
- 3 Each unit in the textbook could include a recommendation for a graded reader related in some way to the topic of the unit. An examination of the major series of graded readers finds many titles related to typical textbook topics such as travel, work, family, music, and movies. It may even be possible to recommend two readers for each topic, thus allowing learners to at least exercise some choice in what they read. Alternatively, there could be one unit topic-related recommendation and one unrelated recommendation, giving learners the option of staying with the topic or choosing something fresh.
- 4 Similarly, there could be activities involving the language focus of the textbook's units, leading to recommendations for graded readers. For example, after a unit on describing people, there could be an activity that involved descriptions of the main characters from two or three readers. The activity would conclude with students deciding which character they are most interested in and being invited to go on and read that character's story.
- 5 Following on from the previous two suggestions, short excerpts from the readers, perhaps the first chapter, could be included to act as a 'hook', getting the students into the story and helping them make their choice.
- 6 Extracts from graded readers could be interspersed with the units throughout the textbook to give students a taste of extensive reading. This is the approach taken by the *Cover to Cover* series (Day, Yamanaka, Harsch, and Ono 2007), the only textbook known to this author that attempts to really integrate extensive reading into its syllabus.
- 7 Short graded readers could be serialized through the textbook, with one chapter appearing in each unit. While this would not allow learners to choose the material they read themselves, and would not result in learners reading enough material for it to be truly called extensive reading, this approach would introduce learners to the concept of reading easy material in a stress-free environment. Indeed one recently published textbook series takes a similar approach to this. *Essential Reading* (Miles, Gough, McAvoy, and French 2008) has a complete short story at the back of each book to introduce the idea of extensive reading to students. While *Essential Reading* follows this format in all its levels, this approach may be especially appropriate for lower level textbooks, the students of which often need a lot of convincing that it is possible to read and enjoy reading English books.
- 8 Activities that allow learners to discuss their reading could be included in each unit. The literature on extensive reading abounds with such activities, and many of these ideas work with any story the learners are reading. Thus, all the students in a class could be reading different books of their own choosing, yet still be able to complete the same activities and discussion. Such activities would provide a regular slot in the class in

which students discuss their reading, and an opportunity for students to find out about other titles they may be interested in. Most teachers who have adopted extensive reading use such activities as they ‘can turn the individual solitary act of reading into a community event’ (Day and Bamford *op. cit.*: 141); including them in the textbook would help organize them, so that, for example, simpler, less demanding activities come earlier in the course and more challenging activities later.

Indirect approaches

Textbooks can also encourage extensive reading indirectly, by approaching reading activities in ways that are more in tune with extensive reading. Day and Bamford (*op. cit.*) list ten features of extensive reading:

- 1 students read as much as possible;
- 2 a variety of material on a wide range of topics is available;
- 3 students select what they want to read;
- 4 the purposes of reading are usually related to pleasure, information, and reading for understanding;
- 5 reading is its own reward;
- 6 reading materials are well within the linguistic competence of the students;
- 7 reading is individual and silent;
- 8 reading speed is usually faster rather than slower;
- 9 teachers orient students to the goals of the programme;
- 10 the teacher is a role model of a reader for students.

Some of these features are clearly irrelevant to the kind of intensive reading passages that textbooks include; some would be difficult to incorporate into textbooks; yet others can be incorporated or at least encouraged.

A variety of material on a wide range of topics is available

Textbooks certainly claim to do this, but while the range of topics in most textbooks is reasonable, the variety of material is less so. Too many textbooks feature magazine-style reading passages exclusively, ignoring news reporting, prose fiction, poetry, or anything else.

Students select what they want to read

It should be possible for textbooks, at least to some extent, to allow this. Two or more texts on the theme or topic could be provided and the learners asked to choose which they will read. Students who read the different texts could then be grouped together to share and discuss what they read.

The purposes of reading are usually related to pleasure, information, and reading for understanding

It could be argued that presenting students with texts that they are required to read makes it inherently impossible for the focus to be on pleasure, information, and understanding, despite the best efforts of textbook writers to find or write interesting material. Yet textbooks could take some steps towards this with readings that students are not required to analyse or recall in great detail; in other words, readings that students are not tested on in some way, but instead are invited to read and then consider whether they

enjoyed them. *Innovations* (Dellar and Walkley 2004) takes one step towards this in its review units, by inviting students to look back and choose the readings they enjoyed the most from the preceding units.

Reading materials are well within the linguistic competence of the students

Textbooks at times include challenging readings for a clear purpose, but very often there seems to be no discernible reason beyond the fact that that is the way things are, and perhaps a shared belief among teachers, learners, and presumably textbook writers that reading should be hard. The purpose of textbook reading activities is usually either to allow the practice of skills, to introduce vocabulary, to provide information on a topic or theme, or a combination of these. While some of these purposes clearly require some challenge in the reading passage, an overly challenging text will interfere with others rather than advance them. Textbooks should be more balanced, with some challenging readings and some well within the students' capabilities.

Reading speed is usually faster rather than slower

Textbook readings are usually read slowly, with students laboriously poring over the text, dictionary in hand. This is often due to the overly difficult nature of the text, as mentioned above, and as Bell (2001) points out, the fact that so many reading activities interrupt students' reading actually makes understanding the whole text more difficult. While slow, careful reading may be desired at times, frequently there seems to be no reason to slow learners down.

It may be argued that since extensive and intensive reading are different beasts, there is no need to make textbook reading activities more in tune with extensive reading. Intensive reading is valuable and rightly has its place in the classroom, but the gulf that seems to separate intensive and extensive reading at present is large. As Day and Bamford (op. cit.) point out, orienting students to the goals of an extensive reading programme is essential and would be much easier if textbook readings were more balanced and if the activities they encountered had a different tone.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that extensive reading is an essential part of the language curriculum, that textbooks should encourage extensive reading, and that it is possible for them to do so. However, it is worth considering why textbooks almost exclusively do not do so at present. One reason may be that publishers and materials writers fear that incorporating extensive reading into a textbook could deter some potential users. Related to this, publishers may also fear the possibility that the incorporation of extensive reading is seen as simply a ploy by the publisher to push sales of its series of graded readers. Carter, Hughes, and McCarthy (1998) have pointed out the tension in materials development between the desire to modify users' views in the light of research, and the need, for both commercial and pedagogical reasons, to conform to users' expectations, and it is clear that at times publishers and materials writers push change and at times are pulled along by it. Yet publishers should take courage from Bell and Gower's (1998) observation that successful textbooks are usually those that break new ground while at the same time having something familiar about them. This

writer believes that textbooks should break new ground by encouraging extensive reading and hopes that the ideas offered above may help; so that more teachers and institutions may be persuaded to adopt extensive reading, and ultimately so that more learners benefit from it.

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