Approaches to Implementing Extensive Reading under Difficult Circumstances: ERWC1 Scholarship Recipients

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The EWRC1 scholarship recipients explored implementations of Extensive Reading (ER) in their particular contexts, seeking out points of commonality and sharing their solutions to apply an ER program under adverse conditions.

Sepideh Alavi (PhD) is an assistant professor from Shiraz University, Iran. She has been using the MoodleReader to improve the reading habits of her students and involve them in a more "extensive" ER program for about a year. During her talk, she pointed out the challenges she faced when implementing ER through the MoodleReader within a curriculum with a rather traditional predisposition.

At Shiraz University, ER is only assigned to English language and literature majors. The program mainly consists of three or four pre-determined graded readers assigned to all students, each to be read in a period of four weeks. After each book is read, a 30-item quiz is administered the score of which comprises 10% of the final score, (the remaining being allocated to midterm and final intensive reading exams). Such a program does not comply with the rules of real ER, put forward by several scholars; the number of books read during the semester is too small, the time between tests is too long and all students read the same book disregarding their reading level. Using the MoodleReader appeared to be a good alternative to the traditional program and a practical solution for these issues. It was not without its problems though.

These problems and how they were tackled were briefly discussed in terms of the four key elements of a language learning situation: context, textbook, teacher and the students.

Context

The MoodleReader is a highly computerized program requiring sufficient computer literacy on the part of the instructor and students. It assumes high-performance computers and high-speed internet connectivity, all of which can be difficult to provide in small schools and universities. Nevertheless, it can be used with limited equipment and facilities if small numbers of students are involved. In addition, using the program is not limited to school hours, so users can access the website through additional resources out of the school.

Textbooks

Another pre-requisite for implementing the MoodleReader is a sufficiently large library of graded readers with enough titles for every student and every level. This could be costly and difficult to assemble, maintain, and accommodate. These problems can be solved by starting with a small collection of books in a single shelf in the teachers' room and asking students to help with the book-keeping and to donate a book they have bought and read, if they can. Approaching publishers and asking them to contribute can sometimes be very helpful too!

Teachers and Students

To teach ER, teachers should be extensive readers themselves. They also need to be motivated

enough to spend time learning how to work with the Moodlereader. Considering their already overwhelming teaching load, many teachers are not very enthusiastic about implementing an ER program which can put extra demands on their time. Holding workshops for teachers can help make the process easier, and create interest. Students themselves can be a challenge too. Until they get used to the MoodleReader, the teachers should prepare themselves for a great deal of explanation about how good it is, how it works and how the possible problems that come up could be solved. The teachers' patience is the key to solving this problem. Once the students learn the ropes, problems will be minimized. Later on, more experienced students could even teach the newcomers how to use the MoodleReader, allowing the teacher to enjoy this fully computerized software to the most.

Lily Mu He is a PhD Candidate at Hong Kong Polytechnic University. She spoke about NMET: A great challenge and opportunity for ER in Chinese senior high schools.

The National Matriculation English Test (NMET) in mainland China is the university entrance test of English for the whole country. The test assesses the test-takers' English language ability, and the test scores are used for university admissions decisions together with the scores from university entrance tests in another three to six secondary school subjects. Millions of senior school graduates who wish to gain entrance to Chinese universities and higher education institutions are required to take the NMET annually on June 8.

Because of its importance, NMET exerts a strong and also direct wash-back effect on classroom teaching and learning in addition to its long-term influence on the Chinese society, the secondary education system, schools, teachers, students, and their parents. The curriculum and teaching content is organized based on what is tested and how it is tested in NMET. For example, reading is taught in the multiple-choice (MC) format in schools because the MC format is extensively adopted in NMET. As many practitioners believe, the reading activities suggested in the textbooks such as "skimming and scanning" are seldom used. Teachers, principals and even education departments on various levels are no less influenced by NMET, because their performance is largely evaluated by the students'

scores in NMET.

Therefore, it is easily understandable that English language teaching in mainland China is heavily exam-oriented. If failing to convince the stake-holders of NMET that ER is effective in improving students' English language proficiency and their scores in NMET, the ER practitioners can hardly gain a chance to implement ER in schools or motivate the students to read.

From one perspective, NMET is the biggest challenge for ER in the Chinese senior high school setting. From another perspective, there is a great opportunity for ER in mainland China as the recent development in NMET provides favorable conditions for the boom of ER in this context. Take the NMET (Shanghai version) as an example. Since 2004, the committee of NMET (Shanghai version) has showed a tendency to increase the proportion of reading in the exam. Since 2005, the proportion of marks that reading accounts for has been the biggest among all the subsections. In 2008, cloze tests were integrated into reading comprehension rather than being an independent subsection. Thus, reading has occupied one third of the total marks. In addition to this steady increase, the committee has hinted at further increasing the marks allocated to reading in this high-stakes exam.

Other progress was made in the test format. Up to 2005, an overwhelming majority (at least 85%) of the items in Paper One were multiple-choice and blank-filling items, and for the reading section, the percentage was 100%. In 2008, a new test format, Q&A, was added to the reading section. In the reading comprehension section, there are five passages. The first three passages are for comprehension questions. After reading each of the first three passages, candidates are requested to answer three to four questions in a four-option multiple-choice format according to their understanding of their passage. The fourth passage is divided into five paragraphs. Candidates are required to choose five suitable sub-headings for the five paragraphs, one for each paragraph, from the six options provided. For the last passage, the candidates are requested to answer four questions based on the passage in their own words. No possible answers will be presented in a multiple-choice format.

The change in both proportion and test format

of reading in NMET is a strong stimulus for the development of ER. In the past decades, there have been numerous studies on the significance of ER. Both successful and unsuccessful experience gained from this body of research can also be applied to the English language teaching and learning in mainland China.

Leonardi Lucky Kurniawan teaches English at the Polytechnic of Ubaya, Indonesia, which is a private higher education institution offering three-year vocational programs.

Many of the students have poor reading habits and are slow readers (even in L1). Despite the number of years they have spent learning English, they have very low vocabulary levels (less than 1000 words). They have very little opportunity to practice using English outside the classroom and have a lot of difficulty expressing themselves in spoken and written English. In view of these facts, the Extensive Reading approach has been implemented in the past few years, aiming at increasing the students English language skills by improving their attitude toward English language learning through an ER program, and providing an enjoyable and motivating way to increase the students' language input, which is fundamental to the development of their language skills.

Students' Response to an Extensive Reading Program

Before I introduced an ER program, I told the students the goals of the program. Then I continued explaining what we were going to do in the ER program, why we adopted it in the curriculum and how they could get the most out of the program. Before assigning reading materials, I gave them Nation's vocabulary test in order to figure out each student's vocabulary level. Realizing that the students have bad reading habits, I had to teach them the techniques for speed reading and give them speed reading exercises. In all classes I taught, the students responded enthusiastically, and 85% of them enjoyed graded readers because they are easy to read and interesting (having colorful pictures). They admitted they had no trouble understanding the material and were eager to read more books of their interest.

Problems in Extending the Use of the ER Program

To be successful, an ER program must be carefully planned and well prepared. It is vital to ensure that everyone – students, teachers, administrators, and maybe even parents – is involved in the setting up and all the people involved understand what the goals and the objectives are.

In my opinion, the key issue is how to adapt the ER approach to students' attitudes, interests, abilities, and goals. Students are usually busy people and claim that they may not have much time for reading. Many of them have had traumatic experience learning English and strongly believe that learning English is complicated and impossible for them. Communicating the benefit of ER alone may not be sufficient for them then. Many students have also never read a whole book in English or do not like reading at all, and so may be reluctant to read even if they know it is good for them. A lot of students also prefer watching movies to reading books. Some would rather spend their time reading comics than reading books. For this reason, the ER was introduced "step-by-step" so as not to overwhelm the students initially. "Start small and simple" was our motto when first setting up the program.

There are other important problems such as financial investment, resource management and logistics. Fortunately, we managed to convince the administrators to make final decisions through discussions and negotiations.

Geruel de Ramos Rivadeneira is the head of the English Department, Merlion International School, Surabaya, Indonesia. He talked about challenges in the implementation of Extensive Reading in the primary level.

While reading is at the core of the Primary language education curriculum, ER finds it difficult to find its supposedly important place in the array of approaches through which reading skills are taught and developed in Primary schools. Various challenges are facing advocates of this approach in spite of volumes of researches supporting its claim to be the "magic carpet to language learning". Misconceptions about ER, lack of enough information about it and its potential clash with other language teaching techniques are among the plethora of obstacles

that make ER an unwelcome idea in many Primary schools.

The Misconception

Many teachers and even school managers look at ER in many different ways. More often than not, the views are rather skewed to the negative side. They thought that it is a new approach and, being new, it is something which is difficult to implement. This misconception alone makes them drop ER at the very beginning of its conception when it is proposed as a program in the school. The misconception gives birth to more negative thoughts about it and in the end it is met with frowning faces rather than enthusiasm on how it could revolutionize language teaching and learning in the school.

The Lack of Information

The lack of information is often a precursor to the misconception about ER. ER is hardly a part of the pre-service language teaching curriculum in most teacher education institutions all over the world. This is the very reason why even teachers who majored in English Language teaching are not conversant about ER. Therefore, when ER is mentioned, teachers respond with a blank face having heard about it for the very first time.

The Clash with other Language Teaching Strategies

ER, with its impressive claim, becomes a threat to the power play of existing language teaching strategies dominating in Primary schools. These strategies have established their roots in the school curriculum, so teachers find it difficult to accommodate ER even as a supplementary reading program. With teachers already being used to certain language teaching strategies, the introduction of ER ushers in a threat to what has been prevalent in the school's system of teaching and learning.

Conclusion

While challenges are real, it does not mean that it is impossible to implement ER in Primary schools. It may take some time for its benefits to be recognized, but persistent efforts of teacher advocates will have a greater effect on how it can be viewed very favorably by all stakeholders of Primary education.

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