Not All Books are Created Equal:

How to Set Realistic Targets and Give Grades to Learners of Different Reading Levels

John Bankier

Soka University

johnbankier@yahoo.co.uk

Many institutions require grades and targets to be given in ER, and many experts recommend reading a book a week. However, due to disparities in word counts and reading time for different students, this can result in very different amount of reading and effort for different students. A system was developed in which all students of all levels are required to reach the same number of credits a semester; lower level students need to read fewer books for the same credits, meaning that targets can be standardized without the problems associated with book- or page-based target

Administrative constraints can have a significant effect on how extensive reading is implemented. In particular, many institutions demand that grades be assigned to students for achievement or effort, and that these grades be based on targets which may need to be consistent across groupings of students of very different reading levels. As ER can often take up a large proportion of learners' time, many learners also demand that these grades accurately reflect their effort. Furthermore, students and administrators often require concrete targets for classes to demonstrate that something quantifiable is being done in the class. Teachers who are new to ER may also benefit from clear targets which can be given to learners.

Existing systems for setting targets such as "12 books a semester" or "1000 pages a semester" work excellently for groups of students who are reading books of a similar level; however, there are significant problems when these targets are applied to groups of students with different reading levels, or when these targets are applied across a whole institution. This paper represents an attempt to develop an easy-to-

implement alternative system which can be used to set reasonable and realistic targets for students.

Settings Targets

Studies of classroom practice in extensive reading (Jarrell, 2003; Schmidt, 2007; Schmidt, n.d.) show that approaches to setting targets are generally divided into page-based or book-based targets. This could mean targets of one book a week, as recommended by many experts (Nation & Wang, 1999; Waring, 2003). Page-based targets could mean 500 or 1000 pages per semester. Both systems have some important advantages, but also have significant disadvantages if they are used in mixed ability groups.

Book-based Targets

Though book-based targets have the advantage of ease and apparent egalitarianism, the reality is that students will not be reading a comparable amount. Table 1 illustrates the very different lengths of graded reader series, in terms of number of words.

Table 1. Number of Words Potentially Read at Different Levels of Graded Reader

	Penguin		Oxford		Cambridge		All	
14 books read	6	419,202	6	412,384	6	398,986	6	410,191
	5	381,500	5	335,664	5	326,718	5	347,961
	4	227,878	4	223,062	4	270,746	4	240,562
	3	154,420	3	136,430	3	201,488	3	164,113
	2	97,412	2	82,488	2	127,232	2	102,377
	1	32,718	1	74,886	1	58,646	1	55,417
	S	12,992	S	18,606	S	30,492	S	20,697

Note: Based on figures given in the Combined Grader Reader List, 2011, retrieved from http://erfoundation.org/ Combined_Reader_List-2011.09.11.xls

As can be seen, there is a huge disparity between levels. I would argue that this disparity does not reflect student reading rates. To compare students reading Level 2 books and students reading Level 5, it seems unlikely that these students will be reading 3.3 times faster. It is inevitable that lower level students will read more slowly, but the length of graded readers mean they will be reading very little; the burden will be for higher level students who will find themselves reading far more than lower level students. It is not unreasonable to suggest that a student reading at Level 6 may read more than twice as fast as a beginner; but between students reading Level 4 and Level 6 is unlikely to be as large. Therefore, I would argue that grades given to mixed ability groups under this system will be unfair.

A further problem is that different publishers are not consistent in terms of how many words (or pages) there are in books of a similar headword level. For instance, an Oxford 1 (400 headwords) has 30 pages, while a Cambridge 1 (400 headwords) has 40. This is not a trivial difference, and means that it is easily possible for students to choose the shortest and thinnest books, and read much less than others, again creating serious problems when grading.

The result of this in mixed ability groups is that students may be discouraged from reading longer books, and will be discouraged from moving up levels. Many students may also perceive grades as being unfair, and not reflecting the amount of time and effort spent.

Page-Based Targets

The above problems with book-based targets are negated by using pages (or words) to set targets. All students will be required to read a similar amount; yet this creates its own problems in mixed ability groups. Asking all students to read 1000 pages, for example, means that students will not be penalized for reading longer books. However, 1000 pages is a considerably bigger target for lower level students than 14 books, for instance. For a student reading Level 5 books, 1000 pages means around 11 titles. For a student reading Level 1 books, it means between 25 and 50 books. 25 to 50 books is a very daunting number, and I would argue it represents considerably more time and effort on the part of lower level students.

Though page- or word-based targets are very appropriate for many situations, in mixed ability groups they may well lead to students reading longer and harder books than they should be, or books which are far too easy; this can negate many of the purposes and benefits of extensive reading.

Using a Credit System

An alternative system is to use credits. Students are required to meet a target of credits, rather than books, per semester. This system has the same benefits as page-based targets, but without the key drawback: using a credit system, easier books can be given proportionally more credits per page (or per word). The following demonstrates an example of a credit system which was used in the institution at which I worked.

Out of necessity, this system was based on a number of assumptions. These assumptions do not diminish the advantages of using a credit-based system, however. First, the letter grade that students receive should represent the amount of time they spent reading. Higher level students would need to read more than lower level students. Second, as no data exists to show exactly how fast students read at particular levels, it was necessary to make a best guess: that is to say, the degree to which particular levels of students read more slowly or quickly was based on interviews with students, experience and intuition. Third, page counts rather than words were used as it was assumed this would be easier for future teachers. This may have been an error: word counts are available for all graded reader series at the Extensive Reading Foundation website, and are more reliable than pages. I would recommend anyone implementing a similar system to use the number of words in a book rather than the number of pages. Fourth, books with a similar headword count can be placed in the same level. Thus, Penguin 1 (300 hw) and Oxford 1 (400 hw) have both been placed at School Level B (see Table 2). Similarly, School Level E consists of Oxford 4, 5 and Penguin and Cambridge 4. This is a concession to my particular institution, as a small number of level bands was required. Readers may wish to use more bands to allow for more precision. Students were able to read any book within 2 or 3 school levels (depending on class); this could mean, for instance, a student reading either E or D books.

Table 2. School Levels & Grading System

School Level	Oxford	Cambridge	Penguin	Ladder
G		6	6	5
F	6	5	5	4
E	4, 5	4	4	3
D	3	3	3	2
C	2	2	2	1
B	1	1	1	
A	Starter	S	Easystart	

Table 3. Credits for Each Level

Grade	A	B	C	D
Credits read	70	60	50	< 50

70 credits was chosen as the target for all students to reach to receive an 'A' grade. This was purely an arbitrary number. Page count goals were then decided for each level; this means the amount of pages a student would be expected to read in one semester, assuming they read only this particular level. Page count goals were decided based on a) the average number of books read by the student body in previous semesters b) student feedback surveys c) teacher intuition. For instance, under our previous system of 12-14 books per semester, students who were reading level 3 found the targets challenging, while those reading level 5 and 6 struggled, and those reading level 2 and below often found the targets too easy. Therefore, the page count goal for Cambridge 3, for example, was set at 700 (see Table 4). This represents about 13 books, an appropriate number. For Cambridge Level 6, however, it was 1000. In fact, this represents fewer books (about 9-10). This was also considered by students and staff to be an achievable goal.

Table 4. Credits and Goals

School level	Page count goal	Credits per page	Avg. pages/book	Avg. credits/book	Avg. books /semester
G	1000	0.7	104	7.3	9.6
F	900	0.78	95	7.4	9.5
E	800	0.88	74	6.5	10.8
D	700	0.1	55	5.5	12.7
C	600	0.12	42	4.9	14.3
B	500	0.14	30	4.2	16.7
A	450	0.16	24	3.7	18.8

These page count goals were then divided by the target credits (70) to produce credits per page. For instance, Level B books were 500÷70=0.14 credits per page. An Excel spreadsheet was used, in which the teacher could input the number of pages in the chosen book and receive the number of credits to assign each book. For instance, a Level B book of 30 pages would be worth 4 credits (30×0.14=4.2). The number is rounded up or down to the nearest 0.5. The books were than labeled with a sticker showing the school level, and the number of credits students would receive for reading this particular book.

Conclusion

When this credit-based system is compared with page- or book-based targets, targets and thus grades for lower and higher level students are much fairer, in my view. Using the above credit-based system, a student who read 14 Oxford Bookworms Level 2 books would meet the target of 70 credits; were their reading based on 1000 pages, they would need to read 25 books. A student who read 14 books of Oxford Starter would have read only 18,000 words a semester; under a credit-based system, 70 credits would represent 28,000 words, a more reasonable amount in my view than the 55,000 words they would be required to read assuming, 1000 pages a semester. Aside from this, the credit-based system also encourages students to read books of an appropriate level. Longer books are worth more credits, but not so much as to encourage students to gravitate towards the hardest books. Shorter books are worth fewer credits, but proportionally more than higher level books. In short, a credit-based system takes away the motivation for underachieving and discourages students from reading books that are well above their level, while providing motivation for students to move up the levels as recommended by many experts in ER.

References

Jarrell, D. S. (2003). Extensive reading for weak readers. *Nagoya Joshi Daigaku Kiyou, 49,* 199-205. Retrieved from http://libweb.nagoya-wu.ac.jp/kiyo/kiyo49/kj4917.pdf

Nation, I. S. P. (2001). *Learning vocabulary in another language.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Nation, I. S. P. and Wang, K. (1999). Graded readers and vocabulary. *Reading in a Foreign Language, 12*(2), 355-380.+

Schmidt, K. (2007). Five factors to consider in implementing a university extensive reading program (expanded version). *The Language Teacher, 31*(5), 11-14. Retrieved from http://extensivereading.net/docs/schmidt_uni_er/article.html

Schmidt, K. (n.d.). *Five factors to consider in implementing a university extensive reading program: On-line companion materials.* Retrieved from http://extensivereading.net/docs/schmidt_uni_er/

Waring, R. (2003). At what rate do learners learn and retain new vocabulary from reading a graded reader? *Reading in a Foreign Language, 15*(2), 130-163.

Appendix: Excel Spreadsheet Credit Calculator

School level	Book level					No. of pages	Credit	Pa
	Oxford	Cambridge	Penguin	Ladder				
					Ungraded		0	
					Young adults		0	
G		6	6	5		95	6.5	
F	6	5	5	4			0	
E	4, 5	4	4	3		75	6.5	
D	3	3	3	2			0	
C	2	2	2	1		40	4.5	
B	1	1	1				0	
A	Starter	S	Easystart				0	

*These levels are an administrative constraint.
I recommend more levels if possible

**Here the teacher inputs
the no. of pages in the book

End goal: A≥70 B≥60 C≥50

Notes: Students keep reading until they reach the goal
However, round up to the nearest whole number (59.5 bec
so students don't need to read one whole book for half a c