

Setting up a High School Extensive Reading Class: Common Problems and Their Solutions



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Extensive Reading and their solutions

Ten years of teaching Extensive Reading at the university level was used as a basis for creating a similar course tailored specifically for the needs of high school students. It was quickly realized that major modifications would be necessary. Problems were encountered due to the differences between university and high school students in previous exposure to Extensive Reading, maturity level and motivation. This paper will look at problems likely to be encountered by anyone setting up such a program, and discuss solutions found for these problems. These issues include how to teach low proficiency students, motivation and book management.

After teaching an Extensive Reading class at the university level for many years, my coworker and I decided to add it to the first-year high school English curriculum of the high school where we both worked. Of course we made adjustments, taking into account differences such as students' level and the length of the lesson. However, we optimistically believed that it would be a smooth transition, given our experience teaching the course and teaching our high school students and the adjustments we made. We were wrong. It should be noted that the university course was a fairly typical Extensive Reading course, based first on an article by Mason and Pendergast (1992) and then taking into account Bamford and Day's research (1998, 2000) on Extensive Reading. For a more detailed description of the class, see Clark (2003). The problem was not with the original course, but with the move to the high school level. We had to deal with a variety of problems of the type that anyone starting a high school Extensive Reading program would be likely to encounter. However the fact that our course was already developed allowed us the luxury of considering the problems more deeply, to think about what we really wanted to achieve, and to come up with solutions that allowed us to realize our goals.

Motivation

The first year teaching this course, we had students write book reports. Book reports proved to be unduly difficult and stressful, given our students' general English level and writing ability. From the second year we began to use the Moodle Reader system found at <http://moodlereader.org>, which proved to be

much easier and less stressful for students than book reports. The Moodle Reader has several motivating features built into it. For example, it moves students up a level after they have passed a set number of quizzes, students can see at a glance how many pages they have read, and when students pass a quiz the book cover goes up on their log in page. Additionally, the Moodle Reader creates a very student-centered class which allows the teacher to walk around offering words of encouragement.

Beyond that, we thought about who we wanted to motivate and what we wanted them to do. We decided that we wanted to motivate high proficiency students to continue reading after they reached the number of pages needed for a top score, average students to strive for the highest score they could get, and we wanted to motivate and encourage low-proficiency students to not give up. That is, we wanted to motivate everyone.

Our high school uses a ten point grading system, with ten being the highest score. Susser and Robb (1990) found that there was no agreed upon standard for determining the number of pages students should read. We decided rather arbitrarily, based on what we believed reasonable given the students' work load, that we wanted the average student to read about 20 pages per week, so we made 20 pages per week equal a grade of 6. This meant that a student would need to read about 500 pages over the course of the school year in order to get a grade of 10. We did not want those high proficiency students to stop when they reached a 10, something they would be likely to do, given how much course work they have for their other courses. Thus we decided to encourage them to push

themselves, and so decided to offer a prize to anyone who read more than 1,000 pages for the school year. We wanted the prize to be relatively inexpensive, yet something that students wanted, but could not easily buy themselves.

We decided on bookmarks, handmade by their teachers. There are three native-English speaker teachers at our high school. We went to a print club booth and took pictures of ourselves individually and together. We then put these pictures, along with various stickers, on a colorful piece of thick paper, which we then laminated. We punched a hole in one end, put a piece of colorful cord through the hole and tied beads onto the ends of the cord. The end result was a unique bookmark which students coveted. As news of the bookmark has spread, our high proficiency students now routinely begin the class with a personal goal of 1,000 pages instead of a grade of 10.

We also wanted to encourage average students to push themselves to get the best grade they possibly could. To this end, we made the standards clear and achievable, with small steps between grades, designed to entice students to try to make it to the next grade level. Other classes tend not to make it completely clear exactly what work or behavior constitutes which grade. However in Extensive Reading we tell students exactly how many pages they need for a 10, how many they need for a 9, and so on. This is very motivating to students since it is so clear, and also usually the first time students of this age group have been given such clear goals. Finally, there are only twenty-five pages to a grade level. This means that once a student reaches a 3, it's only twenty-five pages more—one or two books—to the next grade.

Low-proficiency students

We especially wanted to reach low proficiency students because this is a class where everyone can work at her own level and thus there is no reason for anyone to fall behind and want to give up. There are books available at all levels and students are able to read at their own pace. However, we found that despite this, low proficiency students still needed special care. First of all, though all students at this age seemed to be worse at time management than our university students had been, this was especially true of low proficiency students. When we first started this class, we told students how many pages they needed

to read by the end of the semester. The result was a lot of students scrambling, at the instigation of the teacher, at the end of the semester to avoid flunking the class. It was very stressful for both students and teachers. Our solution was to set periodic goals for students to meet. Now, three years in, we set monthly goals from about the third month on. Any student that does not meet her monthly goal has to come in after school to read and take quizzes. This encourages those students who are lazy or just procrastinators to do a monthly scramble to avoid coming in after school, which allows us to more easily identify those students who are truly low proficiency and in need of help. We first identify students as low proficiency if they have under twenty pages after four classes.

Also, we found that many of the low proficiency students didn't know the basic mechanics of reading, such as using pictures to get clues to the story, or how to choose a book at their level. Our first step was to separate out the easiest level 1 books and make them a level 0, as we noticed that these low level students in particular had trouble identifying which book is easier within the same level.

The first stage of help was for the teacher to read a book to the group of students, asking them guiding questions, such as "which person in this picture is Sally?" or "there is a capitalized word in the middle of a sentence – what could that mean?" We then went over the type of Moodle quiz questions in some detail, making sure that students understood each type and what kind of answer was being sought. We then let students take the quiz for the book we had all read together, helping them with understanding the meaning of questions when necessary. The next step was to let students read a book in pairs, in the after school session with the teacher watching, and then permit each student to take the quiz on it, again with help, if necessary. For most students this was enough to allow them to start reading on their own, but a few still needed extra help. We had those students read aloud to the teacher, with the teacher asking the occasional question to check or aid in comprehension. We would then sit by the student when she took a quiz, assisting with comprehension of the questions, but not the answers.

We found these low proficiency students surprisingly willing or even happy to come in after school for extra help. We surmised that this was because this whole process was motivating for

students as they could gauge own their improvement, and the majority made quick progress. At first students would need a lot of help with comprehension when reading, then they would need less help, and finally they would merely ask the occasional question if they needed help. They also quickly became much smoother, faster readers, probably due to the fact that the low level books tend to use the same vocabulary words repeatedly, especially if the books are from the same publisher. The next step was that students would say they did not need help with reading, but did want help with the quiz. After that they would tell us they would call us if they needed help with the quiz, until finally they were reading books and taking quizzes on their own. Students could easily see their progress as they went from step to step, and this was extremely motivating for them. They were also very happy when they had read enough pages for a 3 grade. Since the standards in this class are clear, those very low proficiency students, who struggle though all English classes, knew that they had legitimately passed this one. I wish I could report that those very low proficiency students were then motivated to go on for a 4 or 5 grade, but, so far that has not been the case.

Book management

We found that the most problematic aspects of book management were keeping track of books, making sure that the students understood book levels, and making sure that students had a book to read during class.

We are fortunate enough to have graded readers in the library which students can check out. In addition to this, we also order three graded readers per student for each Extensive Reading class. In three years we have tried three different ways to keep track of who has which book, but have so far not come up with a foolproof way to ensure that every single book is returned. So we decided to approach this from the other end. Now, at the beginning of the school year, along with the other usual school fees, students pay a fee for Extensive Reading books (of no specified number). This is a flat fee based on the average cost of three graded readers. At the end of the course students choose two books to keep. Students are happy because they have two books to keep. We are happy because we have found this to be a painless way to deal with lost books. Furthermore, since students almost always choose to keep books they have not read, we believe

students might be more likely to continue reading. Finally, the extra books go to the library. This is a good way to build up the library, which ultimately benefits all students.

It can be difficult for students to understand book levels, since various publishers use various terms to describe levels. Furthermore, as Waring (2007) points out, the interpretation of levels vary between publishers. We found that only going by headwords could result in grammar of quite different degrees of difficulty within the same level. So we spent a couple of days in the library, fitting publishers into our levels of 0-9, taking into account both vocabulary and grammar. We then assigned each level a color and put a round colored sticker on each book in that level. We put a sticker with the level written on it on the front of the book, and we put a sticker on the spine of the book. For class books we just put a sticker on the front, as during class these books are spread out on a table, for students to choose from. This has made identifying levels much easier for both the students and the librarian.

Finally, given that each student reads and progresses at her own level, it is difficult to have enough books in class at the appropriate level for all students, at any one time. Therefore it is important for students to be familiar with the library. When we first started this program, some students would start to complain at about the midway point that they could not find a book to read. They would be told to go to the library before class, but would forget. Now, at some point during the first weeks of class, we take all students to the library and have each student check out one book. We have found that this results in most students using the library as a resource from the beginning.

Conclusion

It would be remiss to suggest that these are the only problems that have presented themselves since this course was begun. However, we found that these were the ones that most needed to be addressed, and whose solution led to a course that ran more smoothly and to happier students and teachers.

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