Challenges in Implementing Extensive Reading in Shanghai Senior High Schools

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Over the past decades, extensive reading has become increasingly popular worldwide. However, the implementation of extensive reading involves challenges from various related parties. In this one-year extensive reading program implemented in a Shanghai senior high school, the researchers detected four challenges either noted or not noted in previous literature: reluctant readers, the change of teachers' role, the change of the classroom culture, and students' academic pressure from the context. The solutions to the challenges suggested by the researchers are discussed. The findings from this program help the researchers gain deeper insight into the Chinese context, where the researchers continue their investigations.

Research has shown a wide range of learning benefits accruing from Extensive Reading. The researchers implemented a one-year Extensive Reading program in a Shanghai senior high school in the 2010/11 academic year, aiming to immerse the students in an input-rich environment. Findings from this program showed that students who experienced Extensive Reading demonstrated greater growth in reading in terms of text comprehension and reading speed. Gains were also made in other proficiency areas and language knowledge components compared with peers who did not read extensively. However, Extensive Reading has a low profile in mainland China because it is a new approach, especially for Chinese students and teachers. Extensive Reading is significantly different from the traditional approaches they are used to or trained in, and thus there are often challenges in implementing Extensive Reading in this specific context. The challenges that hindered successful practice of Extensive Reading observed in this program include: reluctant readers, the change of the role of the teachers, the change of the classroom culture, and students' academic pressure from the Chinese context.

Reluctant Readers

Reluctant readers are a problem in all types of classroom. Students read their first books with great enthusiasm and their second with curiosity. Their interest waned when beginning their third. Their third books would seldom be read or returned, unless the teacher has kept a vigilant administrative eye over the library and their progress (D. Hill, personal communication, April, 2010). Readers' reluctance is confirmed by Takase (2007), who states that readers who are not interested in reading is the third biggest concern shared by Extensive Reading practitioners.

Readers' reluctance stems from a variety of social causes, or pressures on the students. McClure (2001) notes that in her experience, Asian students ". . . are accustomed to sitting attentively and following the teacher's instructions, but when questions are directed at them, they are reluctant to reply in case their answer should be wrong" (p. 143). Some Asian students are not adept at taking charge of their own learning in the service of their own needs and purposes. On the other hand, students' lack of confidence in their reading ability in English resulted in their reluctance. Reading in English is for them a passive and frightening activity associated with countless unknown words, complex sentence structure and old-fashioned topics before they actually read the first book. The skills required to read with pleasure have to be nurtured. They do not develop overnight, nor can they develop if students are instantly expected to read extensively simply because a class library has been made available. Moreover, the 1990s rapidly spawned a generation whose free time was filled with video games, comics and cartoons. Any of these colorful visual images are more appealing than black and white books. Even if they are convinced that reading is pleasurable, their main "pleasure" is usually in answering the researcher's or teacher's comprehension questions.

The washback effect of the high-stakes National Matriculation English Test (NMET) also contributed to the students' reluctance. In the NMET, the texts used for assessing reading ability were short (i.e. 300 to 500 words). Maxim (2002) reported that it was likely that students equate reading in English with reading short passages, which naturally kept them away from book-length reading, nor did they have any intention to approach such a mysterious task. Maxim's report matches our experience that some students were not certain whether time spent reading would benefit them in preparation for the standardized English exams. Even after the students have begun their reading, further problems occur. Jackson (2005) noted that her students tended to read extensively at too high a level, and lack awareness of the reasons for Extensive Reading, and how to go about it successfully.

When faced with this challenge, the researchers adopted a simple and straightforward solution: starting the program with an easy book. All the participants in this program were advised to begin their Extensive Reading with a starter or a Level 1 book, which they were fully capable of. After finishing reading the first book written in English, they felt proud and confident. The lack of interest in reading, lack of confidence in their reading ability and worry about difficult reading material, in other words, their anxiety about reading in English, had been greatly reduced when they finished reading the first book, as they noted in the post-program interview.

Furthermore, this program showed them that Extensive Reading could also be fun and give rise to a variety of interaction, which interested them greatly. The presence of "discussion" activities also encouraged the reluctant readers. If reading becomes associated with the opportunity to air views without penalty, then motivation to read is fostered.

The Change of Teachers' Role

The change of the role of the teachers was another challenge facing Extensive Reading practitioners. Traditionally, an English teacher in mainland China has been a ruler, dictator, and speaker instead of an enlightener. What they say is usually accepted unquestioningly. When a teacher asks questions, they are usually questions "to which he already knows the answers" (Widdowson, 1990, p. 185). The teacher's authority is reflected in the answering of questions.

It is usually the teacher who gives the "standard" answer, the only "correct" answer. This is taken for granted to such a degree that students believe there is only one answer to any question. This belief is further enhanced by multiple-choice questions, which constitute 70-85% of the test content, in which only one answer is to be chosen. It has seldom dawned on them that there may be many other possible answers. Teachers' authority is seldom challenged, and this authoritative role awes the students into obedient listeners. The integration of Extensive Reading into the curriculum increases teachers' risk of not knowing the standard answers to questions asked by students as the questions may cover history, society, and so on. In this program, to make herself competent in answering students' questions from their reading, the first author had to spend time preparing herself very well. She read all the 235 books used in this program, and read extensively about the background information of the 235 titles.

In addition to the change of teachers' role, Extensive Reading brought extra burdens to teachers. While many of the courses require little preparation outside of class, Extensive Reading is one of the most demanding tasks. It takes the English teachers up to five hours a week of outside preparation (Robb, 2001). Apart from the preparation for in-class talk and effort to motivate the reluctant students, after the students had begun their reading, the first researcher set up systems for selecting, ordering, classifying, cataloging, storing, lending, returning, checking, repairing, and replacing books. For all the extra preparation time, the first researcher was well aware of what Extensive Reading was and what benefits it could bring to the students themselves. The first researcher had to forget all noble aspirations for developing a "taste" for good literature in her students. Her job was to set the scene, to surround them with reading materials which would attract their attention and be sufficiently simple to arouse their curiosity, so that, as a result, students would "read, whether the material be detective story or comic strip, and having read, wish to continue to read" (Anthony, 1943, p. 500).

The researcher felt great pressure, and was busier than ever before in her working experience. However, she felt that it was a worthwhile enterprise to establish the benefits of Extensive Reading in Shanghai secondary high schools, exposing her students to a wonderful world. She was more experienced in

Extensive Reading after the program, and was willing to pursue it further in the future. As Hill (1997) concludes, "The books are there waiting to be used. The students are there waiting to read them. The work of bringing them together is very worthwhile" (p. 4).

The Change of Classroom Culture

The work of bringing the books and students together is very worthwhile indeed, but not the end of the challenges. The change of both teachers' and students' roles led to the change of classroom culture or the way the teachers and students interacted. In the past if the students wanted to contribute in class, they needed to make a bid by raising the hand and when this was acknowledged and ratified as a claim for a speaking turn, they had the opportunity to stand up to air their opinions. Interaction between students and the teacher or student and student was highly controlled in English language teaching classes in China. In this program, the students were encouraged to voice their opinions freely as they wished. Coupled with the new freedom was the chaos of the classroom. It was not easy for teenagers to achieve the balance between heated discussion and observations of class rules. It took some time for both the researcher and students to get used to the new change and worked out a solution to the chaos: you can speak, but be quiet while someone else was speaking.

Students' Academic Pressure from the Chinese Context

The last, but biggest factor hindering Extensive Reading was not the reluctant readers, the change of the teachers' role or the new interaction but the heavy learning burden. Since the 2008/2009 academic year, the Shanghai Board of Education has increased the number of core subjects for senior high schools from five to nine. Before 2008, the Shanghai senior high school students were tested on Chinese, math, English, physics and chemistry, while after 2008, the Senior One students were required to take geography and computer tests, and the Senior Two students had to take history and biology tests. The change not only meant two more subjects and two more tests, but it meant much more homework and greater demand on students' academic performance. The Board claimed that they were trying to enrich students' knowledge in science and art, but the direct consequence of the change, in the researchers' eye, was that the students were more tired than ever before. Most of the students complained that they were unable to go to bed until mid-night, and had to get up at six a.m. or even earlier. In such an unpromising situation, how could we expect the students to read in a good mood, or expect them to read as much as possible when their sleeping time was only 5 to 6 hours per day? Under such a circumstance, introducing Extensive Reading into such classes of students with still more words to read and book reports to write was understandably unwelcome. Although claimed to be reading for pleasure, Extensive Reading in this situation was not likely to be a pleasurable activity.

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