From Dependence to Autonomy: Extensive Reading Marathons

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The author began bringing her books into the classroom in 2006. Second-year university students, most of whom had never read English books before, started reading when given the chance and resources in class. However, they depended too much on the teacher's books. Attempting to make them more autonomous and to involve a larger number of students, the author has for the last four years organized an extensive reading marathon each term and promoted it to all of the students in the department. This paper reports on the four years of extensive reading marathons: procedures, outcomes, and challenges.

Research has shown that free voluntary reading increases literacy (e.g. Elley, 1991; Mason & Krashen, 1997; Day & Bamford, 1998; Rodrigo, Krashen, & Gribbons, 2004; Cummins, 2011). Now the question is how the teacher can help inexperienced learners start reading.

Reading in/outside of Class Using the Teacher's Book Resources

Krashen (2004: 61) claims that "Often, those who 'hate to read' simply do not have access to books." If that is the case, why not create access to books? The author bringing her books into the 2nd-year reading class in 2006. Part of the class time (10-20 minutes) was used for extensive reading, and the students were urged to read outside of class as well. They were advised to start with *Find Out Readers* and move on to other picture books, graded readers, or whatever they would wish to read. The students were told to keep a simple reading record, but no additional tasks (e.g. book reports or summaries) were assigned. The author and the students discussed and set the target of 100,000 words per term.

The students read 54,251 words on average in the spring term and 68,609 words on average in the fall term. The survey conducted at the end of the term revealed that although some students felt that the aim (100,000 words per term) was too high, most thought that reading books in/outside of class was worthwhile. They felt that their reading speed improved and they were less overwhelmed by the English sentences. They also responded favorably towards the system—borrowing the teacher's books and reading inside/outside of class. However, it was discovered that the students depended too heavily (83.6%) on the teacher's books although the teacher recommended checking out books from the library. Thus, it was necessary to create better access to a wider selection of books. Also, it would be possible to involve more students.

Extensive Reading Marathons

In order to involve a larger number of students, the teacher decided to organize an "extensive reading marathon" and promote it to all of the students in the Faculty of Foreign Studies. Prior to the first marathon in 2007, an Extensive Reading Room was set up, taking advantage of an unused office, to secure students' access to books.

The first "extensive reading marathon" limited the selection of books. The students were advised to choose books from four Graded Readers series: *Penguin Readers, Oxford Bookworms, Cambridge English Readers,* and *Yohan Ladder Series*. This was because the total numbers of words are easy to find, the vocabulary is controlled according to levels, and it is easier (than other books) for students to find the right level. This restriction was lifted in the fall of 2007 and students have been allowed to choose freely.

The posters to announce the marathon were put up on bulletin boards at several places on campus. Students signed up by filling out an entry sheet. Once registered, they received a reading record sheet (printed on a colored sheet of paper). Through the term the students kept records (date, series name, title, author, word count, and short comments). The comments were written either in English or Japanese. In the final week of the term they were asked to submit the reading record to finish the marathon.

In the second or third week of the new term, an award ceremony was held. Students who read more than 100,000 words were awarded a prize (except for spring 2009 when 10 best students who read 39,500-427,498 words were awarded and fall 2009 when 20 students who read more than 50,000 words were awarded). Each student received a certificate and a prize of their choice prepared by the teacher (books, stationery, sweets, etc.)

The Reading Lounge in the Library

Although students made relatively good use of the Extensive Reading Room, the room management was rather difficult. To solve this problem, in the fall of 2008, a Reading Lounge was opened in the library. It created easy access to various books for extensive reading since almost all the English books were moved to a specific corner on the third floor, where the Reading Lounge was set up.

Results

Table 1 shows the data of the eight marathons held from 2007 to 2010. 1) and 2) indicate the numbers of students who participated in the marathon and who finished it. 3) shows completion rates.

It is apparent that not every entrant reaches the goal. 2009 was an especially tough year since the author was assigned different classes where she taught non-English majors and a low-level elective class with fewer students. The entries dropped drastically in the spring term. The desperate teacher asked other teachers for help and some of them responded by encouraging their students to sign up for the marathon. As a result, the number of entries more than tripled in the fall. Although the completion rate fell from 76.7% to 51.8%, more than 100 students managed to cross the finish line that year. In 2008 although there were 11 entries by 1st-year students in the spring term and 52 entries in the fall term, none of them made it through. It has not been easy, either, to attract 2nd-year students after the teacher stopped teaching a 2nd-year reading class. On the other hand, teaching the highest level (AB class) of the 3rd-year advanced English class attracted positive participation. The students agreed to set the aim at 200,000 words per term and they tried to achieve it. As for 4th-year students, it was difficult to get them involved since they rarely come to school because they are busy job hunting or they already have enough course credits to graduate. Most of the 4th-year students who completed the marathons have been seminar students of the author and an Australian teacher who supported the extensive reading marathon.

Table 1. Entry/Goal & Completion Rates

	2007S	2007F	2008S	2008F	2009S	2009F	2010S	2010F
1) ENTRY TOTAL	153	91	140	143	60	195	160	167
1ST YEAR	53	18	11	52	31	70	38	61
2ND YEAR	62	33	55	36	15	41	42	26
3RD YEAR	33	37	55	37	13	72	56	62
4TH YEAR	5	5	19	12	1	12	24	18
2) GOAL TOTAL	58	46	92	62	46	101	73	98
1ST YEAR	10	3	0	0	28	45	27	34
2ND YEAR	28	28	50	30	9	23	10	19
3RD YEAR	19	14	32	31	8	31	32	41
4TH YEAR	1	1	10	1	1	2	4	4
3) COMPLETION RATE	37.9	50.5	65.7	43.4	76.7	51.8	45.6	58.7

S: Spring term F: Fall term

Table 2. Number of Words/Books Read

	2007S	2007F	2008S	2008F	2009S	2009F	2010S	2010F
4) WORDS AVERAGE	54,235	106,131	91,854	133,219	40,200	33,705	50,592	56,838
1ST YEAR	13,504	171,721	---	---	8,303	25,950	14,922	32,706
2ND YEAR	50,465	75,357	73,106	142,722	26,114	50,331	36,859	20,592
3RD YEAR	98,056	135,909	92,384	113,109	181,239	30,598	87,938	95,424
4TH YEAR	73,120	105,527	183,892	441,924	213,870	65,131	6,599	43,121
HIGHEST	508,009	397,211	657,691	441,924	427,498	191,828	222,000	319,400
LOWEST	700	7800	952	8,420	1,425	672	2,544	200
5) BOOKS AVERAGE	5.7	12.4	14.6	10.4	12.9	6.3	15.1	6.5
1ST YEAR	3.0	11.3	---	---	13.5	7.6	17.7	7.0
2ND YEAR	4.4	8.1	14.7	11.1	9.4	3.1	12.9	3.4
3RD YEAR	9.2	20.0	14.3	9.6	15.8	7.0	10.8	7.3
4TH YEAR	6.0	15.0	15.3	12.0	9.0	4.5	8.0	7.8
HIGHEST	33	60	75	34	27	18	26	19
LOWEST	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
6) 100,000 WORDS	11	19	30	41	4	4	17	24

In Table 2, 4) shows how many words students read and 5) indicates how many books they read. 6) shows how many students read more than 100,000 words.

Those who participated in the spring marathon were likely to join the fall marathon as well. They reportedly tried to read more than the spring term. As for the number of books the participants read, except for 2007 when students were told to start with graded readers, they read more books in the spring term and fewer but longer books in the fall term.

Further data shows that in spring 2007 the books the students read most were in the 10,000-14,999 word range (67 books in total), followed by the 5,000-5,999 word range (44 books in total), and then the 7,000-7,999 word range (34 books in total). After the limitation of books was lifted (i.e. students were allowed to choose whatever they wanted), they turned to easier (picture) books. For the next 7 terms, books with fewer than 1,000 words were read most, and the 1-999 word range made up a large part of the total books read.

The detailed data also revealed that a majority of the students participated for two terms or more. The longest participant completed the marathon 5 times and read 853,260 words in total. She voluntarily joined the marathon in the spring term in her second year, missed the fall marathon, joined again in the spring term in her 3rd year, and continued to read for the four consecutive terms until graduation. Her records were 47,770; 228,148; 242,672; 213,870; and120,800, respectively.

Discussion

The extensive reading marathon was initiated in order to attract a larger number of students, but it was difficult to get students, especially 1st-year and 4th year students, involved. 1st-year students were new and not accustomed to the university, let alone extensive reading. They signed up when they were pressured to do so, but they didn't read voluntarily. After the author started using a little bit of class time for reading activities, the completion rate went up. In the 2010 fall marathon, two 1st-year students read more than 100,000 words and became award winners.

4th-year students may be busy job hunting, but after they have found a job, they may have time for reading again. One 4th-year student who participated in the marathons when he was a sophomore and junior came to the author last December to sign up for the marathon Fall 2010. He read 3 books (128,074 words) in one month and completed the marathon. In 4 terms plus one summer vacation, he read 1,235,815 words in total. Although he was told to sign up by the author at first, he voluntarily participated in the following marathons. Hopefully, he will continue reading when he has a chance even after he graduates. This is what university teachers should aim for: fostering independent/autonomous readers.

Although there are a few teachers who understand the purpose of extensive reading and the meaning of the marathons, more teacher support is necessary to make a difference. Students have to be pushed a little to sign up or to be reminded of the

approaching goal to finish the marathon. The number of entries shot up in the fall of 2009 after the author asked other teachers to encourage their students to sign up. However, leading them to the goal is another problem and the challenge is that not many teachers are familiar with extensive reading and they even question: "What is the point of reading if you cannot use the dictionary?" They don't approve of reading without using a dictionary. Work needs to be done in this area.

If students become experienced enough, they don't have to join the marathon. They can just enjoy reading on their own. However, the marathon may keep providing a chance to start reading or continue reading. That will be ideal if students start reading independently without the teacher pushing them. Until then, the author would like to keep encouraging students to use the marathon as a chance to read. At present there are many students who sign up because they are told to do so, but in the future the author hopes that more and more students sign up voluntarily because they want to read.

Conclusion

The "extensive reading marathon" has been gradually recognized as one of the events held in the Faculty of Foreign Studies. Slowly students are getting into reading, but they are not reading outside of class as much as expected. If students become motivated to read in their first year and if they keep reading for the next three years, they will improve their literacy and language competence. Therefore, teachers should encourage them at an early stage of their university life to start reading. Also, students need to be advised to continue reading throughout college and beyond.

The next step might be to create an extensive reading class where students are given time for reading and hopefully such a class would enable students to get into the habit of reading.

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