

Reading can be divided into extensive and intensive reading. Intensive reading is the close study of a text with comprehension questions. Extensive reading is the reading of books, usually fiction, at the learners' language level, without detailed comprehension checking. The books used are *graded readers*, and may be simplifications or specially written originals.

What

There are two main kinds of extensive reading.

1 Class library

Students choose a reader they want to read from a selection at suitable levels. They may read it in class or at home, and there can be follow-up activities, ranging from simple recording of reading done to responses to the text (eg a dramatisation) but no comprehension checking.

2 Class reader

The teacher chooses a reader at the average level of the class, and all the students read it, either at home or in the lesson. The book provides a springboard for a range of classroom activities where the students draw on their shared knowledge of characters and story.

Why

What evidence is there that students who read extensively at their language level can make remarkable progress?

Research studies show that extensive reading improves:

- 1 Reading skills** Obvious perhaps, but it has been shown to be more effective than formally teaching reading comprehension.
- 2 Writing skills** Again a predictable consequence from exposure to a lot of comprehensible text.
- 3 Listening and speaking skills** Much more surprising this, and anecdotal evidence suggests even greater improvement when students read and listen to a recording at the same time.
- 4 Vocabulary** This is what one would expect from reading books where any new words are contextualised or

illustrated and repeated. Frequent meeting of new words in context improves vital guessing skills.

- 5 Grammar** This is excellent news – grammar without pain!
- 6 Examination results** A study has shown that wide reading is the best predictor of success at TOEFL.

Why not?

So if extensive reading is such a boon to the teacher, why don't we do more of it? What kind of things can make it go wrong?

- 1 Denying the students a choice.** The benefits cited above were when students read what they wanted. Forcing students to read culturally unsuitable material because it is adapted from great literature does no favours to the students or the literature.
- 2 Turning extensive into intensive reading and using comprehension questions to wring meaning out of the text.** The natural response to a story is to laugh, cry or read on – not to answer a multiple-choice question.
- 3 Asking our students to read aloud around the class.** Some learners who like to may wish to read individually to a teacher, but reading in front of one's classmates is torture – particularly for teenagers.
- 4 Asking students to read with dictionaries.** Graded readers are written within vocabulary and grammar restrictions so that few words are unknown (studies suggest that 98 per cent known is ideal) and these are repeated. Dictionaries are for intensive reading. Used here, they hinder the development of guessing skills and the enjoyment of the story.

In other words, extensive reading is about reading lots of books – nothing more, nothing less.

How

Most publishers have their own series of graded readers with their own grading system. These systems vary, but there is considerable commonality so you don't need to worry about having books from a number of different series. And as every

class is mixed ability, you will need books at varying levels to suit the students.

Ideally, your school will buy books for your class, but in practice many teachers set up their own class libraries. They do this by asking each student (or their parents) to buy one book. With 30 students you have an instant library of 30 books, and at the end of the year the students can either keep 'their' book or the collection can be handed down to the next class.


You can ask the students to choose the books themselves by going to a bookshop, from the cover illustrations and blurbs in catalogues or from the publishers' websites (some of which also have free sample chapters to read). Encourage them to choose exactly what they want to read – a thriller works as well as an adapted classic.

What does a class library look like? It may be a shelf of books or a plastic bag of books. The main thing is for the students to take responsibility for it themselves, recording loans and returns of books. Some teachers like to put a postcard in each book where students write brief comments.

Make a little time each week for students to borrow readers and talk about them. Most importantly, show that you value graded readers by reading them yourself.

How many books should a student read? As many as possible! A book a week is a good aim – stand back and watch the effects!

And, finally ...

But what if my school makes me use a class reader? Don't despair – all the publishers produce worksheets full of pre- and post-reading activities. But try to have a class library as well ... 



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