

# Getting an Extensive Reading Program going

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Interest in extensive reading (ER) in foreign and second language learning is booming and this growth in interest in extensive reading has led many teachers to set up ER programs. Some of these have been small and modest - often just one class. Others are more ambitious and widespread involving whole schools, universities and even whole school districts. Many of these programs are very successful and well run. But sadly among these programs there are many that have not lasted the distance and many programs have faltered. This is not from a lack of interest or enthusiasm for ER, but due to inadequate planning, poor execution or insufficient resources. It seems some programs have lost their way. This paper will look at some suggestions that will provide a roadmap for implementing, maintaining and running an extensive reading program.

First, let us consider what the program will look like when it is up and running. When the program is fully functional it will

- be an integral part of the school's curriculum;
- raise the learners' reading ability and general English levels and have knock-on effects on their writing skills, spelling, grammar and speaking;
- motivate the learners to read, and learn from their reading;
- have goals that set out how much reading should be done and by when;
- have a reading library from which learners can select their own texts;
- have systems in place for cataloguing, labeling, checking out, recording and returning the reading materials;
- have a variety of materials to read, not only graded readers and other simplified materials;
- show teachers, parents and the administration that you take ER seriously;
- have targets of both learner and program attainment that clearly show the success of the program;
- be bigger and more resilient than one teacher and have sufficient support that it will continue indefinitely.

But how does one get there? Probably the most important piece of advice is to "think big, act small" (Hill, 1997). This means the management systems can be expanded or contracted with minimal pain as the program evolves. If a successful program is to prosper, it has to have vision, and the will to survive potential threats to its existence. Among these threats are increases in lost or mislaid materials, insufficient resources to maintain a library, teaching and financial resources being moved to other projects, and a general lessening in enthusiasm after the highs of the 'big start'. Therefore, the program should be well planned, but should have built-in flexibility and adaptability for future changes.

The very first step is to find ways that the program will fit within the school's curriculum. An ER program needs to fit within the goals, aims and objectives of the school, otherwise the ER program may fail from lack of direction or purpose. Moreover, it needs to not only be part of a larger reading program, but also part of the larger language learning program, because reading extensively is only one type of reading instruction. There also needs to be instruction and practice in intensive reading and the

development of reading strategies and skills, for example. The key to a successful reading program is balance. Too much intensive reading leads to not enough work on developing a fluent reader. Too much extensive reading can lead to a learner not noticing certain language, and too much work only on reading skills will not practice the skill of reading. Not enough work on vocabulary leads to learners who cannot develop their reading fast enough. The balance of these elements for learners at different ability levels must be determined before the program can take shape.

The next step is to ensure that *everyone* is involved not only in the planning and in the setting up, but also involved in decisions that are made as a group. If people do not feel they have a stake in the program then their lack of commitment may lead to frustration and anger if things do not go well. It may even result in resentment if it is felt that something is being pushed upon them - especially something that they do not understand, nor care about. This implies a lot of careful groundwork and planning to ensure that everyone involved understand the reasons for the program and its aims, goals and objectives. This includes the learners and possibly their parents.

After there has been a decision to go ahead, then you will need funding to get reading materials. If your program is using graded readers, then you'll need enough funds not only to buy the initial stock, but to ensure there is follow-up funding for improving the stock and to replace damaged and lost items. Most schools and school districts will have a budget for books, but if this is not available, money can be requested from parents or learners, or raised at school events such as school festivals, sponsoring learners in a reading marathon, and so on. The more the learners are involved in the funding, setting up and running of the library, the higher the chances are that the program will flourish. Initially, the program can start with one book per learner (or even one between two if books are shared) and these can be rotated each week at the designated return date. Eventually, you will need 3-4 books per learner to ensure sufficient variety, range of levels, and interest.

Another way you can start your library (in addition to using readers) is to require learners to find materials which interest them from magazines, webpages, newspapers, brochures or whatever. Their task every week is to find one article that is really interesting to them which they can read reasonably comfortably. They then glue it to a card, write their name on it and where it came from and then read it. Before handing it, they can translate any unknown language in as a service to other learners. This method builds research skills and at the same time they become stakeholders in building a library of things they want to read. These can be kept in a box or bag and learners can be encouraged to label and file them in appropriate categories (the use of different colour backing card can help here). Every week they should select one or two articles to take home and read to discuss later in class. These materials will need to be graded according to your scheme as well.

The effective library management of graded readers needs a lot of forethought and planning specific to your location. Some schools and colleges are lucky enough to have their library keep the books. However, many libraries are too under-resourced to deal with an additional load of books to check-out, check-in and restock. Some schools require the learners to work in the school library to take turns to administer the book lending.

In the absence of support from the school library, you'll need to set up your own book management systems which should be simple and transparent to anyone who picks up a book. The first thing to do is to make a grading scheme so that materials can be graded by difficulty (and age appropriacy). A common way to do this is by using the publisher's headword counts – for example the yellow level refers to books below 300 headwords, green books are between 300 and 450 and so on. This system will need to be flexible because the publishers use different headword lists and books differ by density of text and illustration per page, and book length by level among other things. So you'll need to look at each title

carefully before assigning it a level. It is not a good idea to code them by the publisher's assertions of *elementary*, *intermediate* and so on because these vary tremendously between publishers. Your learners can also help to identify mis-levelled books as they read.

Many foreign and second language ER programs use a 6 to 8 level scheme going from the easiest materials to the more difficult. These levels are often sequenced by using colors, letters of the alphabet or numbers. If there are too few levels then the jump between levels can be too large and off-putting for learners who need a steady sense of progress and accomplishment. Each book can then be numbered and coded by its level and book number (e.g. G4070 G = Green level, 4 = biographies, and 070 is the book number). Other coding schemes can be used to identify class sets of readers, or readers for a particular class or set of classes, or even short term loan books. Whatever the code, it should be clearly visible on the cover and very transparent to everyone, including the learners. These books and materials can then be kept in boxes or on different shelves and should have color tape on the spine for ease of identification. There is probably no need to put them in author or book number order, - just drop them in the appropriately color-coded box.

If the school's library cannot be used, the next thing to organize is the book borrowing system. For a single class, this can be as simple as a checkout sheet with the learner's name and book number listed by week (see Figure 1). When books are returned they are crossed off.

Name	April 1	April 8	April 15	April 22
Akiyo Nagai	<del>G5345</del>	<del>G2453</del>	G3232	
Bert Nuefelt	<del>Y1785</del>	<del>Y2121</del>	Y2778	
Shu Wei	P2352	<del>P2099</del>	G6435	
Carlos Sanchez	<del>543</del>	<del>547</del>	444	

Figure 1. A simple checkout sheet for a single class.

Alternatively, a different sheet can be made for each learner that includes the book title, the book number, and the borrowing and return dates (see Figure 2).

Name <i>Akiyo Nagai</i>		Number ... <i>032012</i>	
Title	Book number	Date borrowed	Date returned
Alice in Wonderland	G5345	April 13	April 16
The green eye	Y1785	April 16	

Figure 2. A checkout sheet for a single learner.

If there are several classes using the same stock, you will have to decide a common system so that everyone knows the system and you will have to coordinate things so that two whole classes do not want to swap books at the same time. In any case, it is not a good idea to use an "honor system", as colleagues from around the world report high instances of 'lost' or 'forgotten' books.

It is much easier if all the learners borrow and return books at the same time. They should put them in the 'drop box' at the beginning of class (or after the time allocated for discussing their reading with others is over). In a quiet moment the teacher (or the learners, in rotation) checks off which books have been returned. Books should only be returned to the book collection when the books have been crossed off.

At some stage you will need to know which books each learner has read, how many pages, and at which difficulty levels so that you can monitor (or assess) them. This is commonly done by requiring learners to write a short report on each book in a notebook, or on a specially prepared questionnaire (examples of these are on the websites described below). This creates a record for later assessment. The teacher can check these either in a silent reading period in class, or out of class.

Before the first class, you will need to decide how the learners can find their own ‘reading level’. One easy way to do this is to spread books out on a table and let the learners choose a title they like. They then have to read a page of it. If the material is too difficult (i.e. their reading speed is under 80-100 words per minutes, and if there are more than 1 or 2 unknown words per page, or if they do not have high levels of comprehension), then they choose a book at an easier level. They can go up and down levels until they feel comfortable. Some teachers ask learners to take a vocabulary or reading placement test as an alternative. Whichever way you choose, the learners will need help in finding their comfort level and need advice about reading suitable for them. You can monitor that they are reading at the right level by talking to each student individually in a silent reading period.

In the first class, you will then need to explain to the learners why extensive reading is important (see Paul Nation’s article, this issue) and convey this to learners as often they cannot see the need and just see it as more homework. Not doing this well is the leading cause of failure of ER programs. They need to see that their coursebook provides them with the new language but their conversation and writing classes assist them in building their fluency with already known language as output. Extensive reading helps learners to build their reading speed and automaticity in reading of *already known language* in a pleasurable way. If they do not read or listen extensively then they cannot build reading speed and gain all the benefits that come from it. I have found the following table very helpful for explaining extensive reading to students (based on Welsh, 1997).

<b>Intensive Reading</b>		<b>Extensive Reading</b>
Analysis of the language	LINGUISTIC FOCUS	Fluency, skill forming
Usually difficult	DIFFICULTY	Very easy
Little	AMOUNT	A book a week
teacher selects	SELECTION	Learner selects
All learners study the same material	WHAT MATERIAL	All learners read different things (something interesting to them)
In class	WHERE	Mostly at home
Checked by specific questions	COMPREHENSION	Checked by reports / summaries

Figure 3. A table for explaining the reading to learners.

The learners also need to know:-

- the goals of the ER program;
- when they have to return books;
- how much they need to read either by number of books or page targets (research suggests a ‘book a week at their own level’ is sufficient);
- how many books they can borrow;
- how their reading will be evaluated (if at all);

- when they have access to the library;
- whether they have to do follow up exercises or write reports etc.;

Finally, you will need to know how to assess the learners and their reading and find ways to determine how the program is meeting its goals.

This short article has not been able to cover this ground in much depth. Much more advice and assistance is available online. Please take time to look at the website below and consider joining the Extensive reading mailing list.

### **References**

- Hill, D. 1997. [Setting Up An Extensive Reading Programme: Practical Tips](#). *The Language Teacher*, 21 (5), 17-20.
- Nation, P. 1997. [The Language Learning Benefits of Extensive Reading](#). *The Language Teacher*, 21(5), 13-16.
- Welch, R. 1997. Introducing extensive reading. *The Language Teacher*, 21 (5), 51-53.

### **Resources**

The following websites provide a wealth of advice and tips on Extensive Reading.

[The Extensive reading website](http://www.extensivereading.net) <http://www.extensivereading.net>  
Rob Waring's [ER website](http://www1.harenet.ne.jp/~waring/er/) <http://www1.harenet.ne.jp/~waring/er/>

### **Biodata**

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