# A Literature Review of the Use of the Term Extensive Reading in Second Language Literature: Who Was the First to Use It?

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## Abstract

Reviewing the literature is an important part of academic work, as it helps readers see what has come before, what has and has not worked, and situates the author's place in the ongoing discussion. Accepting this view, extensive reading literature often points to Day and Bamford (1988) as identifying Kelly (1969) as crediting Palmer (1921) as the first to apply the term extensive reading (ER) in L2 pedagogy. At the time of Day and Bamford and Kelly's publications, a reference to Palmer was a worthy seminal identification as literature searches were not aided by today's more powerful electronic databases. Utilizing more modern search tools (Archive.org, Google Books, JSTOR, Project Gutenberg, Google Books) and the archival works they provide, we extend the discussion by offering a more complete history of the term for researchers to draw from. Specifically, we (a) explore early L1 uses of the term and (b) point to three new L2 seminal benchmarks: the earliest (1) use of the term (2) intensive/extensive distinction; and (3) definition found to date. We then (c) continue our discussion up through today's modern definitions of the term. Directions for future studies are also discussed.

**Keywords:** Extensive reading, literature review, Day and Bamford, Kelly, Palmer, free reading, love of reading, pleasure reading, silent reading, supplementary reading, voluntary reading, seminal publication, definition of extensive reading

## Introduction

Reviewing the extant literature is an important part of academic work as it helps readers see what has come before, what has and has not worked in the field, and what situates the author's place in the ongoing discussion. These reviews are aided, but also limited, by the technology available at the time of writing (Fink, 2019). In the case of extensive reading (ER), for example, Day and Bamford (1998) have cited Kelly (1969) as crediting Palmer (1921) as the first to use the term in reference to L2 pedagogy, two secondary sources and a primary source that have been generally accepted and extensively cited (see Ashwell, 1999; Dao, 2014; Ewert, 2019; Iwahori, 2008; Mart, 2015; Powell, 2005; Sun, 2020; Yulia, 2017). At the time of Day and Bamford and Kelly's publications, this was a worthy claim, as literature searches were unaided by today's more powerful electronic databases and search tools. Acknowledging the fine contributions of Day and Bamford (1998), Kelly (1969), and Palmer (1921), we, assisted by more modern resources (e.g., Archive.org, Google Books, JSTOR, Project Gutenberg, Google Books) and the historical artifacts they provide, extend the discussion by offering a more complete history of the term for researchers to draw from. Specifically, we (a) explore early L1 uses of the term (Ritson, 1714; S.I. 1814) and (b) point to three new seminal L2 benchmarks: the seminal (1) use of the term (Sears, 1844), (2) intensive/extensive distinction (Cutting, 1898), and (3) definition (Johnson, 1921) found to date. We then (c) continue our discussion through today's modern definitions of the term.

**Extensive Reading in L1 Contexts**

In examining early extant L1 literature, it can be seen that what we think of today as ER has an exceptionally long history. The first citable extant text, for example, is located in the early 1700s, where Ritson (1714), using Early Modern English orthography, writes *extenſive reading*, meaning to read in abundance. Additional Early Modern English references can also be found in mid-1700's literature; for instance, in Lauder and Johnson's (1750) reading of Milton's Paradise Lost. From here through the 1800s, the term is more frequently used (Gregory, 1770; Shahria & Dey, 1760; Stewart, 1792; Virginia, 1800), again to describe reading in abundance, an example of which is Harington and Harington's (1804) discussion of a 1596 Rabelaisian satire, "in this little work we find extensive reading and infinite humour" (p. xi).

The first reference to ER as an activity to promote L1 public edification is found in S.I.'s (1814) Important Benefits Resulting from Book Societies. Supporting the movement to promote freely available reading via public libraries (see Wolcott, 1912), S.I. argues "to enumerate all the benefits that would naturally arise from extensive reading . . . would be endless" (p. 314). Such support also found its way to school settings where, as in all healthy academic discussions, there were counter-arguments. Payne (1882), for example, in opposition to extensive reading, praised intensive reading as "the duty of schools to teach reading properly" (p. 67). Nevertheless, support for the inclusion of ER in school settings continued, an example of which is the 1870's Quincy System, where Colonel Parker, its founder, opposing a rote system of learning, provided students opportunities to read "a variety of textbooks, juvenile magazines, and other matter in abundance" (Hewitt, 1880, p. 164).

Continuing support is also found in the late 1800s in the way of distinctions between intensive and extensive reading, descriptions of vocabulary gains, observations, and discussions

of ER's historical place in reading. Harris (1870), for instance, argued that if students are to become learned, they "must do so by independent and extensive reading" (p. ix). Sinclair (1872), offered support in the way of vocabulary gains, "by extensive reading of stories . . . [students quickly learn] to recognize words" (p. 71). Salmon (1886) illustrated support in another way, discussing "the joy children find in extensive reading" (p. 248). He also offered a very salient point: Extensive reading is not a novel procedure, "for more than a century after extensive reading was thus fostered, books appealing especially to boys and girls … [were] devoured " by young readers (p. 248).Thus illustrating that ER, which is often considered to be situated in the 1900s, has long been a part of reading pedagogy.

Detailed descriptions of school/class libraries and materials associated with ER are also found in this period. Prince (1892), addressing school and class libraries, for example, explained that every school "should have a carefully selected library from which books can be taken home by pupils and if there is no such library, one should be maintained in the classroom, from which the teacher should direct the outside reading of good books" (p. 323). Cobb (1842), also addressing text availability, illustrated the placing of materials that we currently think of as ER materials (e.g., graded level books) alongside magazines and other texts in school settings. Support for ER continued into the 1900s where it experienced even greater acceptance in school settings. Early in the century, Paul (1914) exemplified this by addressing the teacher's role in encouraging the habit of reading: "The instructor must … bring home to the pupils and to the school authorities the importance of this supplementary or extensive reading" (p. 215).

Still, others supported the use of ER through discussions of its characteristics. Maple (1917), for example, outlining an early ER program, suggested that students could read considerably more material in an ER course than in traditional curricula and added that students

should be able to self-select materials according to interest. This is especially important, Gray (1919) argued, because "progress in the acquisition of reading ability is dependent on the extension of the pupil's field of experience through extensive silent reading" (p. 610).

Revisiting the 1800's push for free reading rooms at libraries and school ER programs, Alexander (1919) addressed other characteristics, arguing that reading should be "free and extensive . . . . This means a library and the time to use it" (p. 72). In the same year, Lyman (1924) provided another early underpinning of ER theory. Specifically, Lyman described a growing trend in 1900's education: the belief that students should have access to a large variety of easy, self-selectable extensive reading material. Williams (1929), too, addressed this, and reiterated that "independent of any stimulation from the teacher, they [students] may read widely" (pp. 667-668), albeit he suggested teacher guidance was practically facilitative.

The trend of support for ER continued, and by the late 1920s articles began to be published that not only mentioned ER but focused on it specifically. These texts endorsed the benefits ER provides in the content areas (e.g., literature, social science, science) (Good, 1927; Colburn, 1928; Smith, 1927), as well as ER's direct effect on reading improvement. Williams (1929), and others that followed (Harris, 1930), for example, demonstrated that ER, in addition to facilitating gains in vocabulary acquisition, advances both comprehension and reading rate. By this time, we also find that most of the terms we use today had found their way into the discussion; for example, free reading (Alexander, 1919; Cowan, 1913; Hanna, 1931), love of reading (Alpern, 1927; Bostwick, 1909), pleasure reading (McFurry, 1903), silent reading (Gray, 1919), supplementary reading (Paul, 1914; Sinclair, 1894), and voluntary reading (Mead, 1894).

As the 1920s drew to a close, the controversy over intensive and extensive reading continued (Gray, 1926); however, the value of ER had found its place in reading studies (Smith,

1927; Harris, 1930), with many advocating a moderate position (Hanna, 1931; Manchester, 1917; Palmer, 1921; Paul, 1914), where "there should be no conflict between the extensive and the intensive methods; the purpose and type of reading should determine the method to be employed" (Hanna, 1931, p. 592).

### Extensive Reading in L2 Contexts

The 1920s, specifically 1921, has been cited as a benchmark for the term extensive reading. Day and Bamford (1998), for example, as mentioned earlier, reference Kelly (1969) as crediting Palmer (1921) as the first to use the term extensive reading in L2 pedagogy. Using today's more powerful databases, we further unpack these references and extend the discussion by identifying several earlier texts to include a seminal (a) use of the term (Sears, 1844), (b) intensive/extensive distinction (Cutting, 1898), and (c) definition (Johnson, 1921).

Sears (1844), who we credit with the first locatable extant source to use the term extensive reading in L2 literature, addressed the intensive-extensive dichotomy in his The Elements of the Latin Language. However, he did not use the term intensive, and, like L1 intensive reading proponents (Payne, 1888), he did so rather critically: "Extensive reading would lead to nothing but shallowness and confusion with the young pupil. It is not so much expansiveness that is wanted, as accuracy" (p. 5). In this argument, he was contrasting an appropriate amount of text for beginning learners: no more than "100 pages" (p. 4), which would be used for careful study, and extensive reading, which he explained would be more appropriate for the "mature scholar" (p. 5).

Cutting (1898), writing of foreign language education and weighting the discussion toward ER, in what we find to be the first explicit intensive/extensive distinction in L2 literature, used both terms in the same sentence, adding the idea that students need to have repeated

exposure to materials: "Impressions that are to become the learner's permanent possession must be frequently repeated. Mere knowledge must ripen into instinct. What inference may be fairly drawn from this principle as to intensive versus extensive reading" (p. 363).

The early to mid-1900s, as in L1 studies, brought positive support for ER[1]. Brown (1914), discussing Latin education, for instance, explained that employing ER outperforms the "old method" (p. 242), adding that students "can best be taught to read Latin only by reading it extensively" (p. 239). Hoyt (1915), in a survey of more than 100 teachers of Latin, empirically demonstrated this, reporting that "extensive reading of easy Latin stories . . . [resulted in students'] state of advancement" (p. 157). Sheils (1916), writing of English as second language education for US immigrants, offered another positive distinction between intensive and extensive reading: "Extensive reading is as necessary as intensive reading" (p. 261).

The year 1921 also saw several publications which referenced ER (Cline, 1921; Johnson, 1921; Palmer 1921), each of which was supportive. The first which was in March, where Johnson (1921), in a discussion of high school Spanish courses, offered what we find to be the first extant definition of ER, or more especially an ER course, in L2 literature: "The purpose of the extensive reading course is to develop an ability to read easily and profitably in the foreign language" (p. 78). Shortly afterwards, in May of the same year, Cline (1921) also offered support. Discussing the value of using graded materials to teach French, Cline explained that "it is by extensive reading that we can best give to the student the cultural advantage of foreign language" (p. 440).

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[1] The 1901 Report of the Committee of Twelve of the Modern Language Association of America makes several references to the tenets of extensive reading in foreign language education, but the term ER is not used.

In that same year, although we cannot identify a month, as this source is a full-length book, Palmer (1921) posed a question:

Shall reading be intensive or extensive? That is to say, shall we take a text, study it line by line, referring at every moment to our dictionary and our grammar, comparing, analysing, translating, and retaining every expression that it contains? Or shall we take a large number of texts and read them rapidly and carelessly, trusting that quantity will make up for the lack of quality in our attention and the lack of intensity? (p.164)

A question he answered with what was, as in L1 literature, becoming an accepted advocation for a moderate approach: "Adopt them both concurrently, but not in one and the same operation. At times, read intensively; at others read extensively . . . . There is no reason why several methods should not be used" (167).

From here, as with L1 literature, ER seems to have found its place in both theory and pedagogy, where many of the ideas expressed in L1 literature are reified. West (1926), for example, adding the idea that reading should be pleasurable, argued:

If we can ensure that every child . . . derive[s] pleasure from reading . . . , we shall have ensured that no child who begins a foreign language will ever, in the future, be able to regret it afterwards as a waste of time. (p. 43)

West continued by addressing another area today's ER supporters are concerned with, readability, the need for appropriate level materials. That is, "new words should not be introduced more frequently than one new [word] in every fifty running words of the text" (p. 43).

Despite the growing support for ER and its place in foreign language education, ER, as Van Horne (1930) explains, continued to be "much-discussed" (p. 12) by camps on each side of the intensive/extensive debate. However, similar to the L1 context, the moderate approach that

reading "should be both intensive and extensive" (Maronpot, 1940, p. 494) had found firm ground in L2 pedagogy.

As the century progressed, L2 educators, similar to those in the L1 context, continued to suggest characteristics of ER programs. Trotter (1938), for instance, explained that students' interests and levels must be taken into consideration when choosing texts for an ER library. Ansley (1936) revisiting the subject of libraries further explained that students should be given an introduction to ER, an orientation to the ER materials in the library and classroom, and the "freedom to read at will" (p. 121), what Maronpot (1940) described as an "abundance of graded materials" (p. 497).

The teacher factor was also addressed. Coutant (1943), for instance, explained that ER must be

> encouraged by the teacher through the keeping of records, allowing freedom of choice, pointing out the wide resources available in the school, and seeing to it that those resources are there through building up a library of individual copies of worthwhile material. (p. 474)

In line with Coutant (1943), Cartledge (1955) added that teachers can, in addition to suggesting or providing suitable books, engage students in occasional discussions of text elements (e.g., story, plot, characters). Foreign language teacher training guides also included discussions of ER during this period (O'Connor, 1960).

The next major reference to ER is Kelly (1969). According to Day and Bamford (1998)[2], "Louis Kelly, in his volume *25* Centuries of Language Teaching, credits Harold Palmer with first

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[2] Palmer interprets Kelly as crediting Palmer (1921). Our examination of Kelly's text, 25 Centuries of Language Teaching, shows Kelly cited Palmer's The Principles of Language Study (1920;

applying the term extensive reading in foreign language pedagogy" (p. 5). Looking at Kelly's original text, however, we, respecting Day and Bamford's interpretation, find that Kelly more specifically interprets Palmer as follows: "The modern distinction between intensive and extensive reading was first spelled out, it seems, by Palmer" (p. 130). Addressing both of these assertions, we, as mentioned above, credit the first extant reference to extensive reading in L2 pedagogy to Sears (1844) and the first extant distinction between intensive and extensive reading to Cutting (1898).

Kelly, also well-meaningly and limited by the search tools available, writes, "only in this century has the skill of reading been divided into intensive and extensive types" (p. 150), which is a discussion that we find had been going on since the early to mid-1800s, for about 77 years prior to Palmer (see Cutting, 1898; Sears, 1844; Sheils, 1916). Kelly does, however, summarize a very pertinent point found in L1 and L2 literature and one that more recent literature has adopted (see Krashen, 2004): Extensive reading "should be silent and enjoyable" (p. 150).

Moving forward and drawing on the extant literature to date (pre-1980s), Brumfit (1979), brings ER literature up to the 1980s by providing a summary of many of the ideas found in earlier L2 literature, to include class libraries, reading in quantity, and reading levels: "Any efficient English language school or department should have . . . a library of extensive readers so that those who wish to can read at least one book, however short, of an appropriate level, per week" (p. 6).

## 4.     Modern Definitions of Extensive Reading

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reprinted,1964). We, however, find that Palmer originally published this in, as Day & Bamford cite, 1921.

Drawing on early L1 and L2 ER literature, a great many post-1980's texts have been published that, summarizing the tenets of ER literature, have posed definitions of ER. Grellet (1986), for instance, discussing pleasure reading, describing materials, and revisiting the extensive/intensive dichotomy, offered the following:

Extensive reading: reading longer texts, usually for one's own pleasure. This is a fluency activity, mainly involving global understanding. Intensive reading: reading shorter texts, to extract specific information. This is more of an accuracy activity involving reading for detail. (p. 4)

Others have defined ER by outlining the characteristics associated with it: Some short; others quite lengthy. Davis (1995), for example, provides a rather inclusive description:

An extensive reading programme is a supplementary class library scheme, attached to an English course, in which pupils are given the time, encouragement, and materials to read pleasurably, at their own level, as many books as they can, without the pressures of testing or marks. Thus, pupils are competing only against themselves, and it is up to the teacher to provide the motivation and monitoring to ensure that the maximum number of books is being read in the time available. The watchwords are quantity and variety, rather than quality, so that books are selected for their attractiveness and relevance to the pupils' lives, rather than for literary merit. Non-fiction is also included as well as teenage magazines, but fiction predominates as the major reading genre. Ideally, each class should have a book box or book basket of different titles, graded and colour-coded by reading level, numbering about ten more books than the number of pupils in the class. (p. 330)

Carrell and Carson (1997), also echoing early intensive-extensive discussions, offered the following:

> Extensive reading, in contrast to intensive reading, generally involves rapid reading of large quantities of material or longer readings (e.g., whole books) for general understanding, with the focus generally on the meaning of what is being read than on the language. Extensive reading is intended to get the reader to focus on reading for the sake of reading (for information or entertainment), and less on reading for the sake of mastery of a particular linguistic structure of even a particular reading strategy or skill. Thus, it can involve a wide variety of reading skills or strategies. (pp. 49-50)

Extensive reading's place in the foreign language program, text selection, reading in abundance, and benefits have also been addressed in the course of providing definitions. Hill (1992), for instance, discussing ER's place in the curriculum and text selection, offered the following: "It is my belief that extensive reading should be an integral part of the *assessment* [Hill's emphasis] English language syllabus, and that it should be organized in a systematic programme which uses graded readers at appropriate levels" (p. 58).

Richards and Schmidt (2002), looking at ER from a quantity and results orientated approach, explained the following: ER is "reading in quantity and in order to gain a general understanding of what is read, develop good reading habits, build up knowledge of vocabulary and structure, and gain a liking for reading" (p. 212).

Day (2002) addressed text selection and vocabulary range in another definition:

> Texts must be well within the learners' reading competence in the foreign language. In helping beginning readers select texts that are well within their reading comfort zone, more than one or two unknown words per page might make the text too difficult for

overall understanding. Intermediate learners might use the rule of hand -- no more than

five difficult words per page. (p. 137)

Others have provided lists of characteristics when offering definitions. Renandya and

Jacobs (2002), for instance, outline the characteristics of ER this way:

- Students read a large amount of material.
- Students usually choose what they want to read.
- Reading materials vary in terms of topics and genre.
- The materials students read is within their level of comprehension.
- Students usually take part in post-reading activities.
- Teachers read with their students, thus, modeling enthusiasm for reading.
- Teachers and students keep track of students' progress. (p. 127)

Day (2002), in the same year, laid out (and then reiterated in another text, Day &

Bamford, 2004), ten important characteristics of successful ER programs. These are:

- The reading material is easy.
- A variety of reading materials on a wide range of topics is available.
- Learners choose what they want to read.
- Learners read as much as possible.
- Reading speed is usually faster rather than slower.
- The purpose of reading is usually related to pleasure, information, and general understanding.
- Reading is individual and silent.
- Reading is its own reward.
- The teacher orients and guide their students.
- The teacher is a role model of a reader. (p.137)

More recently, others have followed with shorter definitions that addressed or

summarized points found in previous literature. Taguchi, Takayasu-Maass, and Gorsuch (2004)

offered the following:

ER is an approach in which readers self-select materials from a collection of graded

readers (books which have reduced vocabulary range and simplified grammatical

structures) with the goal of reaching specified target times of silent sustained reading. (p.

71)

Taguchi, Takayasu-Maass, and Gorsuch (2004) further added that ER is thought to increase L2 learners' fluency, i.e., "their ability to automatically recognize an increasing number of words and phrases, an essential step to comprehension of L2 texts" (p. 71).

Grabe (2009) also defined ER by outlining quantity and student level, an "approach to the teaching and learning of reading in which learners read large amounts of material that are within their linguistic competence" (p. 286), and more recently, Waring and McLean (2015), summarizing Day (2002), argued that "reading should not only be interesting but also be easy, fast, silent, pleasurable, individual and self-selected, and involve reading as much as possible while guided by a teacher as a role model" (p. 161). Waring and McLean, also drawing on early literature, offered a list that they labelled core elements (necessary to retain the label "ER"):

- Fluent, sustained comprehension of text as meaning-focused input
- Large volume of material
- Reading over extended periods of time
- Texts are longer, requiring comprehension at the discourse level
- Variable elements of an ER program (There are, no doubt, other variables: the below serve as examples.)
- ER is conducted in class or at home, or a combination thereof
- ER is required, or optional
- The reading is enjoyable, for pleasure, or not
- The reading is monitored (self-declared, by the teacher), or not
- The reading is assessed, or not
- The presence or absence of follow-up activities (comprehension or language focus)
- The teacher reads or doesn't read with students in the classroom
- Graded or non-graded materials (provided they can be comprehended fluently)
- Longer or shorter texts
- The degree of freedom to select texts
- Requiring students to start with the simplest material available. (p. 165)

About this time, Ghanbari and Marzban (2014), revisiting the historical intensive-extensive reading dichotomy, offered a contrastive definition:

Reading has traditionally been divided into two types: intensive and extensive. In broad terms, intensive reading may be described as the practice of particular reading skills and

the close linguistic study of text. Extensive reading, on the other hand, can be defined as reading a large quantity of text, where reading confidence and reading fluency are prioritized. (p. 3855)

Most recently, Kepe and Weagle (2020), aptly summarizing the discussion and drawing on a historical phrase, explained that ER is "associated with developing fluency and positive attitudes towards reading — a 'love of reading'" (p. 5).

### Conclusions and Discussion

Extensive reading has a long and rich L1 and L2 history. In the more recent post-1980's L2 tradition of summarizing, we offer the following. Taken together, our review of the literature can be summed up in four statements. The first is that ER is by no means a new concept. It has been around "for more than a century" (Salmon, 1886, p. 248), and its origins in L2 literature can, as evidenced in this study, be cited "at least" [emphasis added] as far back as 1844 (Sears, 1844).

The second comes in the early 1900s from West (1926) in his text Learning to Read in a Foreign Language: "If we can ensure that every child who begins to study a foreign language shall . . . derive pleasure from reading it, we shall have ensured that no child who begins a foreign language will ever, in the future, be able to regret it afterwards as a waste of time" (p. 43).

The third is that ER has been defined widely, and, as has been illustrated in the aforementioned review, these definitions tend to offer recurring themes, e.g., availability of materials (e.g., class libraries), teacher modelling and support, a wide selection of appropriate level materials, self-selection, individual silent reading, reading in quantity, and reading with the goal of pleasure.

The fourth, an especially important point, is found in an interview with Day and Bamford:

Extensive reading, like all teaching, requires hard work and involvement. It just doesn't happen. Teachers who incorporate extensive reading into their classrooms need to offer guidance and support . . . . And the process takes time. Our students will not become L2 readers overnight. But the rewards are definitely worth the time and energy. (Donnes, 1999, p. 7)

### Suggestions for Future Research

Our literature review, discussion of early L1 works (Ritson, 1714, S.I., 1814), and crediting of three seminal L2 citations (Cutting, 1898, Johnson, 1921; Sears, 1844) extend current ER literature (Day & Bamford, 1998; Kelly, 1969; Palmer, 1921), but we are confident and propitiously hopeful that our review, like earlier literature, will be shown to be limited by today's available technology and replaced with even earlier benchmarks. Thus, we encourage future researchers to support (e.g., fund, volunteer for, and utilize) the archive projects which provide such resources (e.g., Archive.org, Google Books, JSTOR, Project Gutenberg) as well as the private and institution library archive projects that lend support. It is also hoped that future studies, utilizing these and tomorrow's tools, will continue to explore our field's rich history, because our pedagogy is informed along a string of cause and effect, and, to better educate the next generation, educators must be aware of the historical context of our field (Burton, 2012). In short, as Carl Sagan (1980) noted, you have to know the past to understand the present, and, we would add, plan for the future.

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