Viewing extensive reading from different vantage points

Fredricka L. Stoller
Northern Arizona University
USA

Some years ago (in about 2007), I was asked by Professor Neil J. Anderson, known for his expertise in second language (L2) reading, to identify my top-five priorities for teachers of L2 reading. It sounded like a simple task, but it was not so simple. With all that we need to know about reading itself, reading instruction, reading curricula, reading materials, the teacher's role in reading classes, and, of course, our own students who oftentimes have pressing needs to improve their reading abilities, how is it possible to identify just five (not even six) priorities for L2 reading teachers? As it turns out, it was an interesting intellectual exercise to narrow down key issues in teaching L2 reading to a grand total of five.

To arrive at my top-five priorities, I found myself thinking about the complex nature of reading itself in addition to the roles of working memory and the lower- and higher-level processes required for reading comprehension. I reviewed our varied purposes for reading (including reading for general comprehension, reading to search for specific information, reading for the gist, reading to learn, reading to integrate information from multiple sources, reading to write, and reading for pleasure) and the skills and strategies needed to achieve our reading goals. I thought about what it takes to become a fluent reader, a strategic reader, and an efficient reader. I contemplated the role of automaticity, the influence of motivation, the relationship between reading fluency and reading comprehension, the importance of morphological awareness, the impact of discourse organization on reading, and the all-important role of vocabulary. And, of course, I reflected on the varied realities of reading classrooms, in second and foreign language settings, and how much we teachers have to achieve in a relatively short amount of time to help our students become more skilled, strategic, confident, and motivated readers. But there was even more to consider. I reflected on the instructional practices that I have witnessed in diverse settings, where teachers strive to achieve curricular goals and meet students' (sometimes pressing) reading needs; some of those practices are particularly effective, while others, at least in my view, are quite ineffective.

After all that contemplation, I arrived at my top-five priorities for busy practicing reading teachers (see also Anderson, 2008, pp. 134–135):

- The best way to help students learn to read and improve their reading skills is through reading itself.
- Giving students choices in what they read can empower students and lead to more student engagement in reading.
- One of the best ways to inspire students to read and to demonstrate the excitement that is

often associated with reading is for teachers to lead by example.
- One of the best ways to promote reading fluency and meaningful reading is through rereading.
- Students most often rise or fall to the level of expectation of their teachers. Thus, teachers should set high expectations for all learners and assist them in achieving those expectations.

And now (2015), years after formulating my list of the top-five priorities for reading teachers, I find myself contemplating a similar, though not identical, question: What is extensive reading? To explore this question, posed by Dr. Richard R. Day, known worldwide for his expertise in extensive reading, I begin by examining my top-five priorities for L2 reading teachers from an extensive reading perspective. I believe that four of my five priorities have direct relevance to extensive reading. One of my five priorities, however, is not particularly relevant to discussions of extensive reading. I will explain why and replace it with a new "priority" that can guide teachers who integrate extensive reading into their L2 instruction.

The Best Way to Help Students Learn to Read and Improve Their Reading Skills Is Through Reading Itself

There really is no substitute for the actual act of reading, if we strive for L2 students to become fluent and confident readers. Yet, sadly, for countless L2 students around the world, so-called "reading classes" involve very little reading, in or out of class. Rather, the focus of such classes is oftentimes on: (a) analyses of short challenging texts, with careful attention paid to key grammatical structures and difficult vocabulary; (b) the memorization of challenging vocabulary in the texts; and/or (c) the translation of texts from the target language to students' first language. In other settings, the focus may be on completing comprehension questions (which do not always require the reading of the passage); discussing and writing about readings (without holding students accountable for the content of the reading passages); teaching vocabulary to be encountered (as a pre-reading activity) or reviewing vocabulary that has been encountered (as a post-reading activity); and/or completing grammar exercises, which cover structures encountered in the reading passage but that do not require comprehension of the passage. Other "reading classes" center around whole-class choral reading, without any concern for comprehension, followed by a teacher-centered vocabulary lesson, with no reference to the passage just read aloud without comprehension. (See Stoller, Anderson, Grabe, & Komiyama, 2013, for additional descriptions of common approaches to teaching reading.)

Despite the prevalence of "reading classes" devoid of meaningful reading, there are other reading classes for which students engage in plenty of reading. The problem, in many cases, is that the reading passages that are assigned are too difficult for students to comprehend, causing student frustration and demotivation. The difficulties that students experience often stem from the fact that the assigned passages have too much unknown vocabulary (Nation, 2013; Schmitt, Jiang, & Grabe, 2011). Other sources of reading challenge could be linked to abstract imagery, conceptual and/or grammatical complexity, lengthy texts, poorly signaled organization, unfamiliar topics, among other sources of reading difficulty (Grabe & Stoller, 2011).

L2 students who read too little, as well as those who must read too many overly difficult texts, find it challenging to become skilled, motivated readers. If reading improvement is truly an instructional goal, then students should be engaged in as much comprehensible reading as possible, in class and out of class, and across the curriculum. This is where extensive reading fits in so well, if we view extensive reading as an approach to the teaching and learning of reading in which learners read large quantities of reading materials, in and out of class, that are easily understood, interesting, and enjoyable. Over time, especially in instructional settings that make a curriculum-wide commitment to extensive reading, students are likely to become more fluent, motivated, and confident L2 readers (e.g., Day & Bamford, 1998; Grabe, 2009; Hedgcock & Ferris, 2009; Nation, 2009).

Giving Students Choices in What They Read Can Empower Students and Lead to More Student Engagement in Reading

Typically L2 teachers assign readings that are in their mandated textbooks, without giving students any choices whatsoever. One of the challenges most of us face with our textbooks has to do with the amount of reading included in them. Many textbooks, even those designated as reading-skill development textbooks, have short reading passages, oftentimes one to two passages per chapter. Thus, our textbooks do not make it easy to give students choices. To make up for this deficiency in our textbooks, some of us integrate supplementary reading passages into our lessons that permit students to further explore textbook topics. Even when we do this, we rarely give students choices, in part because we do not have the time to find multiple reading passages that complement the topics of our textbooks chapters.

The ideal, for motivational purposes, is to give students some choices in the readings that they do. When given choices, students are likely to take the task more seriously and enjoy being a reader. Here, again, extensive reading fits the bill. One of Day and Bamford's (1998; see also Day & Bamford, 2002) top 10 principles of extensive reading states that students should "select what they want to read and have the freedom to stop reading material that fails to interest them" (p. 7). With classroom or school libraries stocked with graded readers at a range of reading levels, on many topics, and of various genre types, students can choose readers that are not only at the appropriate level, but also interesting and motivating, thereby leading to opportunities for reading engagement and success. Because students have varied interests, the aim is to stock our extensive reading libraries with readers of many types, including fiction (e.g., adapted classics, ghost stories, murder mysteries, romance, thrillers) and non-fiction (e.g., autobiographies, biographies, informational readers on culture, the environment, science, sports, technology). (See the Extensive Reading Foundation website http://erfoundation.org/wordpress/ and its link to a list of graded readers suitable for L2 readers, organized by publisher, with information about reading levels, most appropriate student groups, and availability of MReader quizzes at http://mreader.org/.)

In many extensive reading programs, especially in those with large collections of graded readers for students to choose from, students are encouraged to check out graded readers of interest and read them in and out of class. To facilitate informed student choices, teachers can incorporate activities into their extensive-reading classes that familiarize students with books in the extensive

reading library (e.g., matching book titles with back-cover book blurbs, see Schmidt, 2004) and guide students in making wise selections. Suk (2015), in her study of extensive reading in a Korean university context, found that such activities were particularly valuable for students with no extensive-reading experiences.

One of the Best Ways to Inspire Students to Read and to Demonstrate the Excitement that Is often Associated with Reading Is for Teachers to Lead by Example

Many L2 students come from homes, schools, or communities with few avid readers and limited reading materials of any kind, let alone English language reading materials. Thus, it becomes the teacher's role to excite students about reading. Teachers can help students understand how enjoyable reading actually can be when they share what they are reading, what they have learned from their reading, why they are enjoying it, and what other types of reading they engage in. The teacher-as-role-model can serve as a powerful motivator. In fact, "motivation plays a central role in the development of positive reading habits and attitudes" (Anderson, 2014, p. 178). Classes and/or language programs that make a commitment to extensive reading naturally lend themselves to teachers sharing their enjoyment of reading and the "rewards of being a reader" (Day & Bamford, 1998, p. 8).

Teacher-as-role-model, in the context of extensive reading programs, has changed over the decades. There was a time when teachers were encouraged to engage in silent, enjoyable reading, during sustained silent reading (SSR) periods, to lead by example and demonstrate the value of reading (rather than using the time to grade papers or plan future lessons). In instructional settings where scaffolded sustained reading (ScSR) has taken the place of SSR, the teacher's role has shifted from teacher-as-reader to teacher-as-guide (see Stahl, 2004). In classrooms that make a commitment to ScSR, the teacher monitors students' engagement, text selection, and text comprehension (Reutzel, Fawson, & Smith, 2008; Reutzel, Jones, & Newman, 2010). During in-class extensive reading, monitoring takes place as the teacher circulates and interacts quietly with individual students. When student motivation lags, interest wanes, and/or the texts that they are reading prove to be too difficult, too complicated, or simply boring, the teacher encourages students to check out new titles. Teachers who are familiar with the graded readers in the class (or school) library can do a particularly effective job of recommending graded readers that complement individual student's reading abilities and interests (Suk, 2015).

One factor that complicates matters here is that, in many parts of the world, teachers themselves are not engaging in a lot of reading (e.g., Arici, 2008; Oguz, Yildiz, & Hayirsever, 2009). In some of those settings, teachers do not have access to many English reading materials. To counter this dilemma, it behooves school and language program administrators to not only have plentiful reading materials for L2 students but also have interesting reading materials, of various types, for teaching staff.

One of the Best Ways to Promote Reading Fluency and Meaningful Reading Is through Rereading

The fourth of my five top priorities for reading teachers (from 2007) needs to be adjusted for discussions of extensive reading. The notions of reading fluency and meaningful reading remain relevant; however, it is the recommendation that students engage in a lot of purposeful rereading that is not particularly pertinent. In place of "rereading" activities, I propose alternatives that are more suitable for extensive reading settings.

Reading fluency, often neglected in traditional L2 reading curricula, is one of the hallmarks of a skilled reader. Reading research has demonstrated that reading fluency development should be an essential component of effective and successful reading instruction (Grabe, 2009; Rasinski, Blachowicz, & Lems, 2006; Schwanenflugel & Ruston, 2008). In fact, when fluency practice is incorporated as a consistent component of a reading curriculum, students make important gains in reading comprehension.

Extensive reading facilitates the development of students' reading fluency in large part because students are reading a lot. Furthermore, they are reading materials, in the best of circumstances, that are easily understood. When students are guided in selecting graded readers that are at the right level, students are likely to experience few interruptions in their reading, thereby helping them develop their fluency. Reading books that are reasonably easy negates the need for students to consult the dictionary while reading; thus, the frequent stopping and restarting, which occur when students go back and forth between their dictionaries and challenging reading materials, are minimized. Equally important is the notion of meaningful reading, that is, reading for a purpose. In extensive reading settings, students are typically reading self-selected readings for pleasure, information, and/or general understanding (Day & Bamford, 1998, 2002).

In extensive reading settings, however, we typically do not ask students to reread materials. Rather, after they have taken an MReader quiz, filled in a reading log, and/or spoken to a classmate about the books that they have just finished, we encourage learners to check out yet another interesting, engaging book, with the hopes that over time they will be motivated to do this on their own.

In more traditional reading classes, where students typically do not read very much or they read materials that are too difficult for them, fluency is rarely achieved. In such settings, rereading counters this problem and is a reasonable classroom practice. With each meaningful rereading assigned in a traditional class, the passage becomes more familiar and, thus, easier to read. In such settings, the key is to "exploit" the texts that are read by asking students to reread them for different well-defined purposes (e.g., to identify the main idea, find details, determine the author's stance, and compare with another text). Each time through the passage, the students become more comfortable with the text, thereby (a) building their confidence and self-esteem as readers and (b) improving their reading fluency. (See Grabe & Stoller, 2011, 2014, for more on rereading tasks that can promote reading-fluency development.)

In place of rereading tasks, other types of activities, such as those proposed by Bamford and Day (2004), can contribute to extensive-reading goals. Bamford and Day propose a range of activities that helps students get started with extensive reading, introduces reading materials, motivates and supports reading, and guides students in monitoring and evaluating their reading. They also propose activities that support oral fluency development, writing, reading fluency, and

vocabulary building in the context of extensive reading.

Students Most Often Rise or Fall to the Level of Expectation of Their Teachers. Thus, Teachers Should Set High Expectations for All Learners and Assist Them in Achieving Those Expectations

In most instructional settings, students rise or fall to their teachers' levels of expectation. In L2 classes with reading emphases, we typically have students with varying degrees of motivation to read. Some students will do the bare minimum to meet our expectations; others will push themselves to excel and go beyond our expectations. The least motivated of our students, sometimes disenchanted with reading because they have not yet experienced any reading successes, might not work very hard at all. Our goal should be to set high expectations of all students and assist them in meeting those expectations, with the hopes that all students will become better, more confident and motivated readers.

In extensive reading settings, we can set an initial reading goal for our students, defined by number of graded readers read or number of words read. The MReader website helps students keep track of both. To encourage students to keep pushing themselves to excel, when individual students reach the initial goal, the goal can be reset for a higher word count. Suk (2015) set a reading goal of 200,000 words for her students (see also Beglar & Hunt, 2014). Some students pushed themselves further, upon reaching the goal, but others slowed down their reading, with a few weeks left in the semester, after the initial goal was reached. This phenomenon suggests that we should establish one goal for the class initially, but students should know that upon reaching that goal, the teacher will work with them individually to set more ambitious goals.

Take-Home Message

For an extensive reading program to reach its full potential, many instructional and administrative elements must coalesce. My top-five priorities (explored above) only skim the surface. The Annotated Extensive Reading Bibliography at http://erfoundation.org/wordpress/er-bibliography reveals many of the other elements that are needed to help L2 students become more skilled, fluent, engaged, and confident readers. Research has demonstrated the value of extensive reading in improving students' motivation to read (Judge, 2011; Takase, 2007), reading fluency (Beglar, Hunt, & Kite, 2012), attitudes toward reading (Karlin & Romanko, 2010; Yamashita, 2013), and much more. Despite the research being conducted on extensive reading, and the many teachers and researchers who recognize the benefits associated with extensive reading, there remain many L2 settings where there is a total absence of extensive reading, at course and curricular levels. Reasons for this lack of commitment to extensive reading are many, including the need for plentiful resources (graded readers), resistance from teachers who do not want to (or do not know how to) change their ways of teaching reading, different conceptions of what it means to teach reading and to be a reader, and discontent among administrators (and some teachers) with instructional time devoted to students' silent reading, suggesting that teachers are not doing their jobs (Grabe, 2009). Limited classroom hours also make it difficult for many teachers to replace current teaching practices with an extensive

reading component (Helgesen, 2005; Robb & Kano, 2013). Despite these challenges to the implementation of an extensive reading curricular component, we can all agree that students only learn to read by reading; there are no shortcuts (Grabe, 2009), thus, the appeal of extensive reading.

References

Anderson, N. J. (2008). *Practical English language teaching: Reading*. New York, NY: McGraw Hill.

Anderson, N. J. (2014). Developing engaged L2 readers. In M. Celce-Murcia, D. M. Brinton, & M. A. Snow (Eds.), *Teaching English as a second or foreign language* (4th ed., pp. 170–188). Boston, MA: Heinle Cengage.

Arici, A. F. (2008). Pre-service teachers' reading tendencies: Implications for promoting reading. *American Journal of Applied Sciences, 5*, 645–652. doi: 10.3844/ajassp.2008.645.652

Bamford, J., & Day, R. R. (Eds.). (2004). *Extensive reading activities for teaching language*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Beglar, D., & Hunt, A. (2014). Pleasure reading and reading rate gains. *Reading in a Foreign Language, 26*, 29–48.

Beglar, D., Hunt, A., & Kite, Y. (2012). The effect of pleasure reading on Japanese university EFL learners' reading rates. *Language Learning, 62*, 665–703. doi: 10.1111/j.1467-9922.2011.00651.x

Day, R. R., & Bamford, J. (1998). *Extensive reading in the second language*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

Day, R. R., & Bamford, J. (2002). Top ten principles for teaching extensive reading. *Reading in a Foreign Language, 14*, 136–141.

Grabe, W. (2009). *Reading in a second language: Moving from theory to practice*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

Grabe, W., & Stoller, F. L. (2011). *Teaching and researching reading* (2nd ed.) New York, NY: Routledge.

Grabe, W., & Stoller, F. L. (2014). Teaching reading for academic purposes. In M. Celce-Murcia, D. M. Brinton, & M. A. Snow (Eds.), *Teaching English as a second or foreign language* (4th ed., pp. 189–205). Boston, MA: Heinle Cengage.

Hedgcock, J. S., & Ferris, D. R. (2009). *Teaching readers of English: Students, texts, and contexts*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Helgesen, M. (2005). Extensive reading reports: Different intelligences, different levels of processing. *Asian EFL Journal, 7*(3), 25–33.

Judge, P. B. (2011). Driven to read: Enthusiastic readers in a Japanese high schools' extensive reading program. *Reading in a Foreign Language, 23*, 161–186.

Karlin, O., & Romanko, R. (2010). Examining multiple variables within a single ER setting. *The Reading Matrix, 10*, 181–204.

Nation, I. S. P. (2009). *Teaching ESL/EFL reading and writing*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Nation, I. S. P. (2013). *Learning vocabulary in another language* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

Oguz, E., Yildiz, A., & Hayirsever, F. (2009). Assessing reading habits of future classroom teachers in the context of their socio-demographic features. *World Academy of Science,*

Engineering and Technology, 31, 1004–1007.

Rasinski, T., Blachowicz, C., & Lems, K. (Eds.). (2006). *Fluency instruction: Research-based best practices*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.

Reutzel, D. R., Fawson, P. C., & Smith, J. A. (2008). Reconsidering silent sustained reading: An exploratory study of scaffolded silent reading. *The Journal of Educational Research, 102*, 37–50. doi: 10.3200/JOER.102.1.37-50

Reutzel, D. R., Jones, C. D., & Newman, T. H. (2010). Scaffolded silent reading: Improving the conditions of silent reading practice in classrooms. In E. H. Hiebert & D. R. Reutzel (Eds.), *Revisiting silent reading: New directions for teachers and researchers* (pp. 129–150). Newark, DE: International Reading Association.

Robb, T., & Kano, M. (2013). Effective extensive reading outside the classroom: A large-scale experiment. *Reading in a Foreign Language 25*, 234 –247.

Schmidt, K. (2004). Blurb and title match. In J. Bamford & R. R. Day (Eds.), *Extensive reading activities for teaching language* (pp. 23–25). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Schmitt, N., Jiang, X., & Grabe, W. (2011). The percentage of words known in a text and reading comprehension. *The Modern Language Journal*, *95*, 26–43. doi: 10.1111/j.1540-4781.2011.01146.x

Schwanenflugel, P., & Ruston, H. (2008). Becoming a fluent reader: From theory to practice. In M. Kuhn & P. Schwanenflugel (Eds.), *Fluency in the classroom* (pp. 1–16). New York, NY: Guilford Press.

Stahl, S. (2004). What do we know about fluency? Findings from the National Reading Panel. In P. McCardle & V. Chhabra (Eds.), *The voice of evidence in reading research* (pp. 187–211). Baltimore, MD: Brookes.

Stoller, F. L., Anderson, N. J., Grabe, W., & Komiyama, R. (2013). Instructional enhancements to improve students' reading abilities. *English Teaching Forum*, *51*, 2–11.

Suk, N. (2015). *Impact of extensive reading in a Korean EFL university setting: A mixed methods design*. (Unpublished doctoral dissertation, in progress at the time of writing this article.) Northern Arizona University, Flagstaff.

Takase, A. (2007). Japanese high school students' motivation for extensive L2 reading. *Reading in a Foreign Language*, *19*, 1–18.

Yamashita, J. (2013). Effects of extensive reading on reading attitudes in a foreign language. *Reading in a Foreign Language, 25*, 248–263.

About the Author

Fredricka L. Stoller is Professor of English at Northern Arizona University where she teaches in the MA TESL and PhD in Applied Linguistics programs. She is co-author of *Teaching and Researching Reading* (2nd ed., 2011, Routledge) and has published many articles about L2 reading. E-mail: fredricka.stoller@nau.edu