

Encouraging Schools to Adopt Extensive Reading: How Do We Get There?

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Abstract

This paper starts a discussion of the process of extensive reading (ER) program implementation in schools from a functional perspective. It discusses some considerations that may have hindered the spread of ER into the public school systems of many countries. It makes an argument for a top-down approach being required for widespread implementation as well as the need for materials other than graded readers, which while being the gold standard for ER, cannot realistically be purchased by and managed in a large school system. The impact on student choice of what to read is also discussed. The paper ends with suggestions for a way forward.

Keywords: extensive reading, curriculum, public schools, graded readers, choice, implementation, resource-poor countries

While there appears to be undisputable evidence that Extensive Reading leads to more fluent reading and more effective language learning compared with intensive line-by-line study of texts, many teachers and scholars have lamented the fact that the ER approach has not become more popular—that few schools around the world have adopted ER as a component of the language learning curriculum.

Based on my own concerns and those of many others mentioned in this paper, I attempt to fill a gap in our understanding of how ER programs in schools are developed and maintained. It is mainly built on my own theorizing since there is little empirical evidence upon which to base an argument, particularly from the overwhelming number of schools and school districts that have not attempted to implement ER due to factors that will be discussed below.

There have been a number of talks and papers on the general theme of “If extensive reading is so effective, why aren't more schools implementing it?” Why is it so? The list below comes from a posting in 2014, concerning why a great method isn't widely implemented.

- a. We teach the way we learned.
- b. Teachers work in schools not open to innovation.
- c. It doesn't fit the standard curricula.
- d. It's too much work to change over to a new method.

- e. Most teachers are cautious and conservative in nature.
- f. Institutional and experiential memory is long.
- g. It's the students' fault because they don't work hard enough.
- h. Following the book is easier.
- i. The students don't learn enough that we can see that they have succeeded in learning the language.
- j. Language teacher training programs are generally not optimally designed.
- k. Institutional pressure is strongly against it.

Look familiar? Well, the above was *not* discussing ER, but rather another method, called T.P.R.S. (Teaching Proficiency through Reading and Storytelling) in a posting by one of its advocates, Chris Stolz (2014). There was, however, no discussion of approaches to ameliorate the problems mentioned.

In the same vein, there have been many discussions on this same issue concerning ER. Below, after a preliminary discussion of the basic requirements for a successful ER program, we present an analysis of seven such discussions, ranging from Renandya and Jacobs (2002) to Meniado (2021) followed by an analysis of the essential factors that make it difficult to establish a successful, self-sustaining ER curriculum.

Intensive vs. Extensive Reading

Whether reading is intensive or extensive is not so much a dichotomy as it is a continuum. As explained in the Extensive Reading Foundation (ERF) *Guide to Extensive Reading*, reading can be considered extensive only when the students are reading quickly, with high levels of comprehension and without using a dictionary. If the reading is too slow it probably means the students need to use their dictionaries often, and so this type of reading cannot be considered extensive. But if they are reading a bit slower, with occasional recourse to a dictionary, it might be slightly less ER-ish and a bit more IR-ish. It is just a matter of degree.

Hu and Nation (2000) determined that students need to know 98% of the words on the page for them to be able to read it fluently with complete comprehension. However, understanding somewhat less than 98% does not necessarily mean that the students are not reading “extensively”—if they are reading fluently and believe that they are sufficiently comprehending what they have read.

The “Orthodox Approach” to ER

In what follows, I will sometimes refer to the “orthodox approach.” Day (2015) describes ER instruction that adheres to all 10 principles of Day and Bamford as “Pure ER,” while those programs that adhere to most of the principles are termed “Modified ER.” Macalister (2015) reclassifies them as below. Italics indicate those that he feels *might* not always be possible, but do not necessarily mean that ER is impossible. We will reduce the set of characteristics further below.

Table 1

The Principles Categorized in Macalister (2015, p. 122)

<p>The nature of reading</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The purpose is usually related to pleasure, information, and general understanding - <i>Reading is its own reward</i> - Reading speed is usually faster rather than slower - Reading is individual and silent 	<p>What the teachers do</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Teachers orient and guide their students - The teacher is a role model of a reader
<p>The nature of the reading material</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The reading material is easy - <i>A variety of reading material on a range of topics must be available</i> 	<p>What the learners do</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>Learners choose what they want to read</i> - Learners read as much as possible

Basic Requirements for an ER Program—The Ideal and the Real

Although there is still considerable controversy as to the specific methods and materials that are most effective in particular contexts, the following four elements are universally required for any ER implementation:

- **Teacher:** An instructor capable of guiding the students.
- **Material:** There must be a sufficient amount of reading material that is at an appropriate level for the students (preferably on below or on-level).
- **Time:** There must be time, either in class or outside of class, for students to read.
- **Motivation:** The students must want to read.

What Is Possible Depending on the Context

For each of these elements, however, there is a clear disparity between what the “orthodox” approach to implementation recommends and what is possible in many educational contexts.

Teachers

The ideal is a teacher who is an avid reader and who can be a model for students to emulate, but the reality is that there are many teachers who do not read for pleasure who would need to conduct ER with their students should the school curriculum require it. In her dissertation, Wells (2012) mentions three papers that report that many teachers do not read: *Alarmingly, research has found that a large number of teachers do not read voluntarily, and their feelings toward it consequently transfer to their students* (See Kolloff, 2002, p. 52, emphasis added)

Therefore, any curriculum-wide implementation needs to be designed so that it can be carried out in a manner that would allow even unwilling teachers, perhaps those who do not appreciate or understand ER, to conduct it in their classes. For this reason, I stated above that the teachers need to be capable of guiding the students, but perhaps not capable of implementing the program. For a school-wide program, the school administration needs to take charge of the implementation.

One step towards this would be to centralize the record-keeping so that the teachers would be free from that burden. Naturally, the ideal would still stand, and schools would need to nurture their staff by providing suitable incentives, professional development sessions, or whatever else works.

Material

While the ideal is to have a wide variety of genres available and for students to select what they wish to read as outlined in Day and Bamford (1998) among others, this can only be considered an ideal. Graded readers are not available in many countries around the world, and even when available, they are often too expensive to be purchased in the quantities required.

Unfortunately, the quantity of material that students must read in an ER approach requires a library of material or direct access to graded material on the Internet. Too much material is required for schools to be able to print out and distribute the material directly to the students even if the available material is copyright-free. Yet, the emphasis appears to be on the use of graded readers. The ERF's *Guide to Extensive Reading* asserts "Extensive Reading is usually done with graded readers" (p. 2).

The "freedom of choice" principle, as well, needs to be challenged since schools in developing countries may not have the resources for this. It may be that a thick text with a graded set of readings deemed interesting for the students might be more realistic.

Time

While considerably more time is available outside of class than in-class, such factors as the ability to take materials home, a suitable environment for reading outside of class, available time due to other study, work, or family commitments often conspire against this. Limited in-class time due to curriculum pressure and an examination-oriented atmosphere work against in-class implementation. Dedicated ER classes as part of the weekly curriculum would be one means of providing the time, although the examination mindset will still need to be addressed.

Motivation

While the ideal and ultimate goal should be to foster self-directed intrinsic motivation, at the outset a variety of devices are often required to motivate students extrinsically such as a required goal and incorporation of their performance in their final grade.

Factors that enhance the ability to implement a working ER program

1. **Support** of other teachers, families, the school administration, and government policies meaning that they understand the value of ER. Publishers as well as software developers can also support ER programs.
2. Willingness to adjust the parameters for how ER is conducted based on **Material, Time, and Motivation.**

3. The availability of professional development (**PD**) opportunities with required participation desirable.
4. **Professional resources (PR)**. The availability of knowledgeable academics and academic societies
5. **Cultural norms**. A culture that reads and values reading.

The Literature Concerning Impediments to ER Implementation

Table 2 summarizes mentions in the literature of problems concerning ER implementation. The column labelled *Actors* lists the people or entities that could possibly ameliorate each problem, while *Factor* categorizes problems into issues related to materials, time, motivation, support, or culture-related factors. Both the *Actors* and *Factor* columns were assigned by this writer.

Table 2

Literature on ER Implementation Categorized by Issues Mentioned

Issue	R&J 2002	Mac 2010	Grabe 2011	Haider 2012	Huang 2015	RI&H 2021	Meniado 2021	Factor	Actors
Exam orientation/IR orientation	X		X	X	X			Cul	ATSF
Role of teacher as guide	X		X					Cul	T
Parental support					X			Cul	PF
Student expectations of the teachers' role		X						Cul	ST
Absence of reading culture							X	Cul	
Not included in national curriculum *							X	Cul	A
Lack of places conducive to reading							X	Cul	
Lack of relevant reading materials		X	X	X	X	X	X	Mat	A
Use of one-size-fits-all model			X					Mat	AT
No choice by students				X				Mat; Cul	AT
Lack of motivation *					X	X		Mot	TS
No support for self-directed reading				X				Mot	AT
Limited professional development opportunity *			X			X		K	AT
Delayed impact of ER *						X		K	ATS
Legitimacy issue						X		K	AF
Lack of support from school leaders *		X	X	X		X	X	K	A
Limited knowledge about ER	X	X	X			X		K	ATSF
No personal experience with ER						X		K	T
Limited research			X					K	R
Inconsistent research methodologies			X					K	R
Not directly assessed	X	X		X				Cul	ATSF
Too much credence in the "10 principles"						X		K	AT
Effort required to convince administrators *		X						T	TF
Limited time	X	X			X	X	X	Time	A
Students will not read at home / Tracking required		X	X	X				Time; Cul	TF

Notes. Factor: Materials, Time, Motivation, Knowledge, Culture. Actors: Administration, Teachers, Students, Families, Research.

* The items with an asterisk in Table 2 are similar to the problems mentioned in Stolz (2014), although other items that he mentions are related to teachers being traditional or conservative in nature and not willing to exert the effort to try new approaches.

I have not included articles such as Mitchell (2018), where the author was attempting to establish ER in his own classes. He mentions only local obstacles to implementation at his university in Japan:

- The difficulty in setting up an ER program;
- Not knowing whether ER was already offered to the students in one of their classes;
- Dated books in the library and its policy to keep only one copy of any particular title.

Mitchell reports his efforts and those of others to overcome these problems.

In a Korean study, Lee and Ro (2020) report on how too strict adherence to the “freedom of choice” principle can have untoward effects, particularly when only a limited selection of books is available for in-class reading. They mention no obstacles to implementation, but rather tweaks to make it work better. Macalister (2015), being well-aware of resource-poor contexts, suggests that “in a resource-poor setting where there are no funds available for purchasing graded readers, teachers may decide to make their own reading materials” (p. 125). This, however, assumes that instructors are willing to put in this additional effort to produce an effective ER program, which consequently limits the possibility of an ER program taking off.

The *Factor* column of the table shows that knowledge about ER, or perhaps appreciation of the benefits of ER is a major issue. Indeed, if those who control the teaching curriculum were aware of its benefits, perhaps it would be more widely implemented.

Perhaps not surprisingly, many of the issues mentioned appear to be dependent on aspects of the local culture, both the “educational culture” and the mindset of the people. The local culture determines how much students rely on the teacher for direct instruction, and how much they can depart from the standard curriculum. Students are used to having no choice in what they study, since the text is the focus of most lessons. The examination orientation is also part of the local culture, and a pervasive limitation on ER implementation.

The educational system of any region is a multi-faceted system with links among the various elements. Any innovation, any change in one of these factors may have a knock-on effect on the others. In many cases, the forces of change will be weakened, and the innovation suppressed to bring stability to the system.

The *Actors* column echoes what has been discussed above. Teachers and the administration are the two actors who are most involved in any change in the status quo, although all stakeholders need to accept the concept for a successful, sustainable ER curriculum. Both actors need to work in tandem to bring about the needed curriculum change. As Macalister (2010) states,

Clearly, school managers, administrators, and even possibly principals need to be aware of the reasons for incorporating extensive reading into the teaching programme. This may

be particularly important in situations where teachers feel that their teaching programme is severely constrained by an imposed syllabus. (p. 71)

The Bottom-up and Top-down Models

There are two distinct paths for any innovation: 1) the Bottom-up model, which would start from a single teacher who then influences other teachers and ultimately the school to implement ER; and 2) the Top-down model, which implies that the school administration, or perhaps even the local educational authority prescribes the implementation of ER, including it in the required school curriculum. The conditions necessary for each innovational path to succeed are quite different. Naturally, this is not a truly binary distinction since it is possible that the efforts of one teacher might then inspire the administration to require school-wide implementation, which would then become top-down.

The Bottom-up model

This model starts with the teacher who has learned about the benefits of ER and wishes to implement it in her own class. Upon successful completion of the class term, perhaps superior performance on a high-stakes examination compared to other classes or the reputation of the ER program might spur other teachers or the administration to prick up their ears. Assuming an enthusiastic teacher as the basic premise, we can now look at how the other essential factors can come into play depending on local resources, the current curriculum, and the local culture that are listed in Table 3.

Table 3*Components of the Bottom-up Model*

Factor	Situation	Considerations (Assessment, Cultural, Personal, etc.)
Material	The school already has graded readers in the library.	Tracking could be done with an online quiz, LMS or manually with reports, student interviews, etc.
	A budget is available to purchase books.	Book management can be problematic if a library or other school entity cannot manage check out and return.
	School or students can pay for online access.	The online system usually will include a system to log student activity and confirm that they have read.
	Students can purchase books to share in class.	A workable system if the school administration permits it.
	Students can readily access material online.	Some free, online graded material is available but tracking student reading would need to be done manually. This record-keeping task is possible for an individual, motivated teacher but would not be scalable to the entire teaching staff.
Time	The teacher has discretionary time in class that can be used.	Innovation possible.
	No time in class, but outside reading is possible.	Requires more effort since some mechanism for holding students responsible would be required.
	A set syllabus and specific examination-oriented goals.	There may not be any extra time to do regular reading in class, reading can only be done at home, which would require systematic tracking to ascertain that all did the reading. It also assumes that the students have time available to do this additional work.
Motivation	A class with highly motivated language learners.	The dream class. Give them interesting books and they read without further pushing.
	Students are not so keen on reading but will do so with encouragement from the teacher, particularly if it is part of the class grade.	This is the usual case. Incorporating ER into the class grade must be permissible under the school rules. Students need a way to perceive their progress.
	The school policy does not permit ER to be included in the class grade. Other motivating strategies need to be employed.	Other strategies can include recognition for higher achieving students or classes, donut or pizza parties for the winners at term end, and other types of challenges or competitions.

As can be gleaned from Table 3, the Bottom-up model can achieve results with motivated teachers who have books available, have discretionary time in class, and a system to motivate the students to read. If any of the major elements is not achievable it might be difficult to sustain the momentum in future school terms.

The Top-down model

Let us assume here that the head of the school or perhaps the school district has determined that ER should be implemented in schools perhaps at one or more specific grade levels. In this case, the following considerations come into play for the material, time, and motivation requirements for an effective program.

Table 4*Components of the Top-down Model*

Factor	Situation	Considerations
Material Funding will necessarily have to be provided by the school, district, or national curriculum.	Each participating school receives a sufficient number of books or other materials to meet whatever goals and methodology have been determined.	Each school will need a system for maintaining, distributing and collecting the reading material. The more quality material available that caters to the students' range of interests and reading level, the more successful the program might be.
Time	Reading to be done during class.	The school must see that sufficient time is provided in the curriculum for in-class ER
	Reading to be done at home.	Parental support: Parents must understand that ER can deliver superior results. The school needs to be assured that all students will have a convenient place for uninterrupted reading. A system will be required to ascertain that students are doing their reading.
Motivation	The school must provide suitable professional development sessions.	Teachers need to understand the basics of ER as well as its value to the curriculum and how it leads to improved performance of the students on regional examinations.
	The school must provide a simple way for teachers to hold their students accountable that minimizes the additional workload.	The teachers, however, might not be enthusiastic about ER, viewing it as more work for themselves. Comparable reduction of the workload in other areas of responsibility will be required.

As illustrated in Table 3, school-wide, district-wide, or country-wide implementation is the basic means for expanding ER implementations since there are some factors in the Bottom-up model that can rarely be met in many contexts. Quoting Serdyukov (2017),

innovations that start at the bottom, however good they are, may suffer too many roadblocks to be able to spread and be adopted on a large scale. Consequently, it is up to politicians, administrators, and society to drive or stifle the change. (p. 11)

The Top-down model thus requires knowledgeable, enthusiastic leadership and the political wherewithal to convince the grassroots schools, teaching staff, students, and their families that ER is the most effective approach toward more efficient, enjoyable, and long-term language acquisition. Most likely the implementation must go hand-in-hand with a concomitant de-emphasis on the “examination culture” and other culturally related impediments to establishing effective ER programs.

Serdyukov (2017) states that “educational innovation must be scalable and spread across the system or wide territory” (p. 11). For ER, the main limiting factor to scalability is the reading

material itself. This must be available in abundance either online, local conditions permitting, or as texts in massive quantities. It is doubtful if this can be achieved with printed graded readers. The cost of purchasing the amount required for an entire school system and maintaining a library to manage check out and return are serious impediments to the universal acceptance of ER.

Where to Go from Here

This paper asserts that a different approach is required for ER to be widely implemented, but there is sparse proof that departures from the orthodox approach using an ample, well-selected set of graded readers would be effective. The basic premise of ER is that the students can read a large quantity of material that is at a level that they can easily comprehend. Naturally, material that is relevant and interesting to the students will surely foster greater internalization of the lexis and syntax of what they are reading and promote greater fluency. However,

1. Can the reading of a large quantity of shorter passages promote fluency and language acquisition equally, or better, than the use of graded readers?
2. Can a limited choice of materials work as well as free choice from a wider selection of materials that cater to the students' varied interests?
3. Can ER be effective when implemented by teachers who do not project themselves to their students as role models?
4. Is there a difference between reading the same amount of words in-class, as opposed to outside reading assignments, in terms of improvement in fluency or language skills?

While a Top-down approach is needed, educational boards are unlikely to implement ER unless they feel that it has a strong chance of success. To convince people of this, we first need to foster model schools that have successfully implemented ER in a manner conducive to wider implementation. The answers to questions such as those posed above may help provide more convincing arguments to the administrative decision-makers.

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