

Implementing an extensive reading program and library for adult literacy learners

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Abstract

This article describes the implementation of an extensive reading (ER) program with 43 first language (L1) and second language (L2) adult literacy students. Among them, 16% were nonnative speakers of English. The main principles considered in the design of the program were (a) purpose of reading, (b) reading tactics, (c) material used, and (d) teacher role. The program included sustained silent reading, book talk, and reading aloud. Because a well-equipped library is essential for a successful ER program, this article discusses practical considerations for implementing a library and establishes principles that could guide others working on similar programs. This article also discusses criteria teachers should consider when selecting books for a reading-aloud activity as well as the books and genres that were popular with our sample.

Keywords: extensive reading, adult literacy, read-aloud activity, sustained silent reading, book selection

Extensive reading (ER) can be defined as reading in great amounts for the purpose of a general understanding of the text or for the enjoyment of the reading experience. Its theoretical basis is that people learn to read by reading (Eskey, 1987; Grabe, 1991; Krashen, 1988; Smith, 1994). It has been used to improve reading and language skills for children in their first language (L1) and for adults in a foreign or second language (L2) (for a detailed review of the literature, see Day & Bamford, 1998; Krashen, 2004). An extensive literature review reveals that this approach has not been used with adults who attend literacy programs to improve their reading. Instead, adults who attend programs specifically designed to improve their reading typically spend their time on workbook or software exercises that focus on teaching basic reading skills and preparation for the General Educational Development Test. They are not exposed to authentic materials such as books, magazines, and newspapers (Beder & Medina, 2001; Purcell-Gates, Degener, & Jacobson, 2001; Purcell-Gates, Degener, Jacobson, & Soler, 2002). This paper describes the implementation of an ER program in an adult literacy classroom and presents the principles and components of the program used with adult learners of third-, fourth-, and fifth-grade reading levels.¹ We specifically focus on the ER library used by the students.

Designing an ER Program for Adult Literacy Learners

Day and Bamford (2002) list ten principles that define a successful ER program for L2 learners. Our ER program contained four major categories that were derived from their list: (a) reading purpose, (b) reading tactics, (c) materials, and (d) teacher role.

Reading Purpose

There are two main reasons people read: (a) for pleasure or enjoyment and (b) for information. Our learners were encouraged to read books, magazines, and newspapers, of their own interest, as an enjoyable activity and as a way to obtain information about various topics, people, and facts. Many of our learners had never read a complete book. It was hoped that by experiencing the pleasure of completing a book, they would be motivated to read more.

Reading Tactics

Because the ER approach is based on the theory that we learn to read by reading (Eskey, 1987; Grabe, 1988; Krashen, 1988; Smith, 1994), the amount of reading learners do in a reading class is crucial. In our program, not only were the learners encouraged to read as much as possible in the classroom, they were encouraged to borrow books to read at home as well. Sustained silent reading practice was followed during class, and learners were encouraged to read at their own pace. Neither comprehension questions nor written summaries were required after they read their selections. They also were taught to be responsible for their own reading. In other words, they chose their own books and were encouraged to stop reading if the book was not entertaining or not what they expected.

Readers need to know 98% of the words in a text in order to be able to guess the meaning of new words from the context (Hsueh-Chau & Nation, 2000). In order to increase the learners' confidence and motivation to read, we encouraged them to select books that they would find easy to read. Therefore, they were encouraged to start with a book that was written a little below their current reading level and to slowly increase the reading difficulty of their chosen books. It was our hope that if the students could easily read a book, they would find reading it a pleasant activity and, after completing the book, experience a feeling of accomplishment that may show them the value of reading, which is a major first step in the process of becoming an independent reader and a life-long learner.

Materials

Learners' motivation to read increases when they are interested in what they are reading, which is why it is up to the learner to decide what to read in the ER approach. Consequently, access to books that cover a variety of topics, genres, and reading levels is a key factor for successful ER programs. Learners need to have direct access to reading materials in the classroom; therefore, books should be displayed in an appealing way that clearly shows the different levels of reading and genres.

In our program, colored labels were placed on each book to indicate the level of reading difficulty. For instance, we used red to indicate books that were written at the fourth-grade level, while green-colored labels were used for books written at the third-grade level. At the beginning of the program, the instructor suggested a comfortable reading level (a color) to each of the learners to assist their book selection. Although the learners were advised to avoid material that was too difficult, they were free to choose a book exclusively on the basis of their particular preferences.

Teacher Role

The role of the teacher in an ER program for adult literacy learners is crucial. Due to the fact that this approach is not typically implemented in adult literacy programs, the teacher needs to help learners understand the principles of the ER approach as well as the rationale for what, why, and how to read. Not only should the teacher describe the methodology and goals of the program, but the teacher should also become a role model for the learners. In our program, for example, when the students read, the teacher also read a book from the ER library and similarly engaged in book talk about the book he or she was reading. The teacher also played a crucial role in creating an environment that encouraged learners to read. For example, the teacher decided where to keep the library, as well as how to display the material so that it appeared as appealing as possible. The teacher also guided learners by providing them information about the different genres, showing them how to use a library, and teaching them how to select a book.

Components of the ER Program for Adult Literacy Learners

Our eight ER classes met 4 days a week (i.e., Monday through Thursday) for 2 hours a day for an average of 14 weeks. There were three main components to our program: (a) sustained silent reading, (b) book talk, and (c) reading aloud. These components are reviewed below.

Sustained Silent Reading

This component requires teachers and learners to read books of their own choice silently at their own pace. In the literature, this concept has also been referred to as *pleasure reading* or *free voluntary reading* (Krashen, 2004). During the period of sustained silent reading, teachers can help select a book, answer questions from learners, and observe learners' reactions toward reading. However, the teacher-learner conversation must not disturb the other learners who are reading.

In our program the time assigned for the sustained silent reading activity had several modifications. We started with a reading time goal of 1 hour and 30 minutes. However, we soon realized that this was an unrealistic goal because the students were not used to reading. So we reduced the reading time to a total of 80 minutes and divided it into two sections of 40 minutes each. This goal also proved to be too high an expectation. After reading for 20 minutes, our students usually did not pay attention to their books, and some even fell asleep. Therefore, we implemented a progressive model in which the learners set their own goals as to how much time they would read each day. Thus, the reading-time goal increased daily until reaching a total of 80

minutes. After each book was read, learners wrote their impressions on a form provided by their teachers.

In addition to reading during class time, the learners were encouraged to check out books and read them at home. Our checkout procedure was similar to what regular libraries do: Each book had a pocket inside the back cover and a checkout card. There was space on the card for the learners to write their names and date the book was borrowed and returned. Each time the learners checked out a book, they filled out the card and gave it to the teacher who kept it in an index box.

Book Talk

The rationale of this component is that discussing a book with others feeds the learners' curiosity, gives them an opportunity to exchange points of view, and introduces them to other books in the library. It is a type of literary circle activity, but on a smaller scale. This component of the program was conducted after each session of sustained silent reading. During this time, an informal discussion was held where the learners and instructors discussed the books they were reading and expressed their opinions and reactions about them. When doing this activity, learners can hold the book and show the cover to the class as they talk. They should never disclose the end, so that another learner can become curious and, eventually, read it. The instructor should not force any learner to talk if he or she does not feel comfortable sharing. Typically, each person in our program talked for about 1 minute, with some students talking a bit longer.

Reading Aloud

The reading-aloud component is considered an important way to promote ER (Smith, 1997). It introduces learners to books and stories that they currently are not ready to read by themselves, thus exposing learners to literature they would not ordinarily read. Lee and Neal (1992/1993) indicate that adults enjoy listening to stories and it is a source of motivation for reading. For learners who have difficulty reading, it also helps them to build correspondence between sound and writing symbols as well as to acquire a feeling for the rhythm of the language (Pegolo, 1985). In this component, teachers selected a book that the students would not be able to read easily on their own and read it out loud to them while learners silently followed along in their own copies.

During a reading-aloud session, the teacher should read with expression and be sensitive to learners' attention spans. In our program, teachers read aloud each day for an average of 15 minutes. At the beginning of the session, teachers distributed the students' copies of the book and then collected them at the end. Some students, however, preferred to keep the books from day to day, either rereading what the teacher read out loud or reading ahead before the teacher read it out loud. The session always started with a brief review of what the teacher read the previous time, providing and activating background knowledge and schemata. During this time, the teacher also presented cultural information needed for understanding the reading and introduced vocabulary (e.g., slang, old style words) that might be difficult for the learners. The teacher then proceeded to read out loud and, upon completion, the teacher and learners discussed what was read.

Any reading material (e.g., magazines, newspapers, books, etc.) can be used in reading aloud. In our program, however, the teacher read novels out loud because we found that novels maintained our learners' interest, and they began to anticipate events in the story. The plot, theme, and characters all became factors that created a highly meaningful context for interpretation, anticipation, and interest. Also, our learners valued the effort made to finish a book that took weeks to read; it provided a feeling of accomplishment that they clearly enjoyed.

In the process of selecting a book for reading aloud in class, teachers should consider the learners' interests and ages, as well as the linguistic and cognitive levels required to understand the book. If it becomes apparent that a book is too linguistically or cognitively complex, teachers should select another one. For example, in our experience, the very first book chosen for a reading-aloud activity was a disaster. *The Little Prince* by Saint-Exupéry (2000) was chosen because of its simple language and story plot. However, our learners found the book difficult to understand due to its inclusion of inferences and metaphors. Another book was immediately chosen. Through our experience, we found structural complexity, pace of plot, physical features, type of book, and student reactions all to be helpful criteria in selecting books for reading aloud in an adult literacy classroom.

Structural complexity of the selected book. Books with a writing style that is simple and that has a straightforward lexicon and syntax are good choices for adults who have difficulty reading. Books with an abundance of complex structures or with concepts that express ideas in an abstract or philosophical manner, such as *The Little Prince*, should be avoided. In addition, books that include too many extraneous details should also be avoided because our learners found these details uninteresting and rendered the book as boring.

Pace of plot. Easy-to-follow and fast-paced plots are preferred over stories that unfold slowly. The reading should keep the attention of reluctant readers and should never bore the audience.

Physical features. Font size, density of the words on page, and book length all matter to adults who have difficulty reading. We have found it best to select books that are not written in excessively small print and that contain 200 or fewer pages.

Type of book. Our learners were consistently interested in books that were significant to their individual backgrounds and cultures. Books with characters of the same or similar age or gender helped students relate to them and to connect with the story during the reading-aloud process. Examples of reading-aloud books that our learners enjoyed can be found in Table 1.

Student Reactions

For the first reading-aloud session, teachers should select a book based on the ethnicity, gender, and ages of the students. The book should be one that does not require much interpretation and that has a fast-moving plot. After the first session is finished, learners should be asked for input for the next selection. We have found it helpful to develop a reading-aloud guide. This guide is used by teachers to record the reactions, recommendations, and comments of previous students and colleagues who have used the book for a reading-aloud activity. It can be used as a reference

guide to help select books for reading-aloud practice.

Table 1. *Popular books for reading-aloud practice*

Title	Author
<i>Tuesdays with Morrie</i>	Mitch Albom (1997)
<i>Souder</i>	William H. Armstrong (2002)
<i>The House on Mango Street</i>	Sandra Cisneros (1984)
<i>What Looks Like Crazy on an Ordinary Day</i>	Pearl Cleage (2002)
<i>The Midwife's Apprentice</i>	Karen Cushman (1995)
<i>Like Water for Chocolate</i>	Laura Esquivel (1995)
<i>The Outsiders</i>	S. E. Hinton (2003)
<i>Their Eyes Were Watching God</i>	Zora Neale Hurston (1998)
<i>Mama</i>	Terry McMillan (1987)
<i>Beware, Princess Elizabeth</i>	Carolyn Meyer (2001)
<i>Sula</i>	Toni Morrison (1982)
<i>Of Mice and Men</i>	John Steinbeck (1993)
<i>The Red Pony</i>	John Steinbeck (1992)
<i>Night</i>	Elie Wiesel (1986)

The ER Library

The main focus of an ER program is to encourage students to read as much as possible. Therefore, the most important component of this program is easy access to a library containing titles that target the readers' interests and reading levels. In this section, we will report on the library as used by 43 adult literacy learners, including the books they read, the most popular genres, and their reactions to the books they read.

To provide context for our library's characteristics, it is important to know the demographics of our 43 learners. The students, who wanted to improve their literacy skills (for various reasons, such as better job opportunities and personal growth), were recruited from community-based and state-administered adult literacy programs in a Southern urban area of the United States. They volunteered to be part of our program as part of a larger research project investigating adult literacy learners and reading instruction.¹ Of them, 72% were female, 82% African American, 8% Hispanic, 8% Asian, and 2% Caucasian. The students' ages ranged from 17 to 63 years old (with a mean age of 35). They read between the third and fifth grade levels. Sixteen percent of the learners spoke English as their second language. The 43 learners belonged to 8 different classes that met an average of 14 weeks. They received 2 hours of instruction for 4 days a week.

As indicated in Table 2, the ER library included 249 different titles of both abridged and authentic materials that covered 12 genres and 8 reading levels (from 1–8). Multiple books per title meant that there were a total of 817 books in the library. Because our learners read at the third through fifth grade levels, 70% of our books fell within that range. The library was expanded based on the learners' interests in various genres. The distribution of books in the genres reflects the popularity of the books our learners liked to read. There were 76 books of general fiction, 36 of biography, 25 of health and education, and 24 of crime mystery.

Table 2. *Extensive reading library books presented by genre and reading level*

Genre	Reading level of book								Total
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	
General fiction	7	4	26	8	14	12	4	1	76
Biography		3	10	3	12	6	2		36
Health and education	3	3	4	6	9				25
Crime mystery				22	2				24
Personal reflection	5	2	2	5	2	6			22
African American fiction*				3	11	1			15
Business and work	1		11	1				1	14
Sci-fi horror				9	1	1			11
Folktales		8							8
Romance	1		7						8
Sports			5			1		1	7
Poetry			1	2					3
Total	17	20	66	59	51	27	6	3	249

Note. Books were classified as African American fiction if they were written by an African American author and with African American dialectical patterns, if they described African American experiences, and if the narrator's point of view was relayed through an African American voice. We included it as one of our genres because over 80% of our learners were African American.

The Most Read Books

The learners read 85% of the titles in the library (i.e., 211 out of the 249 titles in the ER library), equaling a total of 731 books during the program. As indicated by Table 3, general fiction was the most read genre, with 64 titles read 246 times, followed by biography, with 29 titles read 97 times, and African American fiction, with 14 titles read 80 times. The least read genres were poetry and sports. As can be seen in Table 4, certain books were read more frequently than others.

Table 3. *Books read by 43 adult literacy learners*

Genre	Number of titles read	Number of times read	Reading level
African American fiction	14	80	4.5 – 6+
Biography	29	97	2 – 7.5
Business and work	11	37	1 – 8.3
Crime mystery	20	56	4 – 5.0
Folktales	7	21	2 – 3+
General fiction	64	246	1 – 7.8
Health and education	22	59	1 – 8.0
Personal reflection	20	49	1 – 6.7
Poetry	2	8	3.5 – 4
Romance	8	44	1 – 3.5+
Sci-fi horror	9	22	4 – 6.4
Sports	5	12	3 – 8.3
Total	211	731	

Table 4. *The most frequently read titles in our ER library*

Genre	Most popular book	No. times read
General fiction	<i>Climbing the Wall</i> (Reiff, 1998)	15
Romance	<i>A Friend in Need</i> (Massie, 1997)	14
African American fiction	<i>Lost and Found</i> (Schraff, 2002)	11
African American fiction	<i>The Bully</i> (Langan, 2002)	11
Business and work	<i>Play Money</i> (Reiff, 1999)	11
Health and education	<i>Managing Stress</i> (American Institute of Preventative Medicine, 1994)	10
Biography	<i>Sojourner Truth</i> (Roop & Roop, 2002)	8
Folktales	<i>Love Stories</i> (Reiff, 1993)	7
Personal reflection	<i>Never Say Good-bye</i> (New Writers' Voices, 1993)	7
Sports	<i>On Their Own</i> (Boga, 1991)	7
Crime mystery	<i>A Deadly Game</i> (Lorimer, 2001)	6
Crime mystery	<i>Murder on the Loose</i> (Godfrey, 1999)	6
Sci-fi horror	<i>Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde</i> (Stevenson & Hegarty, 2003)	5

For the purpose of knowing how the library matched the students' interests and reading levels, the students were asked to rate the books according to four categories (see Appendix A): (a) *great* (I loved it, very good book), (b) *good* (I liked it, nice story, interesting), (c) *OK* (I didn't mind reading it), and (d) *boring* (I didn't like it). As indicated by Table 5, of the books read, 75% of the time the books were rated *great* and *good*, 22% *OK*, and only 3% *boring*.

Table 5. *Learners' opinions about the books they read*

Genre	No. books read	Opinion				
		Great	Good	OK	Boring	Not rated
African American fiction	80	13	31	15	2	19
Biography	97	28	33	16	0	20
Business and work	37	8	16	5	1	7
Crime mystery	56	13	18	10	4	11
Folktales	21	5	8	2	0	6
General fiction	246	55	75	37	1	78
Health and education	59	9	27	9	0	14
Personal reflection	49	14	12	5	3	15
Poetry	8	4	1	2	1	0
Romance	44	7	16	7	1	13
Sci-fi horror	22	2	7	11	1	1
Sports	12	3	6	2	1	0
Total	731	161	250	121	15	184

Students' Book Selection Criteria

Our students were encouraged to select a book by looking at the title of the book, reading the back of the book, looking at the pictures, or skimming through chapter headings (for examples of how to present and introduce books, see Bamford & Day, 2004; Collin & Slater, 1987). Toward the end of our ER implementation, we realized that it was important also to explore what adults who have difficulty reading consider when selecting a book to read. Therefore, students in three of our most current classes (16% of the student sample) were invited, with their teacher's help, to

fill out a form indicating the criteria they used in their book selection process (see Appendix B).

As indicated by Table 6, 36% of the selected books were based on the learners' personal interests, 34% were based on aesthetic features, 16 % were based on peer influences, and 14% were based on the reading level of the book. For the learners who wrote that reading level was a criterion, their answers indicated that 55% of the time the learners chose a book because it looked easy to read. In other words, they were attempting to ensure a feeling of accomplishment in their reading activities by picking a book that they thought they could finish reading. Of interest is that 45% of the time the students chose a book because it looked challenging.

Table 6. *Book selection criteria*

Criteria	Description	Percent	Percent of the total
Aesthetics	The pictures on the cover look interesting.	65	
	It has interesting pictures.	6	
	The print is easy for me to read.	16	34
	I think it is short enough for me to finish today.	13	
Reading level	It looks easy to read.	55	
	It looks challenging to read.	45	14
Interests	The title sounds interesting.	3	
	I always wanted to read this book.	13	
	I like this kind of book.	84	36
Social	I saw someone else reading it.	23	
	Someone told me it was a good book.	77	16

Conclusion

In this article, we have briefly introduced the implementation of an ER program for adult literacy learners. A literature review indicates that this approach has not been described for use with adult literacy learners. In designing this program, four principles were considered: (a) the purpose of reading (e.g., for enjoyment, information, and one's own personal reward), (b) the reading tactic (e.g., reading for content and general information, individually and silently, and in large quantities), (c) the reading material (i.e., having a library that has a variety of topics and levels of books and that permits easy access to the books), and (d) the teacher's role (i.e., the teacher is a key component of ER programs because he or she becomes a role model in sustained silent reading, guides students in selecting books, and chooses and reads aloud books that are difficult for the class). Our approach was based on three methodological principles: (a) reading as much as possible and about what one likes or wants to read (sustained silent reading), (b) listening to stories one cannot read but would enjoy hearing (reading aloud), and (c) talking and sharing with classmates about what one reads (book talk).

Because an ER program cannot succeed without a well-equipped library, special attention was paid to the practical considerations of organizing a library so that future ER programs targeting a similar population could have a model to follow. Our library contained 817 books (249 titles) that covered 12 genres and 8 reading levels. The most popular genres for our participants were

general fiction, biography, and African American fiction. This information was invaluable when ordering books for the library. It is worth noting that the particular topics of the books in an ER library depend on the particular group being targeted. Therefore, classes without a large African American population may not want or need as many books in the African American genre as we had in our library.

Considering that our learners were not in the habit of reading and that most of them reported that they had never completed reading an entire book, we are pleased that our students read many books from the ER library. Our participants who read between the 3rd and 5th grade reading levels read a total of 731 books (i.e., 85% of the library titles; 211 out of 249 titles) during the 14 weeks of instruction.

It is suggested that providing learners with appealing topics is a priority of an ER library. In order to meet this requirement properly, teachers and administrators should first research the reading interests of their target population. Additionally, when using reading-aloud books, it is important to keep in mind the class profile, drawing on factors such as age, gender, language, and ethnicity, as well as the pace of the book and simplicity of the language. Our experience indicates that the best books for adult literacy learner reading-aloud activities are those that are not too long, are written in a simple writing style with straightforward syntax and vocabulary, are easy-to-follow, and include fast-paced plots. In addition, we have found that teachers should always read the book first so that surprises, such as inappropriate content or offensive words, are not encountered in the reading-aloud activity.

Unfortunately, only towards the end of our implementation did we consider exploring how adults in this sample selected books to read. Although only 16% of the students were surveyed, their answers are interesting and warrant further study. Answers to the survey indicated that the students first paid attention to the topic because they wanted to read what was interesting to them. This concern about reading something that is interesting, as the main factor when selecting a title, is consistent with previous research on ER using college students studying Spanish as an L2 (Rodrigo, 1997). Also important was the physical appeal of the book, including interesting pictures, easy-to-read print, and the length of the book. Peer recommendation also proved to be a factor in the selection process. Finally, in the fourth place was the reading level of the book. It is important to note, however, that because only 16% of the students completed the survey, further exploration is warranted with a larger sample.

Our experiences indicate that it is possible to implement an ER approach with adults who have difficulty reading. However, most adults who join a class to improve their reading skills do not want to read just for pleasure as a goal; they also want and need to see their reading skills improve so that they can reach their job, family, and educational goals. We are in the process of gathering quantitative data to analyze the reading gains of adult literacy students in an ER classroom compared to the reading gains of adult literacy students in more explicitly driven reading classes.² Research is also needed to determine the impact such an approach has on individuals' long-term reading attitudes and motivation.

Notes

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2. A study on *Reading Instruction for Low Literate Adults* funded by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, the National Institute for Literacy, and the U.S. Department of Education, grant # 1 R01 HD43801–01.

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Appendix A

Week # _____

Name: _____

Site: _____

Date: _____

<u>Day</u>	<u>Title</u>	I read From: __ to __	# of pages read	<u>Opinion</u>
<u>Monday</u>				
<u>Tuesday</u>				
<u>Wednesday</u>				
<u>Thursday</u>				
	Per Week:	Total minutes: ____	Total pages: ____	

Opinion Key:
<i>Great</i> (I loved it)
<i>Good</i> (I liked it)
<i>Ok</i> (I didn't mind reading it)
<i>Boring</i> (I didn't like it)

Appendix B

Name _____

Day _____ Date _____

Book Title _____

Why did you pick this book today?

Put a check mark next to the statement that tells why you picked this book today.

- The pictures on the cover look interesting.
- It has interesting pictures.
- The print is easy for me to read.

- I think it is short enough for me to finish today.
- It looks easy to read.
- It looks challenging to read.
- I saw someone else reading it.
- Someone told me it was a good book.
- The title sounds interesting.
- I always wanted to read this book.
- I like this kind of book.

Other _____

About the Authors

Victoria Rodrigo, and Daphne Greenberg are faculty members at Georgia State University and are the principal investigators of this study. Victoria Burke (project coordinator) and Ryan Hall (psychometrician) are doctoral students at Georgia State University. Angelee Berry, Tanya Brinck, Holly Joseph, and Michael Oby are cognitive behavioral specialists and teach adult literacy classes to both native and nonnative speakers of English.

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