

Exploration of the core and variable dimensions of extensive reading research and pedagogy

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The Extensive Reading Foundation’s bibliography now boasts over 530 articles with ‘Extensive Reading’ in the title. About 35% of this rich and diverse body of papers were published in the past decade. A meta-review of this literature shows it is quite fragmented as evidenced by considerable variability in the conceptualization of extensive reading (ER) itself. For example, some researchers suggested that reading graded readers meant the subjects were therefore reading extensively (e.g., Kirchhoff, 2013; Yamashita, 2013) whereas others were more circumspect. Some suggested students were reading extensively by reading as few as 9 books or 140 pages over the duration of the study, or 5 books over an academic year (e.g., Robb & Kano, 2013; Shue, 2003), while others conducted ER over several years (e.g., Nishizawa, Yoshioka, & Fukuda, 2010), and yet others operationalized ER as the intensive reading of difficult material (e.g., Kweon & Kim, 2008).

Given the variety and apparent fragmentation of the conceptualization of ER, we believe that it is necessary that our field share a common understanding of what ER is so we can evaluate and interpret ER research within a stable framework and talk a common language. But what is it that forms the core of ER? Is there a defining aspect of ER that determines whether a practice or research design can be called ER, or by its absence, not ER? This paper is an attempt to initiate a dialog to answer these and other questions.

Definitions of Extensive Reading

The first place to start our search is by looking at some definitions and conceptualizations of ER. Grabe and Stoller (2011) defined ER as 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). Renandya (2007) referred to Carrell and Carson’s (1997) definition of ER as one which provided an overview of ER: “extensive 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” (pp. 49–50).

The Top Ten Principles for Teaching ER, outlined in Day and Bamford (1998, 2002), are often cited to define ER (e.g., Asraf & Ahmad, 2003; Burrows, 2013; Hitosugi & Day, 2004; Soliman, 2012; Yamashita, 2008). In brief, these principles state the 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. Over time, these principles have come to be the default way to define what ER is, and what ER is not, despite these principles only being a “description of the characteristics that are found in successful extensive reading programs” (1998, p. 7). In fact, Ro and Chen (2014, p. 16) “purposely avoided using ‘extensive reading’ terminology to describe our participants’ reading behavior. This was because we did not investigate whether the participants followed any of the top ten principles for ER provided by Day and Bamford (1998, 2002); rather, we only looked at their pleasure reading habits” shows the elevated status of these principles in the minds of some in our field.

Others have voiced dissatisfaction with this one-size-fits-all approach to ER. Bruton (2002), for example, framed his conceptualization of ER by the volume of material read, but neglected to address the cognitive dimension of an ER construct. Our reading of the literature suggests there is more than the one universal form of ER based on the *Ten Principles*. Rather, there are several distinct and equally valid forms of ER. We suggest that operationalizing them as separate, distinct and legitimate varieties within ER pedagogy and research, rather than aberrations of a purist view of ER, will lead to more fruitful and accurate comparisons. The following are some examples:

- Classical ER – as espoused by the Ten Principles
- Class reading – all students read the same text decided by the teacher, most probably with lots of follow-up and some assessment
- Integrative ER - ER conducted as one component of a 2–4 skills class
- ER as Literature - students study a text as a piece of literature
- ‘Easy ER’ - building fluency and reading speed (Nation, 2007)
- ‘ER as *i+1*’ – focuses on meaning-focused input

Despite the obvious variety within these types of ER, the question remains of what is common or core to all of them in terms of ER.

In addition to the lack of clarity over a definition of ER, the construct of ER is sometimes confounded within, and between, studies as well. For example, Hitosugi and Day (2004) despite referring to the Ten Principles when in a description of ER, assigned grades for reading, which contravened the principle “Reading is for its own reward” (p. 21). Both the lack of a clear definition of ER and the confounding of its construct shows just how tangled our conceptualization of ER has become. Thus, a search for core attributes of any ER program is relevant, timely and appropriate.

Essential Core Attributes of ER

The following four elements of ER are commonly present in various descriptions, including those above:

- Fluent comprehension
- High reading speed
- Reading large amounts of text
- Focus on meaning of text

Putting these four elements of ER into a single definition, or conceptualization, raises a myriad of questions including, but not limited to, just how much text needs to be fluently comprehended for it to be called ER? Are two graded readers a week sufficient, or will two a semester suffice? Exactly what reading speed needs to be attained to call it ‘fluent’? Is this a constant for all readers and texts or does it vary, and if so, how? What do we mean by ‘fluent comprehension’? Will 90% comprehension, or 98%, suffice? To resolve these questions, we need to find and establish the core, or necessary, elements versus variable elements of ER.

We suggest that the central concern for most researchers when deciding whether their subjects are ‘reading extensively’ is whether they are fluently comprehending the meanings and ideas in the text, or not. In a broad sense whether the subjects are reading extensively or not, is a matter of how text is processed, i.e., smoothly and with high, fluent comprehension. By contrast, the *products* of the research—e.g., what is learnt, how much reading is done—serve as the independent variables. From this point of view, as a subject’s fluent comprehension is the same whether they are fluently reading for three minutes, or for three hours, which allows us to place the process and the product in separate dimensions. If the text is overall too difficult and there is very low fluent comprehension (‘Reading Pain’), then it ceases to be ER as the readers’ focus returns to the forms in a text (i.e., to the more intensive reading end of the scale) rather than the meanings and ideas contained in it. Clearly, the more text that the learner reads, the better. However, as a component of ER, the volume of text read exists in a different dimension to how a text is being read. This is so because it is possible, for example, to intensively read ten graded readers a week. Thus, we should separate fast, fluent comprehension from volume.

The fast, fluent comprehension of text for meaning is a *cognitive* activity similar to the first language (L1) concept of *rauding* (Carver, 1992), and we suggest is an indispensable core attribute of any conceptualization of ER and of *all* of the six forms of ER mentioned above. Rauding represents the optimal reading rate for comprehension, and one at which lexical access, semantic encoding, and sentential integration takes place (Carver, 1992). These three processes, albeit termed differently, are developed through reading large amounts of running text (Grabe, 2009; Grabe & Stoller, 2011). Through this, readers experience positive feedback. As readers read more, they develop these skills and can read more rapidly while sustaining and later increasing comprehension of material. Nuttall’s (2005) virtuous circle of the strong reader, and McLean’s (2014) virtuous cycle of reading appropriate ER material, reflect these cycles of positive feedback. Through rauding, readers develop their reading ability, learn vocabulary and increase positive affect towards reading.

One obvious way to disambiguate the elements of ER is to consider Extensive Reading and Intensive Reading as endpoints on a continuum of how attentional resources are expended—whether primarily on fast, fluent comprehension, or on forms. A greater amount of attentional resources removed from fluent reading would make the task more intensive: for example, when a

student needs to put down a book and look up a word, or to re-read a section several times after a comprehension breakdown. By contrast, when the diversion of a student's attentional resources does not cause the student to leave the page, or pause unnecessarily, more of those resources will be at the ER end of the scale. Examples of minimal distraction from fluent reading might include noticing an alternative spelling of an already known word, or a new collocation.

As students are likely to be flitting between states of high fluent comprehension and a temporary focus on form as they encounter unfamiliar language within a reading passage, we suggest the distinction between whether a student is 'reading extensively' or not is the disproportionately large amount of time spent in fast, fluent comprehension versus a much smaller percentage of time spent on form. By contrast, if the learner is focused on the relatively slow reading of a passage laden with unknown language, we'd suggest this was on the more 'intensive' end of the continuum. As reading comprehension is a massively multi-faceted construct, we believe it will not be possible given our current battery of research tools to strictly determine the threshold for when learners are reading 'extensively.' Until these tools exist—if they ever do—we therefore suggest that 'extensive' reading is a form of reading whereby only a tiny percentage of attentional resources are expended away from fast, fluent comprehension.

Similarly, it is likely there is some minimum reading speed threshold a reader needs to achieve in order to comprehend text fluently. This is likely to differ by learner, text and text type and even by L1, as well as other variables. While the exact nature of this threshold will emerge from future research, we suggest that reading at 250 wpm probably does not lead to significantly greater comprehension than reading at around 120 wpm within English as a Foreign Language (EFL) settings. However, we feel that the speed should be sufficiently high to sustain comprehension over longer periods, not just short bursts.

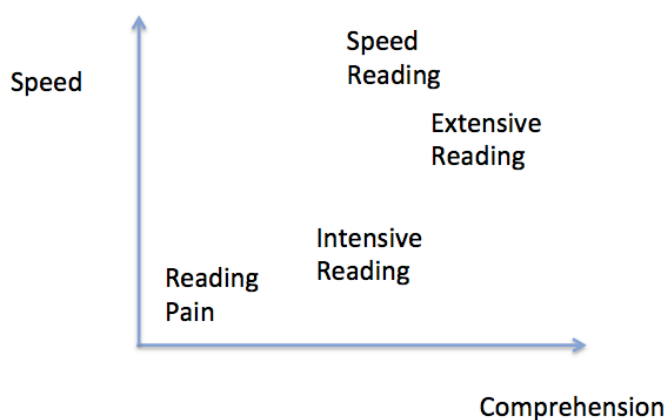


Figure 1. The relative relationship between the forms of reading and comprehension

Following the above, we can now make distinctions between the various forms of reading as shown in Figure 1. It is axiomatic to say that the more that is read, the better, but what are the minimum speed, volume and comprehension rates for it to be called ER? We suspect the answer lies within the learner, not with the teacher nor the material. Comprehension is a property of learners, not of materials.

ER programs (typically those using graded readers) exist for various reasons. Some exist to provide meaning-focused input. Others exist to provide massive language practice to complement and recycle language forms met in language-focused learning. Others exist to build cultural capital, while many exist for all three reasons, or for other reasons completely.

Fortunately from a pedagogical rather than a cognitive dimension, there are some guidelines for us to follow. Nation and Wang (1999) suggested a book a week at the learner's reading level is an absolute minimum level at which partially known words will be met before they are lost from memory. By contrast, Waring (2013) showed that even 2–3 graded readers a week at one's level may not suffice. From a different perspective, Nishizawa, Yoshioka and Fukada's (2010) research indicated that Japanese learners need to read about 300,000 words for them to be able to process text in a fast, fluent manner. Thus, we can see the answer to the question about volume is complex. Yet we suggest that an ER program that requires learners to read only 1–2 books a semester seriously undervalues the necessary amount of reading, whether extensive or intensive. One method to establish an appropriate reading volume is to base weekly, monthly and semester long reading targets on students' reading speeds, and then extrapolate the number of words that can be read over a given period of time. Following this, we suggest all language programs should require learners to meet vast amounts of text—meaning several thousands of words a week, extending across the whole language learning curriculum—regardless of whether or not there is a component of the program labeled 'ER.' By contrast, we suggest that practices that require the subjects to focus on developing sustained, fluent comprehension of large volumes of text at the discourse and ideas level, over an extended period of time, might be labeled 'ER.' Those that do not, would earn some other label.

We feel that the label 'ER,' should be applied to the type of processing students do that allow them to focus on developing fluent comprehension of texts for meaning, and not on language features excessively. This is not meant to imply that texts can only be properly comprehended in a fast, fluent (rauding) manner, because texts can still be understood deeply through careful slow reading. It follows, then, that beginning-level learners, tasked to build their fluent reading ability (even if they have not yet achieved it) through meaning-focused input, can still be said to be 'doing ER.' But this should be considered as a temporary transitional step.

Variable Dimensions of ER

The (largely pedagogical) variable dimensions of ER assume the reading has met the necessary core attributes mentioned above of involving the fast, fluent comprehension sustained over extended periods with minimal distractions. The variable dimensions of ER are ones that researchers and practitioners can select from in varying degrees depending on their pedagogical aims, research questions, or what is practical within a research setting. These would include the amount of time spent reading; what is read; where it is read; whether the reading is required; and who selects the texts, among many others. Each dimension might form an independent scale: for example, from low to high volumes of text read; or the absence or presence of varying degrees of assessment. Table 1 is an attempt to separate core dimensions from variable dimensions of ER practice.

Table 1. *The core versus variable dimensions of ER***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

Conclusion

We would like to clarify why it is important to distinguish between core versus non-core elements of an ER program. As we mentioned in the introduction, several papers state that their subjects read graded readers in their 'ER' study, but do not provide evidence that the texts were being read in a fast, fluent, highly-comprehended manner. This means we do not know whether the subjects were reading intensively, or extensively, and therefore whether we are comparing apples with pears. Similarly, we feel that research papers that require students to read very few words over an extended period ought to be discouraged from using the term ER, as its use will only weaken the construct we are trying to disambiguate.

The above distinction between core versus non-core elements of ER would also mean that no one form of ER is to be given an elevated status over another, as each would be equally valid. Using the term 'Extensive Reading' in a title of a paper or in discussions should actually mean something definite so that users, researchers and practitioners can have confidence in knowing what is being referred to.

Going forward, we feel the ER research community would benefit if researchers verified which, and how much, of the core cognitive and core pedagogical dimensions of ER are present as part of their research design or ER course descriptions so we can accurately assess and compare any learning effects using a consistent construct. This could be achieved by, for example, specifying or measuring the reading speed, comprehension rate, participants' lexical knowledge, the lexical load of the text and providing self reports of whether or not the subjects were reading at a high comprehension level, among other ways. Simply saying the subjects read graded readers does not verify that the subjects were reading extensively as defined above, because they might have

read them intensively.

Our purpose in this paper is to promote discussion within our community about what constitutes core versus elective aspects of ER practice, and is likely to raise such questions as:

1. How much reading needs to be done to earn the ER label?
2. Can the ER be assessed or monitored?
3. Should the reading only be pleasurable, for its own reward, and not required, or is this the goal of ER in some programs?
4. Is the use of graded readers in research sufficient evidence that the subjects are reading extensively?

We are sure the readership can come up with more. We look forward to discussing these and other issues related to understanding what constitutes ER, and hope that this paper will initiate a much-needed discussion of what we are attempting to measure and promote.

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