



## CAPE Alumni Internet Connection: English Teacher Talk

*CAPE Internet Talk was started as part of CAPE follow-up activities to continue ties with CAPE alumni and those who are interested in professional development in English teaching. It is hoped that this would increase our bond and aloha among former participants, and that the information in the TALK would help our alumni and friends/members review what they know and deepen their understanding of issues and interest in the ESL field.*

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### What is Extensive Reading?

Richard R. Day

This is the first in a series of articles on extensive reading. The focus of this article is the nature of extensive reading. Future articles will cover such topics as how to put extensive reading into a course or a curriculum, ordering books and setting up a library, and activities.

Extensive reading is based on the well-established premise that we learn to read by reading. This is true for learning to read our first language as well as foreign languages. In teaching foreign language reading, an extensive reading approach allows students to read, read, and read some more.

When EFL students read extensively, they become fluent readers. But there is more. Studies have established that EFL students increase their vocabulary, and become better writers. We also know that reading extensively helps increase oral fluency—listening and speaking abilities. Finally, students who read a lot develop positive attitudes toward reading and increased motivation to study the foreign language. So there are some excellent reasons for having EFL students reading extensively.

Let's now look at what extensive reading is. Day and Bamford (2002) believe that an extensive reading approach has ten principles, including these top four:

1. *The reading material is easy.*

For extensive reading to be possible and for it to have the desired results, students must read books and other material that are well within their reading competence—their reading comfort zone. In helping beginning readers select texts, I believe that more than one or two unknown words per page might make the text too difficult for overall understanding. For intermediate learners, appropriate texts have no more than three or four unknown or difficult words per page.

I recognize that not everyone agrees with using easy materials. Many teachers believe that learners must read difficult texts; they also believe that students need to be challenged when learning to read. Perhaps they think that reading difficult texts somehow gets them used to reading materials writer for first-language reading.

This is a mistake. It confuses the means with the end. That is, our goal in teaching students to read is to have them read literature that is written for native readers. But we should not start with that goal! We need to start with books and material that have been especially written for beginning and intermediate levels of reading ability. They have to red texts they find easy and enjoyable as they learn to read.

2. *A variety of reading material on a wide range of topics must be available.*

For an extensive reading program to succeed, students have to read. So it is critical to have a large number of books on a wide variety of topics to appeal to all students. Such a library

will include books (both fiction, non-fiction), magazines, and newspapers. There should be books and magazines that are informative and books and magazines that are entertaining.

3. *Learners choose what they want to read.*

Allowing students to select what they want to read is the key to extensive reading. Again, this is related to the basis of extensive reading: we learn to read by reading. Students are more likely to read material in which they are interested. So it makes sense for them to choose what (and where and when) to read.

In addition, students should also be free, indeed encouraged, to stop reading anything that isn't interesting or which they find too difficult.

4. *Learners read as much as possible.*

The most crucial element in learning to read is the amount of time spent actually reading. We have to make sure that our students are given the opportunities to read, read, and read some more. This is the "extensive" of extensive reading, made possible by the first three principles.

How much should we ask our students to read? The quick and short answer is, *As much as possible!* I usually set *reading targets* for my students. For example, for beginning EFL readers, the minimum is one book a week. This is realistic, as *language learner literature* (for example, graded readers) for beginners are short. Some teachers set their reading targets in terms of time. For example, students must read for 60 minutes each week.

### Conclusion

Let me repeat this important fact: We learn to read by reading. There is no other way. Extensive reading helps students become readers.

This article is a brief introduction to an extensive reading approach. If you would like to learn more, you could look at Day and Bamford (1998), a book-length treatment of extensive. Day and Bamford (2002) present and discuss ten principles for teaching extensive readings. And Bamford and Day (2003) contains 106 extensive reading activities.

### References

- Bamford, J. & Day, R. R. (eds.). (2003). *Extensive reading activities for teaching language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Day, R. R. and J. Bamford. (1998). *Extensive reading in the second language classroom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Day, R. R. and J. Bamford. (2002). Top ten principles for teaching extensive reading. *Reading in a Foreign Language* 14/2. <http://nflrc.hawaii.edu/rfl/October2002/>

*Please take the time to give us the addresses of anyone else you think might be interested in receiving this newsletter of the CAPE Internet Connection: English Teacher Talk. And don't forget to write us with any comments you might have. Mahalo!*

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