

Come to an Enjoyable Class: EFL Extensive Reading

Arwijati Wahjudi
State University of Malang

Abstract: This paper argues that an Extensive Reading Class is not a place for reading only, where students read and, therefore, may become better readers. In fact, lots of interaction among students, between student(s) and teacher, can happen, and this happens in an EFL natural situation. The students have something to talk about and are ready to share with the teacher and the other students what they have read. Questions asked are real questions, not comprehension or leading questions. Higher level questions, asking for opinions and feelings, are asked without the students being told to ask these kinds of questions. Students' opinions and feelings are expressed simply because they are necessary. Because of its potential as a place where students can exercise somewhat real language with little burden, if any, the writer suggests that Extensive Reading courses be offered at all levels in the English Department, starting from the first year.

Key words: extensive reading, interaction

With the adoption of the Communicative Approach in the teaching of English in Indonesia, the image of an English classroom is that in which interaction among students and the teacher takes place in English much of the time. Consequently, it has been taken for granted that the class expected to have the clearest image is the Speaking class. In a speaking class, students are given topics and a list of related language functions to practice orally. Therefore, we can picture students talking to each other, although their conversation is actually a task-based activity planned by the teacher and/or textbook. In a listening class, students are generally given

oral texts and asked questions so that naturally they are expected to answer them. However, the questions are generally comprehension questions concerning students' understanding of what they have heard. Here too, though, we can picture some interaction going on. In an (intensive) Reading class we can clearly see lots of interaction although it is mostly teacher-centered, because the teacher asks a lot of questions, leading the students for full understanding of a text and/or testing the students to find out how far they can understand the text they are encountering. To make a long story short, what about an extensive reading class? What kind of interaction could take place in a classroom where students are supposed to read as many novels, articles and/or short stories as possible? Typically, it would look like an intensive reading class with one difference: in an extensive reading class the students read different readers because they are allowed to choose readers they are interested in. Each individual student can have his or her own reader, for that matter. The interaction in an extensive reading class would mostly happen between the teacher and individual students since the teacher will be asking questions to check if the student really reads the novel he claims to have read and whether the student really understands what he has been reading. This kind of interaction, which is similar to those happening in other EFL skill courses, is not actually very fruitful because the students might not enjoy reading the materials of their own choice simply because they have to really understand them and be able to prove that they understand. This can lead to a frustrating disadvantage because complete understanding of a text and good performance to prove it can slow down the rate of reading.

The purpose of this paper is to propose a well-defined extensive reading course in which interaction can take place without the students experiencing stressing atmosphere. Interaction is really important and it should take place more or less naturally in the sense that the language the students produce results out of necessity. The students should ask questions because they need some information to add to their existing knowledge or simply to satisfy their curiosity. The students should express opinions and feelings because they feel the need to share their opinions and feelings with their peers and teacher. The discussion in this paper is divided into several parts. First, Extensive Reading is defined because

teachers should know what Extensive Reading is or what it is supposed to be. Second, what benefits the EFL students can get from it is discussed. Third, the characteristics of a successful Extensive Reading class are listed and given comments. Finally, some samples of interaction happening among the students in an actual Extensive reading class in the English Department of State University of Malang are given to show that interaction can really take place in a more or less natural situation.

EXTENSIVE READING DEFINED

According to Barfield in an online paper, Extensive Reading can be defined as reading "a large quantity of texts, where reading confidence and reading fluency are prioritized". Here, the students are expected to have the courage to read whatever they like openly. Teachers are familiar with the students' hesitation to show that they can and like reading novels, for example, because of the burden that they have to perform to prove they really understand what they are reading. In an EFL situation, this is not uncommon. By reading a lot of comprehensible readers of their own choice without having to answer comprehension questions, the students are expected to gain confidence.

Schmidt (2000) takes Dawson's (1992) definition "...extensive reading as a means of facilitating acquisition ... and learners ... select books from a variety of genres and language levels and read them for interest and enjoyment, with minimal post-reading tasks." Here, "minimal post-reading tasks" does not mean tasks which are *sometimes* done by the students. On the contrary, post-reading tasks are required at all times. It is the *nature* of the task that is kept to the minimum. For example, the students are asked to write a very short summary (2—3 sentences long) and a comment of the reader as they wish, with no grammar correction whatsoever from the teacher.

Other definitions include Mutoh and Bamford's (1998): "... reading a lot of self-selected easy, interesting text and doing little or no exercises afterwards"; Susser and Robb's (1990): "reading large quantities of material or long texts for global or general understanding with the intention of obtaining pleasure from the text"; and Day and Bamford's (1998): "... in which learners read large quantities of books and other

materials that are well within their linguistic competence.”

To summarize, definitions of Extensive Reading vary, but experts of reading agree of the general practice of extensive reading, i.e. it involves the independent reading of a large quantity of material for information or pleasure with little post-reading activities. There are issues to be dealt with as how independent the reading is and how large is “a large quantity”. In an EFL situation, the teacher are sometimes needed to help students choose the appropriate readers and to help them with some comprehension problems due to cultural issues, thus reducing the students’ independency. The number of articles, short stories, books, and novels to be read by the students really depends on their attitude towards reading and their reading habits. Although some teachers can decide on the quantity based on his or her professional judgment but it is necessary and fair to make the decision based on experience after several classes have been conducted.

The Benefits of Extensive Reading

Teachers, in this case, teachers of English as a foreign language in English departments, should be more aware of the benefits of ER and do more about it in order to improve their students’ proficiency.

According to Nation (1997), foreign language students obtain the following benefits. First, because of the large quantity of their reading materials, they learn new vocabulary and review old vocabulary. General high frequency lexical items are read on a practically regular basis so that many of these items are in a way mastered.

Second, extensive reading activities improve the students attitude toward reading in particular and language learning in general. From an informal interview with several students, the writer of this paper thinks that the students really enjoy their present extensive reading class. Their previous classes were less enjoyable because the teacher would borrow the students’ novels prior to the reporting activities so that he or she would know how to test or even attack the students. With a different approach, in which the teacher trusts the students and the students learn to trust themselves, there are less anxiety, if any. Some students even admit that they have never read novels before they take the course and that they will continue to like reading. A certain student says that sometimes she is

psychologically affected by the content of the novels: she can be sad or angry or contented as if she were in the story she is reading. The important point here is: she has never thought that reading can be so exciting and so personal.

Third, the learners improve their writing ability because a successful extensive reading class normally includes a writing activity in the form of writing a summary and personal reflections. The students write without any burden, because they know that their writing will not be used to judge their performance in the course. They know, from experience, that the teacher will not evaluate the language, but will be more interested in the students’ ideas instead. The “vicious” circle is indeed understandable: the freer they are in writing their comments, the more they write; the more they write the better they become.

Fourth, because of the large quantities of readers, the foreign language learners learn to read more fluently. They have some requirements to meet, and they just cannot afford to read for complete understanding. Even “dictionary-lovers” will soon forget about their dictionaries if they really want to finish a reader as soon as possible. Some teachers do see extensive reading as a potential class for vocabulary building and require students to make notes of new lexical items and even to write sentences using these items. However, it seems that this practice has been abandoned because students cannot work fast and the teacher has a lot of assignments to correct.

Krashen (1993) summarizes several studies and comes up with a convincing positive statement about the result of Extensive Reading classes. In L1 situations, it is found out that students who just read do better than those who are taught reading. In L2 situations, primary students, secondary, as well as adult learners who take part in experiments show that they are not only better in reading but also in the other language skills. In other words, extensive reading does work and there is no reason for ignoring the research studies and treating Extensive Reading just as one among so many courses. It deserves more attention and respect. Nation (1997) concludes that not only is there improvement in reading, but that there are improvements in a range of language uses and areas of language knowledge. A positive side effect is that success in reading and its associated skills, most notably writing, makes learners come to enjoy

language learning and to value their study in English.

Characteristics of Successful ER Programs

Renandya et al. (1999) summarizes the work of several writers and come up with characteristics of successful ER programs.

- (1) Students read large amounts of printed material.
- (2) Students choose what they want to read.
- (3) Students read a variety of materials in terms of topic and genre.
- (4) The material students read is within their level of comprehension.
- (5) Students take part in post-reading activities.
- (6) Teachers read with their students, thus serving a s role models of good readers.
- (7) Teachers and students keep track of students' progress.
- (8) Teachers provide help and guidance where needed.

I would like to give comments on each of the characteristics based on my own experiences in my ER classes.

- (1) Students read large amounts of printed material.

The phrase "large amounts" can be somewhat tricky; however, the teacher can decide the number of articles, short stories and novel the students should read. A minimum should be clearly offered and determined by both the teacher and the students. Also, requirements for the students' grades should be mentioned in the teaching-learning contract—the course outline.

The consequence of requiring students to read various readers is that the department should provide ample readers for the great number of students at different levels. Readers should be displayed based on the level of difficulty.

- (2) Students choose what they want to read.

The consequence is the teacher has to be open-minded if a student picks out quite a few children story-books. This particular student might simply love children's stories. However, because the students are supposed to read materials of different genres, it is

the job of the teacher to control the variety of the books the students read. The teacher can say "You've read many of this kind of readers so why don't you look for another kind of readers". The teacher has to be careful and keep it in his or her mind that he or she cannot and should not tell a student what he should read.

- (3) Students read a variety of materials in terms of topic and genre.
This is meant for the students to get a wider knowledge from his reading activities. An Extensive Reading class is meant to help student explore something starting from their interests and gradually broadening their scope of interest. Besides, different topics and genre provides different vocabulary so that students' vocabulary is increased (Nation, 1997).
- (4) The material students read is within their level of comprehension.
This has to do with Krashen's input hypothesis, and in my opinion, students will not learn enough from materials which are too difficult or too easy. They might learn some contents, but their language proficiency may suffer or stay at its old, static position. Reading too much children stories at the elementary level will keep the adult students at that exact level, which is a very awkward level for university students. However, due to the fact that university level students are not necessarily at the advanced English proficiency level, simplified versions of readers should be allowed.
- (5) Students take part in post-reading activities.
After reading something, the students must have added knowledge to his previous level. He must have gained something. In real life, we sometimes tell others of what we think are worth talking about, and people give some kind of reactions toward what have been told to them. In an Extensive Reading class, the students can be asked to write something about what they have read. This is not to be meant as a test but as a record of what they have accomplished. Another way of doing it is by having the students conduct a conference in a small group, where each students tells about his reading and others asking questions or commenting. The teacher can make use of conferences to decide whether a certain student need some form of assistance in his reading. A student

might have chosen a very tough novel for him to handle. Research has shown that post reading activities in the form of summary writing improves not only the students' writing ability but also their overall language proficiency.

- (6) Teachers read with their students, thus serving as role models of good readers.

In a successful Extensive Reading class, teachers do not sit idle or do things other than reading, no matter how important these "other things" are. The teacher should be reading something just like the rest of group in the classroom. He/she is meant to be a role model in his class, and in an extensive reading class he/she has to show that he/she likes reading and that he/she is a good, efficient and effective reader. A good practice would be, when he/she finds something interesting from his/her reading, he/she can just ask for the students' attention and say whatever he/she wants to say about it and let students comment on this. This way the students get more interested in and even excited at reading. They will be used to expecting the unexpected. When the students are conditioned with this kind of activity, even the students themselves can ask for attention once in a while. The class will be a very lively class and natural language activities, not simulations, will just happen.

- (7) Teachers and students keep track of students' progress.

We have to remember, though, that Extensive Reading is a course where students are supposed to meet some requirements and where students are expected to gain language proficiency at a level higher than before. It is the teachers' job to make sure that these happen. Some students do not know how to keep track of what he is doing. So, formats to fill out have to be distributed and described clearly at the very beginning of the course. From time to time, the teacher has to work together with the student to make notes and write short reports. The teacher should know when a student is moving at a very slow pace and should remind this student to work faster. Besides, the teacher has to be ready to help students with any kind of reading difficulty. Keeping track of students' progress is a form of authentic assessment; it is trustworthy. One good point of an Extensive Reading course is

that there is no paper-and-pencil tests. Students love this!

- (8) Teachers provide help and guidance where needed.

This is related to the previous discussion. The teacher is in the classroom not as a policeman telling students to read when they are a bit digressing. He has to help them with vocabulary and grammar problems, and even culture found in some parts of a novel. In a successful extensive reading class, the teacher, who is supposed to be a keen reader himself, does not help the students with the language components and skills only. He provides information related to the information the students get from their reading. He can add examples, give comments, express his opinions, and tell students about other materials related to what the students are reading. These materials may support or state a different view, which will add to the students interest in reading his chosen ones. A charming, smart and well-informed teacher is likely to be a successful teacher in any language class, especially in an extensive reading class.

A VISIT TO AN EXTENSIVE READING CLASS

Extensive Reading is a compulsory course in the English Department of State University of Malang. At present, it has to be taken after the fulfillment of four prerequisites, i.e. (Intensive) Reading I, II, III, and IV. This means that the students are already in their sixth or seventh semester when they take Extensive Reading. The students are required to read as many materials as possible and write short reports of what they have read. In some classes they are required to report to the teacher are asked questions. However, in other classes they are to report to their fellow students and their written reports are not evaluated. The most important activity in this class is that the students read various kinds of reading materials, both fiction and non-fiction. In some ER classes, students are free from formal classes and are scheduled to report their readings to the teacher. The grades can be based on the amount of reading, how well they can show their understanding of the readers they have read, and/or how well they can write their reports. These are still open for debate since different teachers have different opinions on grading their students.

The following is a course outline that I constructed.

EXTENSIVE READING COURSE OUTLINE

OBJECTIVES

This course provides the students with the opportunity to choose and read various readers, such as novels and articles of journals and magazines.

CONTENT/MATERIALS

Novels or short stories (classics/modern), articles from *Reader's Digest*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, or textbooks and journals on language or language teaching, such as *English Teaching Forum*, *Guidelines*. (On-line readers are allowed provided they are printed for class discussion/report.)

ACTIVITIES

The course consists of two components: the classroom and the outside reading or homework components. In the weekly classroom activity component, the students are required to read an article of their own choice. While the rest of the class are reading, three to five students report to the teacher in a conference or individually what they have read in the homework component.

In the homework component, the students are required to read a number of novels and articles or short stories, and write a short report for each reader.

EVALUATION

By the end of the course, each student is to submit all his or her written reports in a folder. To pass the course, each student has to finish reading two novels, four science articles, and eight popular articles.

Grade	Number of Novels	Number of Articles
A	4*	24*
B	3*	18*
C	2	12
D	1	12

*Negotiable

Interaction in an Extensive Reading Class

Exactly what kind of interaction can happen? For one, the interaction will be more or less natural, because the students will be asking questions because they really want to know the answers in order to understand what has been reported. They can even ask the reporters feelings about the materials that they have read. However, do the students only ask

information questions? Or do they use higher level questions, such as those for problem solving or for asking one's opinions? We will observe some of the transcribed protocols of students having a conference or an interview with the teacher. (Some editing has been done for the sake of clarity and ease of reading the protocols due to the fact that we are not interested in the protocol per se but at the meanings and messages they convey).

Students Give Information, Describe and Explain

When someone does not understand some part of the report they would ask questions such "What do you mean?" "Did you say ...?" "Who was the main character?" "Why did you choose the novel?", and so on. When asked what his or her article is about, normally the student will try to describe what he or she has just read. With an interested teacher who has not read the article, a conversation between the student and the teacher may look like the following:

Student: This article is about young girls who have sex just for fun.

Teacher: But the title is "It's all for money".

Student: Yeah, normally at the beginning it's for money. But then the girls enjoy it, and money is not the most important factor anymore.

Teacher: Wow.

Student: That's true. I have friends who are like this ...

Teacher: Really? (Are you) OK with them?

Student: We're just friends... no need to stay away from them.

Teacher: Yeah, as long as you can stay away from their hobby.

Student: (laughter)

Students Bring up Knowledge from Outside Their Reading Materials

Related to the previous conversation between the teacher and a student on having sex for fun, the conversation digresses to the fact that women are usually the victims. Further discussion includes why the customers, which are men, are not arrested by the police. Then the conversation touches upon the different treatment of men and women in

heaven. In a certain religion, it seems that even in heaven, men are more privileged than women. The following is part of the conversation.

Student: But ... on TV (the other day) ... only the prostitutes were arrested by the police.

Many prostitutes were being chased. What about the men (customers)?

Teacher: Well, that's a good question.

Student: Also I never heard of gigolos being arrested. (The student is showing some disgust)

Teacher: Yes, this is a gender issue. Well, even in heaven ... men are said to be surrounded by beautiful virgins ... and ...

Student: What about women ... maybe ... surrounded by gigolos ... yuck!! (laughter)

In her last comment, the student is making an analogy: if a man were surrounded by women-servants, then a woman would be surrounded by men-servants. This might not be true, and it is certainly not mentioned in any religion, but the language activity is real. Both the student and the teacher are using language for discussing something imaginary, even fantastic, for that matter! It is interesting as well as exciting to be able to talk freely, not being afraid to make mistakes both in the language and the content.

Students Criticize

When telling about an article in the *Reader's Digest* "Why Bond is back" a student even criticized the title.

Student: I enjoyed the article, Brosnan is one of my favorite film stars. But what's in the article does not answer the question of the title.

Teacher: What do you mean?

Student: Have you read this article?

Teacher: No.

Student: What do you expect to read (from the title)?

Teacher: That there is change from not liking James Bond films to liking them (again)?

Student: Naa... the same with me...but it isn't like that. The article tells about Brosnan's personal life. Even though I like the article, it was

not as I expected from the title.

Teacher: At least we have the same opinion.... And I'm sure we have the right opinion.

(both the student and the teacher laugh, showing some sense of pride!)

Students Ask Necessary Questions

Students might ask questions such as why a reader is chosen or a reader is read anyway when it is found to be uninteresting or even too difficult.

Lots of laughter is heard during a conference because students ask silly questions and in turn get silly answers too. Consider the following conversation that took place after a student (Student 1) had just finished reporting his ideas about *Animal Farm*.

Student 4: The reason ... why did you choose (this novel)?

Student 3: Yes. I wonder ... I don't think it is an interesting story... it's so serious...

Student 1: Hem ... first ... I think (it's because of) the number of pages ... (everybody laughs)

It was found out that Student 1 chose *Animal Farm* because it was a very thin novel. This is a normal action for a student, meaning that normal students would choose short and easy novels! Everybody laughs not only at Student 1 but also at themselves.

When talking about a certain woman character who is loved by more than one man, it is really natural to have some students having the following conversation.

Student 1: How does she look?

Student 2: Yes. She must be beautiful. If not, (she would) not loved by so many men.

Student 3: Here is a picture. (Everybody in the group looks at the picture)

Student 1: Bad picture. She should be much more beautiful.

Student 3: But maybe in the old days fat women are (considered) beautiful. (laughter)

Students are Just being Themselves

Sometimes we just do not know our students in other classes, because of the nature of the courses. Students are meant to perform well in the language skill courses and perform correctly or showing how well they understand a concept or subject matter in content courses. In contrast, students do not need to prove anything in an Extensive Reading class. In other words, they don't have to pretend that they have mastered something so that in a way the students in this class are just being themselves. They are free to express opinions, some of which could be against the norms of their own religion.

Student: And so ... they ... (giggle) ... you know ... made love (giggle) .. anyway ... they really love each other ...

Teacher: Hang on ... you said they were not married ...

Student: No... but that's not the point. The point is that they were (really) in love ... and I am touched by their true love.

Teacher: How did you know (that their love is true)?

Student: From the love scene. From what they say to each other when they make love. I can feel it. It's so beautiful. Not the love making only... but everything as a whole.

Teacher: So ... love before marriage?

Student: No ... again ... I'm not talking about that.

Teacher: Ok ... ok ...

Students Reflect on What They Have Doing in Class

Without being asked, some students feel that they have to say something about the class activities. One student says: "This is the first conference where I am not afraid to say anything I want to say because I know I am not being judged ... not my opinions ... not my language."

Another says, "Now, I am not ashamed to bring a magazine or a novel in front of my friends. It's OK. My friends know I am not showing off; I just want to read. That's all."

Still another says, "By reading classic novels, I learn about people in the past. (It's) Like reading history, but it is not."

A smart student finds a topic for her thesis, "Now I know what to do next (semester). The subject of my thesis will be *the Mill on the Floss*."

An eager student comes to me and says, "Mrs. Arwijati, do you have *Harry Potter*?"

"Sure. Which one would you like to read?"

"I would like to borrow the first book because I have seen the movie. I just want to know which is better: the book or the film. But later, can I borrow all?"

CONCLUSION

We have read quite a few results of studies on the benefits of Extensive Reading, which supports the course, so that there is no reason for ignoring it or even postponing it, for that matter. Extensive reading classes should be given from the beginning of an EFL program with suitable kinds and levels of readers matching the students' interests and proficiency levels. Requirements should be confined to quantity only so that students read without any burden. Two student-friendly post-reading tasks have to be conducted. One is summary and comment writing, for "writing is one way of promoting engagement with a text, which leads to better comprehension" (Smith, 1988 in Robb and Susser, 1989). Unlike traditional classes, however, no evaluation or correction should be done. The other post-reading task is small group conferences and individual student interviews with the teacher as the interviewer. Again, this task is content and fluency-oriented so that interaction takes place more or less naturally.

The title of this article intentionally contains two words which are usually contrasted: *natural* and *classroom*. If an Extensive Reading course is to be successful, however, the two words should be true friends. In ER classrooms which are enjoyable and fun, students interact and communicate naturally. Nuttall (1982:168) has a very good way of recommending Extensive Reading:

The best way to improve one's knowledge of a foreign language is to go and live among its speakers. The next best way is to read extensively in it.

So, why wait until the students are about to leave the university to take Extensive Reading classes? Let us begin earlier, starting from the students' first academic year until they graduate, without any pre-

requisites.

REFERENCES

- Bamford, J., and Day, R.R. 1997. ER: What is it? Why bother? *The Language Teacher*, 21, 5—8/12.
- Day, R.R., and Bamford, J. 1998. *Extensive Reading in the Second Language Classroom*. Cambridge: Cambridge Language Education.
- Mutoh and Bamford, J. 1998. Handout from the extensive reading Fc JALT '98, Omiya, Japan, November 22, 1998.
- Nation, P. 1997. The Language Learning Benefits of Extensive Reading. *The Language Teacher Online*, (Online), 21.5
(<http://langue.hyper.chubu.ac.jp/jalt/pub/tlt/97/may/extensive.html>, accessed March, 29, 1999)
- Nutall, C. 1982. *Teaching Reading Skills in a Foreign Language*. London: Heinemann Educational.
- Renandya, W. A., Rajan, B.R.S., and Jacobs, G.M. 1999. Extensive reading with adult learners of English as a second language. *RELC Journal*, 30, 39—61.
- Robb, T.N. and Susser, B. 1989. Extensive reading vs. skills building in an EFL context. *Reading in A Foreign Language*, Vol. 12, 2, 239—251.