

Integrating Extensive Reading into the Curriculum

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Abstract : As a part of curricular changes to improve the core English courses within the English department, an extensive reading (ER) component has been gradually integrated into first- and second-year core English classes beginning in 2012; and in 2014 the ER component became compulsory, graded sections of the courses. Reading data has been compiled and student feedback was solicited via an online survey. Teacher uptake while not without challenges has been relatively successful in the three years since integration; and learner achievement in terms of reaching reading goals has improved. Survey data also show that the ER component has been generally effective in terms of learner participation but waning in terms of learner enjoyment of reading for its own sake.

Keywords : 多読, extensive reading, curricular integration

For many years, extensive reading (ER) had been a standalone elective course offering in the Department of English Language and Culture. When the curriculum was revamped in 2012, this optional class was slowly phased out and an ER component was added to the core English classes in the first and second year curricula. This has meant that all students were now required to engage in ER as an integral part of their studies.

In this paper, the authors review the steps taken in the past three and a half years to phase in the ER component. We examine some of the data culled from Mreader (mreader.org), an online tool for monitoring reading progress, and student feedback through an online survey.

Steps to Integration

The English department deemed the Production and Fluency ‘A’ course as best suited for integrating the ER component as these classes were new to the curriculum and designed to promote fluency in the different skill areas. Coordination was necessary to implement the changes as most of these classes are taught by part-time faculty. Initially, the ER component was required but teachers were allowed flexibility in its implementation and tracking with a suggested 20% grade allotment. In 2012-13, using Mreader was an option with some teachers choosing to monitor by other means such as books lists and summaries and/or book reports. Since 2014, Mreader has been used to monitor the ER component in all P & F ‘A’ classes and the administrative duties of registering students via class lists has been done by full-time faculty; and the 20% grade allotment became a requirement.

The Extensive Reading Program

The department has amassed a large collection of graded readers since e-space, our self-access center, opened in 2011 with over 9,000 books as of fall 2016, providing wide choice and promoting overall reading fluency. Prior to the inception of the new curriculum ER was a standalone elective. The ER component was then phased into the P&F ‘A’ course as it is seen as an important part of the self-access language learning experience and the development of learner autonomy. ER by

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its very nature is learner-centered as learners decide what they want to read in English and often for the first time. This reading area of e-space sees a lot of foot traffic as all first and second year students engage in ER year-round. Although books can be checked out, many students spend a substantial amount of time in e-space reading quietly particularly toward the end of the semester. Engaging in ER is sometimes the only reason why some students use e-space and is continually encouraged for independent exposure to language.

When ER was integrated into the P&F classes, a 50,000-word semester target was set for students in the regular stream and a 70,000-word target was set for advanced stream students. Classes were registered on mreader.org and students were asked to take quizzes in order to get credit for words read. In the second year, to encourage students to read more widely, they were given the option of either taking quizzes on Mreader as available, or if they wanted to read books without quizzes, they were encouraged to do so by writing a brief summary and impression of the book instead. The word counts for non-quiz books were then manually added to the student's record on Mreader by the teacher. This has continued for the past three years.

Initially, in order to ensure smooth access to the graded reader library, the ER component was staggered by semester. First-year students would do a stamp rally as an introduction to e-space and its resources in the spring term and ER in the fall term, while second-year students would start with ER in the spring and do the stamp rally in the fall. In 2015, the stamp rally was phased out of second-year courses as these students had already completed it in 2014 as first year students. (See Mayeda, MacKenzie and Nuspliger, 2016 for details on the stamp rally.) First-year students began ER in their second semester and all second-year students continued with ER for both semesters. Beginning in 2016, all first year and second year students have been engaging in ER for all four semesters for a total of 200,000 words for regular stream students and 280,000 words for the advanced stream. At the end of each semester, ER records for each class have been compiled and book-borrowing data has been analyzed.

ER Survey

At the end of the 2014 academic year, all first- and second-year students were asked to respond to a bilingual survey on their P&F class, asking their opinions on the self-access and the ER components of the course. Teachers were requested to administer the online survey in their P&F classes to ensure a good response rate. The results below reflect only the ER survey data. (See Mayeda, et al., 2016 for complete survey data.)

Results

Extensive reading

During spring 2014, 140 second-year students passed 2,005 quizzes and received credit for 5,929,773 words read, or 79.5% percent of their target (Table 1). Some classes had better completion rates than others, likely depending on how much attention was afforded to ER by the teachers. Most classes were close to 100% completion, but one class was at just 6%.

Table 1 Extensive reading data

Semester	Year	Students	Target	Words read	Completion rate	Quizzes passed	Words/quiz
2014 Spring	2	140	7,460,000	5,929,773	79.5%	2,005	2,957.5
2014 Fall	1	126	6,860,000	5,718,511	83.4%	4,080	1,401.6
2015 Spring	2	117	6,250,000	6,017,594	96.3%	3,368	1,786.7
2015 Fall	1	139	7,450,000	7,095,360	95.2%	2,747	2,582.9
2015 Fall	2	112	6,000,000	5,975,373	99.6%	1,516	3,941.5
2016 Spring	1	147	7,850,000	6,732,893	85.8%	4,871	1,382.2
2016 Spring	2	108	5,880,000	5,642,146	96%	1,683	3,352.4

In fall 2014, with first-year students starting the ER component, the completion rate improved to 83.4%. One class read just 41% of their target, but the rest were near perfect. The words-per-quiz number was much lower than second-years indicating that they likely read much shorter (and easier) books.

In 2015, completion rates improved to 95.2% for first-years and 96.3% and 99.6% for second-years, and in 2016, the completion rates were 85.8% for first-years and 96% for second-years for the spring term.

More interesting, however, is to note the numbers in the 2014 Fall (Year 1), 2015 Spring (Year 2) and 2015 Fall (Year 2) as this is the same cohort and has continued ER for three semesters. The completion rates have steadily increased from 83.4% to 96.3% to 99.6% and the words-per-quiz numbers have increased from 1,401 to 1,786 to 3,941 respectively. This suggests more reading overall, a slight reading level improvement between the first and second semesters and a significant jump in improvement in the third semester as a result of doing ER.

First-years in 2015 read longer books than did first-years in 2014 (2,582.9 vs. 1,401.6 words per quiz), with first-years in 2016 reading the shortest books (1,382) and with the highest number of quizzes passed (4,871). This might suggest that the 2015 cohort was stronger entering the university, but with ER beginning in the first semester for first-years in 2016, this may mean they are simply starting with easier books. It will be interesting to see more patterns in the data set as students engage in ER for the full two years of their undergraduate study.

Survey

The response rate for the P&F student survey was 60.7% overall, with 76.4% of first-year students and 44.8% of second-years completing it (Table 2). One first-year and four second-year teachers failed to get their students to do the survey.

As for the ER component, students believed that it was good for their English (86%), but only 68% reported enjoying it. Only 42% wanted to continue ER in the future. Students were supportive of using mreader.org, with 78% saying it was a good way to check that they were reading.

Table 2 ER Survey Data

Question	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Doing ER was good for my English.	43%	43%	11%	2%	2%
I enjoyed reading.	26%	42%	22%	5%	5%
I want to continue to do ER in the future.	11%	31%	35%	14%	9%
M-Reader quizzes were a good way to check that we were reading.	37%	41%	13%	7%	3%

On-going Challenges

As most of the core English classes in the first and second year are taught by part-time faculty, one of the challenges has been to clearly communicate to the teachers the need for integrating ER into the curriculum and the gradual steps being taken to implement it. It has also become clear, in hindsight, that there is a need to continue professional development opportunities for part-time faculty in the pedagogy behind ER. This was an oversight by the authors who had assumed that the teaching faculty all had a clear idea of what ER is and the tenets behind it as most faculty have an MA and TESOL background and/or years of teaching in the tertiary level in language acquisition. It became clear that several teachers were not versed in ER at all, at which point full-time faculty took over the ER orientations with teachers sitting in on these sessions so that they would be able to monitor their students through the semester.

While most teachers have been open to the changes, a few continue to resist in implementing the ER component as can be seen in the Mreader data and the failure to administer the survey. It is also interesting to note that on one occasion, two second-year students asked this first author if they should be reading for ER this semester (fall 2016) as they had been

observing their peers continuing to do so. They had not received specific instruction by their teacher so had failed to keep up. I confirmed that they should be reading this semester as well and later checked with the teacher who responded that while he was aware that they should continue, he had neglected to remind his students. He did later address this with his class but by that time they could not have fulfilled the required 50,000 words for the semester. The point here is not to place blame on the teacher but that it is rather interesting to note the self-checking attitudes and noticing of peers' workload by the two students; so much so that it prompted them to question what was required from the department. This can be seen as a positive outcome where learners are questioning the equity of requirements for all students.

Conclusion

While word count goals have seen a steady increase in completion rates, questions remain open with regard to authentic learner uptake. Does ER promote a love for reading? Are they reading and comprehending at a faster rate? Does ER promote a sense of learner autonomy? Are they enjoying what they read? Or is this just another hoop that students must jump through? The Table 2 survey data seem to indicate the latter. However, although many will groan with such comments as, "More extensive reading?" "For another year?" "I don't like to read," "I cannot find a good book to read," "The word count is too high," we also know that these same students often write in their reflections that although they do not always enjoy ER, they do see its intrinsic value in contributing to their language learning. Many comment in their journals that if it were not for ER they would not read in English at all. And while the authors hear a lot of verbal complaints about the word count, when asked through a straw poll in 2015, 93% of the respondents stated that the word count was just right. At the end of the day, it would seem that learners are quite aware of what is required to be better language learners and they may not always enjoy all the tasks, but do seem to understand its inherent value in the process.

References

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