

An Extensive Reading Journey into Nepal

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Abstract: This paper is a brief summary report of the research project undertaken by the author of an extensive reading program initiative in Nepal. It outlines the project from inception to the current situation. The author and teacher-researcher will discuss some of the sustainability issues that have arisen in the school communities and address the ongoing solutions currently in practice.

Key Words: Extensive reading, Nepal, reading in developing communities, teacher-training and sustainability

I. Introduction

Since 2014 six primary/secondary schools in and around Kathmandu have adopted extensive reading (ER) programs. The author/teacher-researcher has been monitoring the programs in addition to collecting interview data, infusing the schools with more books and conducting teacher-training workshops. Contending with high teacher turnover, a shortage of qualified teachers, and a dearth of professional development opportunities, a major challenge has been to ensure continuity over the years. This, in and of itself, has been challenging as some of the interviews with teachers and school administrators alludes to the need to put on “a good show” in order to keep the books coming every year. In other words, there appeared to be little support for ER as a pedagogically sound approach for increasing English language proficiency. It was, rather, a need to show effort in order to receive sorely needed books for their respective libraries. However, given the number of years of commitment shown to the schools by the teacher-researcher and the noticeable improvement in the learners’ reading fluency and motivation for reading, a relationship based on trust and commitment seems to be evolving. This trust factor may play an important role in sustainable education initiatives in communities and countries dependent on volunteer support and outside aid.

II. Background and Timeline

This study was initiated following a yearlong book collection effort in Japan for the purpose of supplying books and materials to schools for a university-supported learning service program in Nepal. Over 2000 books were donated and subsequently brought into Nepal in late February 2014 by the program participants. Many of the books were graded readers for English learners, and with university language teaching specialists accompanying the group, the decision was made to implement ER programs in order to maximize the language learning potential with the graded readers. Thus, rather than simply contributing books, the program coordinator (Mayeda) aimed to support the soft skills including the methodology and pedagogy behind ER to the schools. The teacher-training and professional development opportunity this provided for the local Nepali teachers were seen as more meaningful for a long term, sustainable, learning-based program that could benefit and empower the learners in their English language learning immediately and into the future.

The following is a timeline of events undertaken by the program coordinator:

1. March 2013: First Konan Women’s University learning service study tour to Nepal with 5 undergraduate students was conducted. The need for on-going support with reading materials and teacher-training was determined at this time.
2. February - March 2014: Grant received from the Extensive Reading Foundation to purchase readers in Nepal. In addi-

tion, over 2000 books were collected through book drives and donations from ELT publishers and booksellers in Japan over the year.

Extensive Reading 'kits' were distributed to 7 schools in Kathmandu in order to target and then establish the core schools for long-term research. These kits consisted of all materials necessary to begin an ER program: an ER teachers' guide, reading record forms (30 copies), book recommendations/impression forms (30 copies), and 100+ graded readers.

Teacher-training workshops and classroom demonstrations of ER in practice were conducted for grades 4-7 in each school. Three schools that demonstrated motivation and commitment for a minimum of 3 years were selected as the core ER schools.

3. September 2014: A grant from Konan Women's University allowed for a second trip in the year. Teacher-training workshops and class practicum sessions were conducted at the core schools. Presentations and workshops with school administrators and faculty were conducted; all aspects of the program were monitored and maintained during this two-week period. Pre-survey on reading speed and comprehension for grades 4-6 in 3 schools was conducted.
4. March 2015: A six-month post-survey for grades 4-6 in 3 schools was conducted to quantify the preliminary effects of ER on reading speed and comprehension. These results were presented to the schools and at the ER World Congress in Dubai in September 2015.
5. February 2016: Continued support and assessment of the core schools via teacher-training workshops and in-class team-teaching with ER-designated teachers. Classroom videos were recorded and teacher and learner interviews were conducted. A database for the libraries was compiled.
6. February 2017: Teacher-training continued in schools, systematic maintenance of the libraries (coding and labelling of books for easy access), and teacher interview data were collected. Two-day teacher-training workshops were held at Early Childhood Education Center (ECEC) in Lalitpur to investigate the possibility of in-country ER-specific trainers and coordinators.
7. February 2018: Reassessment of the core schools. One school was dropped, one added based on level of commitment of the teachers and school administration. Data was collected via teacher and administrator interviews on the changing beliefs of their teaching, and on student learning through ER. Development of the library database continued.
8. April - July 2019: Teacher-students in the MA TESOL program at Kathmandu University School of Education enrolled in sessions and workshops on ER pedagogy. The majority of students in the program were/are practicing teachers and thus, the aim was to train them in order to cascade the tenets of ER to their school and support the existing schools via the university program.
9. July 2019: The 1st ER Symposium in Nepal was organized at Kathmandu University with the support of the US Embassy in Nepal for which this author/teacher-researcher and program coordinator was invited as the keynote speaker.

Several hundred books were brought to all schools at each visit. Japan-based ELT publishers and booksellers have continued to support this program. Readers were also purchased locally in Nepal through donations and fund-raising activities taking place throughout the year. As of November 2020, each school library has over 3,000 readers.

III. The English Learning and Teaching Situation

According to Khaniya & Kiernan, et al. (1994), the methods that are most common in schools in Nepal are rote memorization, note copying and lecturing. This appeared to be the case in the targeted schools during our first visit in March 2014. In pre-ER observations the English reading classes were reminiscent of teacher-centered grammar-translation classes where passages were read aloud irrespective of comprehension, then subsequently explained and translated into Nepalese by the teacher. The classes were teacher-fronted and controlled by the content of the textbook or reader. The shortage of trained teachers and professional development opportunities created a challenging situation. The textbooks and the teach-

ers' own learning backgrounds seemed to control what teaching approaches were used. Thus, it came as no surprise when an ER session was introduced for the first time some of the young learners (and teachers) showed dismay and resistance when faced with the sheer number of books put before them. The learners visibly relaxed when informed that no evaluation or assessment would be involved and that they were free to browse the books.

Studies in extensive reading (Mangubhai & Elley, 1982; Sze, 1999) have shown improvement in not only reading fluency but also overall gains in language proficiency in ESL and EFL contexts in primary and secondary schools. However, most studies have focused on situations in *developed* countries where access to materials, resources and training are generally abundant. With the exception of Tup, Shu and Davis' 1997 study in Cameroon, little research has been conducted on the effects of ER in *developing* countries where not only access to books but also access to professional development and teacher training is severely limited. In addition, there are few studies on the changing beliefs of teachers as they negotiate a more autonomous approach of working with reading texts.

IV. Why Extensive Reading?

While there is an abundance of English books that can be collected and contributed to schools in need of resources in developing countries, there has been no program that attempts to work with the local Nepali schools in identifying their needs and offer a way to use the books more effectively and sustainably. This project aimed to fill this void by supporting the soft skills necessary for applying learner-centered teaching approaches in a concrete and pedagogically sound manner. ER is, by its very nature is learner centered as it offers choice and autonomy in what the learners choose to read. There are no limits placed on what they can or should read. While the teachers are encouraged to recommend books based on learner interest, the learners are in control of whether they follow the recommendations. There are no repercussions for non-adherence and if the suggestions are taken, they are simply widening their reading repertoire which in turn can develop their English language proficiency through varied content and vocabulary uptake in a voluntary manner. ER has been chosen as the medium to promote more self-selected reading, and to bring in concepts of learner autonomy and choice into the curriculum.

V. Anticipated Challenges

The first trip to Nepal involved visiting many schools throughout the country from local community-based to both public and private schools. It became obvious early on that while most of the schools had the necessary textbooks for subject classes there was a severe lack of books for reading for pleasure. Libraries generally were not available for student use and what might generally be thought of as library spaces were shelves filled with textbooks and their accompanying teaching manuals. The ability to implement ER requires access to a large number of books to accommodate a large variety of learners. This meant that each of the schools had to have enough books not only to get started but also to continue over the years. This required the purchase of more books by the schools or by an infusion of books at every yearly visit by the program coordinator. This also meant that the students had to have access to an area designated as a library to access the readers freely.

The school administrators could hardly justify very limited resources on a program that had not produced measurable results, and more importantly, there was no valid reason to commit to a long-term program brought upon them by outside educators and volunteers with whom they had not established a commitment for continued support.

For any new program to become established, teacher-training becomes vital. Workshops were conducted over several days at each visit but to become firmly established this had to be ongoing. In addition, the idea of learner-centeredness and learner choice was a challenge to instigate in a teaching community where teacher-centeredness was the norm. This would take some time and could not be established in a few days or one visit.

VI. Unanticipated Challenges

Preparations for the anticipated challenges were made beforehand with the sourcing of books and a firm commitment by the program coordinator over several years. There were, however, several unanticipated challenges to overcome.

Due to a high turnover rate and a lack of teachers in Nepal in general, many teachers are not certified, nor trained, and often not proficient in English. The teachers are often part-time college students hired to teach subjects they excelled in in their schooling and have not had any formal means of teacher-training nor teacher certification. Teachers often leave after finishing their studies or when they find higher paying positions elsewhere and often in other industries. This is more common than not. Thus, teacher training and re-training was required every year. At each visit, while the program coordinator was prepared to move on to more challenging principles in learner-centered teaching, the schools required the training of a new crop of untrained teachers in the basics of ER. This resulted in very slow uptake.

Another factor contributing to the stall was the impact of volunteer tourism. Nepal is a country with a long history of volunteers coming in and donating supplies and people power to support the fraught infrastructure. This is no less true in schools where donations of books, supplies and other basic needs for often impoverished students were welcomed. Many of the schools are reliant on outside aid in the form of donations and volunteers from abroad working on projects and doing what they can for short stints sharing their culture and resources. This is commonly known as *voluntourism*. While this is certainly beneficial for both parties in the short-term, it can have a negative impact on programs such as this aiming for sustainable education-based change. Simply put, the schools viewed the ER programs as one where a group of volunteers come, support with resources and then leave never to return again. This resulted in sluggish uptake and low motivation on the part of the school administration to continue with the program. Although books were sorely needed and appreciated, there was less incentive to continue the program. Given the circumstances, this was understandable but resulted in considerable challenges in establishing a foothold in the community.

VII. Sustainability

In order to tackle the above-mentioned challenges, several steps were taken to ensure continuity including attempts to cascade the tenets of ER through a local-based teaching organization and a university graduate school teaching program, and through focusing not only on the teacher-training workshops but also on working with the key members in individual school administrations.

Since the program coordinator visited once a year, ongoing local support became necessary to sustain the programs. In 2017, a collaboration with a Nepal-based early learning teacher-training institute began with two full-day ER training workshops followed by observations and two days of practical training at one of the ER schools. Following in 2019, the program coordinator was invited as a visiting scholar at Kathmandu University School of Education based on the fieldwork undertaken over the years. In this graduate school program, the teacher-researcher conducted workshops in addition to giving lectures in reading in a second language. This was followed by invitations to visit several of the schools in which the graduate students were teaching in to investigate the possibility of integrating ER into their curriculum. This work culminated in producing the 1st ER Symposium in Nepal. The one-day symposium brought together teachers and administrators from each of the ER schools for the first time for a panel discussion on the impact of the program. It was attended by teachers from over 60 schools from both inside and outside of Kathmandu valley. The schools ranged from government, community, small private and large established schools. The goal was to spread the merits of the program, develop a network of local practitioners and create a ER community for knowledge and ideas to be shared collectively. The Nepal Extensive Reading Facebook group was also started here for teachers and schools to share, learn and connect with others in one social-learning space.

The aim has been to localize the context through the creation of master trainers and integrating ER pedagogy within the

capacity of the existing school environments through not only the training of teachers but also through integrating ER pedagogy into teacher-training programs at institutes of higher education. To do this effectively, it was vital to find the key individuals in the schools, demand accountability for progress in the form of evidence indicating continued administration and commitment to the program throughout the year. All of this required forming trusting relationships with the teachers, the school administration and creating education initiatives in higher education teacher-training programs. Longer-term learning outcomes for the students showing reading improvement also need to be addressed.

VIII. Conclusion

Cascading the tenets of ER in such a fluid teaching environment has been one of the larger unseen challenges in this foray into Nepal. What has become clear is the need to build relationships based on trust and knowing that the program coordinator is committed to beneficial outcomes for the learners. In short, sustainability means continuity beyond the program coordinator who, in the end, needs to become redundant.

While the sourcing and analyses of all the data collected over the years has been challenging its purpose remains unchanged. Ideas about learner-centered teaching can contribute to improved learning outcomes. However, changing the beliefs about teaching and learning into the schools and the teachers takes time and immense effort. The key component appears to be adjusting mindsets with and a sense of teacher efficacy on a school-wide and community level. Empowering the teachers to cascade what they have learned with their colleagues will serve their students with a lifelong skill for future academic and vocational success.

This study culminates the five years of the fieldwork undertaken in implementing extensive reading in communities with a lack of resources and often unfamiliar with concepts of learner autonomy. With the support of the Nepal language education community, the teacher-researcher plans to continue to support this project through regular book infusions while maintaining ties to in-country expertise for long-term sustainability.

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