

What is Extensive Reading?

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Extensive reading has been variously described as Free Voluntary Reading (FEVER), Uninterrupted Silent Reading (USR), Sustained Silent Reading (SSR), Drop Everything and Read (DEAR), or Positive Outcomes While Enjoying Reading (POWER).

Powell (2006, as cited in Jacobs et al., 2000) states that the term "extensive reading" was originally coined by Palmer in 1917, to distinguish it from "intensive reading" which is : "The careful reading of short, complex texts for detailed understanding and skills practice". It has since acquired many other names such as "pleasure reading", "sustained silent reading", and "free reading". Regardless of the different names, the characteristics generally include the relatively fast reading to understand material, with the reading done mostly outside of the classroom and at each student's own pace and level. There are few, if any, follow-up exercises, because the aim is for overall understanding rather than word-by-word decoding or grammar analysis. For the same reason, there is minimum use of dictionaries. Most importantly, as Thompson (1996) stated:

“instead of an inflexible curriculum saddling students with texts they neither enjoy nor understand, with extensive reading, the material is generally chosen by the students themselves, who can thereby enjoy some small measure of responsibility, for decisions affect in their learning, a basic tenet of communicative teaching”.

As B. Blair (2011) notices, while intensive reading is important, learners will not become fluent and confident readers if this is the extent of their reading practice. This is where extensive reading comes in. To become good readers, learners need to read as much as possible, and they need to read books that interest them and are at their own level of difficulty. According to Susser and Robb (1990), the key features of this method are "reading (a) of large quantities of material or long texts; (b) for global or general understanding; (c) with the intention of obtaining pleasure from the text. Further, because (d) reading is individualized, with students choosing the book they want to read, (e) the books are not discussed in class." (p.3). Moreover, the immediate aims of this method tend to be directly related to reading: increased fluency and speed. This is not to

say that comprehension is not important, since research indicates that reading speed and comprehension are linked; the overall message may be lost if the rate of processing information is too slow (Brown and Hirst, 1983, as cited in Blair, 2011). Thus, comprehension as well as fluency benefit from extensive reading practice.

It simply refers to the outside reading pupils do on their own, with no help or guidance from the teacher, it means reading book after book, rapidly. Extensive reading plays an important role in FLL. It is an activity that can be carried out by the learner on his own, outside the classroom. Furthermore, it may be the only way a learner can keep contact with English outside the classroom sessions. It also provides valuable reinforcement of language and structures already presented in the classroom. As the learner is reading for pleasure, he will be eager to see what happens next and will therefore try to read more rapidly, i.e. the more a learner reads extensively, the faster he learns to read.

Undoubtedly, the main way in which the teacher can help the pupils to read extensively is by directing their attention towards reading material they find interesting. Most pupils will not do a lot of extensive reading by themselves, unless they are encouraged to do so by their teachers. It is therefore important to convince learners of the value of extensive reading. Thus, the learner should be encouraged to read extensively outside the classroom. He does this kind of reading, not to remember details for an exam, but for general information and ideas, as well as for pleasure. He may even become so absorbed in the material that he actually loses awareness of the fact he is reading. Extensive reading, especially where learners are reading material written at their level, has a number of benefits for the development of a learner's language. Davies (1995) suggests that : "Any classroom will be poorer for lack of an extensive reading programme, and will be unable to promote its pupils' language development in all aspects as effectively as if such a programme were present" (p.335). Davies also claims that such a programme will make learners more positive about reading, improving their overall comprehension skills, and give them a wider passive and active vocabulary. Day and Bamford (1998) agreed when citing two of the many goals of extensive reading which are: enabling students to read without constantly stopping and providing an increased number of words.

Extensive reading is therefore, the best possible way for learners to develop automaticity, that is the automatic recognition of words when they see them and it is, by far, the best way to improve their English when reading.

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