

# TEACHERS' ROLES IN IMPLEMENTING EXTENSIVE READING

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## Introduction

Extensive reading (ER), as a language teaching/learning procedure, entails reading in large quantity, at a rapid speed, and usually for a general understanding (Day 2015; Susser & Robb 1990). Up to date, numerous studies have shown the benefits of ER for L2/FL learners, in both linguistic and affective aspects (Elley 1991; Krashen 1993). In view of the considerable benefits of ER, an ER programme is advocated by some authorities (e.g. Day & Bamford 1998) to be incorporated into a L2/FL curriculum. As the manager of the programme, teachers need to motivate students and monitor their progress (Davis 1995). However, in an exam-oriented context, implementing ER is particularly difficult since extensive reading seems unable to satisfy students' need of improving grades within a short time (Chen 2018).

Extensive reading in EFL is required of secondary school students in China. The newly enacted *National English Curriculum Standards for Regular High School* (CME 2017) states that senior high school students should read at least 1,500 words in English after class each week. For junior high school graduates, *Compulsory Education English Curriculum Standards (2011 edition)* (CME 2011) sets the reading requirement at 150,000 words in total. Nevertheless, Chinese secondary EFL teachers receive very limited training regarding this specific pedagogical approach, which may explain why ER implementation in this context is still at an experimental stage, and few empirical studies have been carried out. The present study aims to provide some practical guidance and pedagogical implications concerning ER implementation by exploring an ER programme carried out in a Chinese secondary school.

## Background to the study

### *Teachers' roles in ER implementation*

Opinions differ on what roles teachers should play in running an ER programme. Some (e.g. Susser & Robb 1990) perceive that teachers should not talk about the reading in class since ER is an individualised activity, while some other (e.g. Day & Bamford 1998) hold that teachers need to give an introduction to this learning procedure, followed by setting regulations and keeping records of it. Whichever side to take, teachers are

regarded, more or less, as an observer and facilitator, rather than the traditional authoritative role. Teachers' refusal to accept this novel role may prevent them from practising extensive reading in the first place (Day & Bamford 1998).

Admittedly, extensive reading is an individual activity, but arguably in-class activities led by the teacher may benefit students in many respects, especially for beginning extensive readers. In a Jordanian secondary school, EFL teachers followed very detailed procedures to organize in-class activities concerning ER, and after a semester, students in the experimental group demonstrated marked improvement in many aspects of language competence, for example, writing, speaking, vocabulary, reading comprehension and listening (Smadi & Al-Zawahreh 2013). Similarly, in three Malaysian rural secondary schools, in-class activities related to ER (e.g. retelling the stories in the book) were incorporated into the ER programme. Over a school term, the attitudes of students, many of whom were reluctant readers initially, and teachers' attitudes towards extensive reading experienced a dramatic change (Asraf 2003).

Many other studies have presented different modes of ER implementation fitting in with the teaching contexts. With an extensive study of 44 ER programmes, Day (2015) re-examined the top ten principles for teaching ER and provided three possible directions that the practice of ER might take: *supervised ER* (teachers' supervision and instructions play an important role in students' extensive reading), *independent ER* (students read extensively without supervision from teachers), *blended extensive and intensive reading* (teachers combine extensive reading and developing reading strategies which bear some features of intensive reading). This updated frame bestows teachers with more freedom and choices as to ER implementation, but meanwhile gives rise to the question again: what roles should L2/FL teachers play in the implementation of ER today?

In the present study, the teacher participant ran a supervised ER programme in which she provided students with supervision of various types, acting as an organiser, facilitator, and mentor. The core reading material for this programme was selected by the teacher, but she

gave students the freedom to read whatever they wanted to read.

### **Selection of reading materials**

Reading for pleasure is a defining characteristic of extensive reading (Krashen 1993; Susser & Robb 1990). To ensure readers gain pleasure, reading materials are preferably selected by students themselves and should be easy enough (Day 2015). Therefore, a *class reader*, i.e. a book selected by the teacher for the whole class to read, is additional rather than necessary for an ER programme (Day & Bamford 1998). However, it is tenable to postulate that by using a class reader, teachers could give students more specific instructions and assistance concerning ER, which may benefit readers, particularly beginning extensive readers.

Regarding the principle of choosing easy materials, some empirical studies have collected evidence against it. For example, a seven-month ER programme carried out in a New Zealand secondary school discovered that linguistically challenging books could also motivate FL learners and improve their language proficiency significantly (de Burgh-Hirabe 2011). Likewise, an online ER programme targeted at advanced FL learners found that some students would purposely seek challenging books to read and they made no less progress than their peers in their FL acquisition and development (Arnold 2009).

To date, few studies have been conducted to explore the practicality and efficacy of using authentic novels as a class reader and the core reading material for supervised ER, especially in the secondary EFL teaching context. This study intends to fill this gap by investigating an ER programme with the aforementioned features.

## **Methodology**

### **Research context**

The present study was conducted in a secondary school in Beijing. The teacher participant, Jane (a pseudonym), has been working as an EFL teacher for 20 years, with one-year of experience of using graded readers to implement ER. The two classes she was teaching were experimental classes with students selected from the district as top students. There are some special policies for the experimental classes. For instance, in the second semester of Senior One, some teaching periods were set aside for studies beyond text books. When the present research began, Jane's students were starting their first year of Senior High. This was the second year Jane taught these two classes (90 students in total). Most of the students were intermediate and lower-intermediate English

learners, and the majority of them had no experience of reading original English novels before participating in this study.

Exploring this ER programme with an original English novel as the core reading material, the present study aims to seek answers to the following research questions:

1. What roles does an EFL teacher play in an ER programme in a Chinese secondary school?
2. What are secondary EFL students' attitudes and responses to an ER programme?

### **Participants**

The researcher got to know Jane through a teacher friend. After learning about the aim of the research, Jane agreed to participate in the study and help distribute the participant information sheet to the students and their parents. The students who were willing to participate and got their parents' consent were recruited into the study. It is important to state that the researcher administered the two online surveys (with different numbers of student respondents for each: 89 and 67 respectively), and the teacher participant did not know which students participated.

### **Data collection**

This study lasted 5 months (a school term), and data were collected through two interviews with the teacher participant, two questionnaires completed by the student participants, the teacher's reflective journal, and documents of various forms concerning this ER programme. Both the interviews and the surveys were conducted at the beginning and at the end of the school term. Once a month, the teacher participant submitted to the researcher a teaching journal entry, together with students' written works or other documents she considered significant. The questionnaire surveys were conducted online: the researcher sent the link to the teacher participant who subsequently sent it to a WeChat group where student participants completed the questionnaires. Two interviews with the teacher participant were carried out for different reasons: the first interview aimed to explore the teacher participant's previous experience of implementing ER and her perceptions of ER and its implementation; the second interview intended to investigate the concrete measures the teacher participant took and the difficulties she and her students encountered during the ER programme.

### **Data analysis**

Thematic analysis was employed to analyse the qualitative data from the interviews, the reflective journal entries and related documents. The major themes, e.g. supervising ER, motivating reluctant readers, students' responses, difficulties encountered, were synthesised and presented in the form of section headings or sub-section headings of this article. Data from the questionnaires are presented with descriptive statistics. The teacher participant was involved in the revision of the interview transcripts and the interpretation of the transcripts and the journal entries; any discrepancy was resolved accordingly. As stated above, data were collected through multiple sources to achieve triangulation. An audit trail was kept by the researcher to document critical decisions made in the course of data collection and analysis (Lincoln & Guba 1985).

## **ER implementation procedures**

### **1 Selecting reading material**

Jane chose an original English novel, *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, as the ER material for the following reasons: Firstly, she thinks the topic/theme is attractive to her students. Secondly, many secondary schools have used this novel, and some friends recommended this book to her. Thirdly, this book is linguistically accessible for her students. It is important to note that Jane allowed her students to read any other English novels if they showed great interest in it.

### **2 Giving guidance**

With some samples, Jane demonstrated how to write a summary before giving her students such an assignment. Besides, Jane gave guidance on how to deal with new words in the novel. She allowed her students to consult dictionaries; meanwhile, she told them not to look up every new word because they could guess the meaning from the context.

### **3 Assigning and checking homework**

Students were suggested to read one chapter each week (around 2000 words) and choose one writing task from the three offered by the teacher (see Appendix). When checking the homework, Jane noted down typical mistakes or questions for further discussion.

### **4 Organising in-class activities**

Once a week, Jane held a discussion about the mistakes or questions she discovered in students' assignments. In addition, Jane utilised the extra studying periods (as aforementioned) for extensive reading. In the reading class, for the first ten

minutes, Jane shared some excellent students' works from last assignments. For the next 20-25 minutes, students read silently and individually. During the last 5-10 minutes, students wrote their questions on the blackboard and discussed these questions in the whole class.

### **5 Organising out-of-class activities**

In the middle of the semester, Jane held a competition of summary/connection writing. Students' works were put on the wall outside the classroom. In a schoolwide activity, Parent-Child Reading, Jane encouraged the parents of her students to read *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* together with their children. In addition, Jane gave students two chances to adapt parts of the novel into plays and perform the plays in class.

### **6 Making evaluation**

Jane set aside five points out of 100 in the first monthly paper to test how well her students did in the novel reading (students were asked to write a letter to the main character). For the following months, students did summary/connection writing to earn points (one article one point, 5 points in total).

## **Results and discussion**

### **Students' perceptions of ER and response to related activities**

In both Questionnaire I and Questionnaire II, two out of nine questions concern students' attitudes towards English studies and their perceptions of the relationship between ER and English learning (see Table 1). It is conspicuous that the percentage of students who believe ER benefits English studies rises sharply, from 51 per cent to 96 per cent. It is also worth noting that the percentage of students who like studying English very much increases by 7 per cent.

The marked change in students' attitudes were reflected in various aspects of their English studies, for instance, their behaviour and performance in class. 'Once students got down to reading in class, they seemed immersed in it' (interview 2), and 'at the end of the class, they could not wait to share their understanding with each other' (journal 3). On the part of Jane, she 'really enjoyed the atmosphere in which everyone was reading quietly and then discussed heatedly' (journal 3). Gradually, the reading class became something Jane expected: 'Next month, I will have another class for students to read and discuss, which I really look forward to' (journal 3).

When students prepared and presented the play adapted from the novel, Jane surprisingly spotted excitement and devotion:

Table1. Students' attitudes toward English studies and their perceptions of the relationship between ER and English studies.

Question	Answer	Questionnaire I (N=89)	Mean=3.99	Questionnaire II (N=67)	Mean=4.19	Change
		Number of responses	Percentage	Number of responses	Percentage	Percentage
Q1: Do you like studying English?	I like it very much.	35	39%	31	46%	↑7%
	I like it a little.	29	33%	24	36%	↑3%
	It is ok.	16	18%	8	12%	↓6%
	I do not like it.	7	8%	2	3%	↓5%
	I really do not like it.	2	2%	2	3%	↑1%
Question	Answer	Questionnaire I (N=89)	Mean=3.52	Questionnaire II (N=67)	Mean=3.65	Change
		Number of responses	Percentage	Number of responses	Percentage	Percentage
Q8: How do you see the relationship between reading in English outside class (ER) and English studies?	They are not related.	2	2%	2	3%	↑1%
	Reading novels benefits English studies.	45	51%	64	96%	↑45%
	Reading novels has little to do with English studies.	2	2%	1	1%	↓1%
	Others	40	45%	0	0%	↓45%

One thing I was satisfied with was that they were all excited about the performance ... The actor and the actress shouted to each other loudly as if they were really angry ... The expressions and intonation really aroused the sympathy of the audience. (journal 4)

However, not every student's attitude improved, and when Jane talked about this, she seemed somewhat helpless:

There are some students who are not very cooperative. For example, one student read the novel but did not write anything. This student is almost the poorest English learner in the class, far behind the others ... (interview 2)

Jane did not present exact reasons behind these reluctant readers/EFL learners, but as a common phenomenon even in L1 reading (Nielen, Mol, Sikkema-de Jong & Bus 2016), reluctant reading in a foreign language could be triggered by various factors. Although not all students benefit greatly from the ER programme, their overall attitudes changed for the better, as demonstrated in Table 1. This discovery corroborates Day and Bamford's claim (1998: 27): 'It is indeed the ongoing experiences of extensive second language reading

that have the most potential to establish positive attitudes toward second language reading'. We may tentatively extend this statement by adding that besides L2 reading, extensive reading influences students' general attitudes towards L2 studies in a positive manner. This discovery adds to the huge body of research showing evidence that ER could enhance learners' attitudes and motivation for L2/FL reading and studies (e.g. Arnold 2009; Judge 2011; Kirchoff 2013).

#### **Teachers' roles in ER implementation**

In Questionnaire II, one question concerns the further help students expect of their English teacher relating to ER. As shown in Table 2, the greatest help students hope to get from their teacher is 'provision of chances to discuss the reading with classmates/Teacher' followed by 'recommendations on reading materials'. In effect, Jane did provide students with chances to discuss the reading in class as mentioned above. Students' further request in this respect manifests their strong and continuing need for sharing and collaborative activities in relation to ER.

Table 2. Assistance students expect of the teacher with their extensive reading.

Question	Answer	Number of responses (N=67)	Percentage	Added information (from respondents)
Q8: Besides the help you have got from your English teacher with your reading in English outside class, what other help do you expect to get from him/her? (You can choose more than one answer.)	Recommendations on reading materials	33	49%	/
	Provision of chances to discuss the reading with classmates/Teacher	38	56%	/
	Guidance on reading skills/ strategies	8	11%	How to grasp the gist of the text; use the context to guess word meaning.
	Encouragement	4	6%	Pay attention to our progress; give encouragement instead of exerting test pressure.
	Supervision	1	2%	Write summaries.
	Others	3	5%	Recommend related movies; recommend more novels; explain some colloquial language in the novel.

Jane had a full awareness of supervision from the very beginning. Each time after checking the assignments, Jane would 'praise those who did well and chat with those who didn't take it seriously', and usually Jane could see 'improvement after the chat' (interview 1). Besides, her supervision was not restricted to regular assignments, for example:

Each group chose any part of the novel and adapted it into a short play of one to three minutes. I checked their adaptation in advance, just to make sure that they had their lines ready without giving any comment. (journal 3)

Encouraging students is another issue that Jane paid close attention to. From her students' response, Jane came to the realisation that students cared a lot about teachers' encouragement, as she elaborated in her journal:

I put my ideas in her summary book and praised her. She got so delighted and satisfied that she came to my office with a broad smile on her face and said 'thanks' to me. She is still not a smart girl. But to learn English well and to enjoy reading and writing, one doesn't need too much intelligence. The boys and girls like her just need encouragement and a little guidance from their teachers and parents. (journal 1)

This student's response indicates that teachers' encouragement, which may be embodied in many forms, could contribute significantly to the enhancement of students' L2/FL reading motivation.

#### **Difficulties students encountered**

According to the data from Questionnaire II, the biggest problem students encountered in extensive

reading is 'too many new words', followed by 'lack of time' and 'lack of interest or motivation' (see Table 3).

Although vocabulary is considered by many students as the biggest threat to ER, Jane observed the counter-measures some students took to deal with this problem:

There could be 40 to 50 new words in a chapter for some students...but I noticed in class that their reading speed was ok. Many could finish one chapter within 20 minutes. They did not look up all the new words, but marked them and handled them altogether at the end. (interview 2)

Jane also realised 'lack of time' was an enormous problem for students' sustained reading. At the beginning of the semester, Jane expressed her concern about it: 'I'm worried that after they enter senior high school, with the pressure from other subjects, their English studies may be affected' (interview 1). In this exam-oriented environment, the problem of 'lack of time' seemed to be unavoidable:

After the National Holiday, I found the students' work was not as good as that before the holiday. I think there might be two reasons. First, their monthly test was coming in one week. They needed to prepare for it. And they didn't think reading an English novel would do them good in their exams. (journal 2)

This discovery mirrors Day and Bamford's (1998) concern about teachers' difficulty in incorporating ER into an exam-oriented FL curriculum. The present study adds to this concern by showing evidence that even if teachers manage to integrate ER into such a curriculum, students

Table 3. Difficulties students encountered in extensive reading.

Question	Answer	Number of responses (N=67)	Percentage	Added information (from respondents)
Q6: What difficulties did you encounter when doing English reading outside class? (You can choose more than one answer.)	Lack of interest or motivation	24	36%	/
	Lack of time	35	52%	/
	Too many new words	42	63%	/
	Others	1	2%	Comprehension problem

may still find it challenging to set aside time for the reading.

With regard to motivation, Jane expressed her helplessness in the first interview: 'The students who showed interest in ER demonstrated more and more interest in it, but those who showed little interest lost their interest little by little' (interview 1). She did not know then she could change some of these students, though not all of them.

#### **Difficulties the teacher encountered**

In the two interviews and reflective journal entries, Jane reported some difficulties or confusions she had regarding ER implementation. Assistance needed to resolve these problems could be categorized as follows: *training about ER* (including definition of ER; relations between literature, language and culture), *training about ER implementation* (including selection of reading materials; sustaining motivation; supervision; evaluation), and *in-service training for effective ER implementation* (including updated theories and pedagogy; methods of tackling ongoing problems) (see Table 4).

#### **Reaching reluctant and weak readers**

Usually perceived as more profitable for advanced language learners, extensive reading could also benefit reluctant readers and may even turn them into eager readers (Mason & Krashen 1997). To realise the transformation, teachers need to make efforts and give more attention to those who need extra help. In the reflective journal, Jane reported four cases of turning reluctant/weak readers into active/confident language learners:

One girl, who was among the poorest ten in learning English in class, lists all the possible answers to every question. She even puts the page number where she gets the idea at the beginning of each answer ... She is more careful, patient and logical than before. If she puts her

answers together, she will make a short passage. I think she will find it herself soon. (journal 1)

With this lower-proficiency EFL learner, besides giving encouragement and guidance, Jane acted as a patient observer, giving the student adequate time to make progress and discovery on her own.

Another girl enjoys reading Harry Potter and she began to write summary last year ... To be honest, I could understand little of what she wrote. Every time when I had time to read her work, I would ask her to stand by me and explain her idea to me in Chinese ... But she never gives up ... This September, she showed us her great progress. She is able to write something that I can understand ... Two days ago, she brought me a story she created. I think she really has fallen in love with reading and writing. (journal 1)

Jane gave students the freedom to read what they were really interested in, regardless of her requirements for the assigned book. For this student, Harry Potter books aroused her enthusiasm for EFL studies and enabled her to have the persistence to conquer all the difficulties on the way. From summary writing to creative writing, this student demonstrated characteristics of a willing and passionate EFL learner. Conceivably, the face-to-face discussions and communication Jane had with this girl contributed greatly to the transformation of this language learner.

One [boy] finished his junior high school in a village. His English was much poorer than others. He said when he came to this school last year, he was not able to understand me in class ... He has made great progress and become more confident. More importantly, he loves this novel. Whenever he read something interesting, he couldn't help sharing it with me ... While others have finished Chapter VI, he has finished Chapter VIII. (journal 2)

Table 4. Difficulties the teacher encountered in implementing ER.

Difficulty/question	Source	Assistance needed to resolve the difficulty/question
<i>What is the proper reading amount for each week?</i>	Interview 1	Training about ER (definition of ER)
<i>My worry is whether my understanding of the text is right or not.</i>	Interview 1	Training about ER (relations between literature, language & culture)
<i>How to select reading materials?</i>	Interview 1	Training about ER implementation (selection of reading materials)
<i>I don't know how to sustain students' motivation for reading.</i>	Interview 2	Training about ER implementation (sustaining motivation)
<i>I wonder if I could have other ways of communication with students about their reading (except writing summaries).</i>	Interview 1	Training about ER implementation (supervision)
<i>I want to incorporate ER into the exam, but I don't know how.</i>	Interview 1	Training about ER implementation (evaluation)
<i>Is there any book which could give us teachers guidance on ER implementation?</i>	Interview 1	In-service training for sustainable ER implementation (updated theories and pedagogy)
<i>I know little about literature and drama. If I had more knowledge about them, I would give students more instructions and they would make greater progress.</i>	Journal 4	In-service training for sustainable ER implementation (methods of tackling ongoing problems)

This case indicates that teacher-selected reading materials could interest students as well, especially for those who have little experience in extensive reading. Besides, we may conjecture that Jane is open to any discussion with her students about their reading, and this effective channel for communication propels students into more reading and sharing.

The second boy hates English very much while he is good at maths, chemistry, physics and geography. I have always been trying to persuade him to study English harder but in vain. For the first two chapters, he did nothing, no answering questions, no summary, no connection ... To my great delight, he began to read and answer the questions ... This week, he finished a summary. In the comments, I gave him encouragement. I hope he can continue. (journal 2)

This student is an extreme example of a reluctant EFL reader and learner, who is crazy about other subjects but hates English in any sense. Jane took the measure of 'not complaining' after many times of invalid persuasion. To put it alternatively, Jane did not give up on this reluctant learner, which brought about the change that the student finally decided to make.

These inspiring cases, to a great extent, support Day and Bamford's (1998: 42) statement: "If a teacher is firmly committed to extensive reading and promotes it actively, then students generally catch the teacher's enthusiasm and are drawn to

doing it". Drawing on these cases, it is legitimate to conclude that teachers' persistent engagement in students' reading may prompt their interest, motivation, and confidence in L2/FL studies.

### Implications and conclusion

The findings of the study may have some pedagogical implications for L2/FL teachers and educators. Firstly, students' improved attitudes towards FL studies suggest that even for intermediate and lower-intermediate language learners, original novels could be beneficially used as ER materials. Although 'too many new words' is regarded by many as a great hindrance, with teachers' guidance and some related strategies, students could surmount this obstacle without reducing their reading pleasure. In addition, a class reader, selected by the teacher with careful thought, could be as intriguing and enlightening as those selected by students themselves. Furthermore, in-class discussion and other ER-related activities are perceived by many students as valuable chances to promote extensive reading.

How to sustain students' motivation for ER is a common concern for L2/FL teachers, as is the case in the present study. It is inspiring to discover that if the teacher is firmly committed, ceaselessly seeking solutions to whatever problems, even the students lacking in motivation could be instilled with enthusiasm for extensive reading and

language studies. Still, to fulfil the roles expected of L2/EL teachers in ER implementation (e.g. selecting reading materials, giving guidance, assigning and checking homework, organising various activities, etc.), L2/FL teachers are in urgent need of related training to carry out sustainable ER implementation.

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## **Appendix**

### **Chapter One tasks**

#### **Task 1**

1. Why does Bruno's family move?
2. What does Bruno enjoy about his home in Berlin?
3. Who is Maria and what does she do for Bruno's family?
4. Would Bruno's mother like to move? How do you know that?
5. What job do you think Bruno's father does?

#### **Task 2**

Write a summary about 100 words.

#### **Task 3**

Write down anything you think of when you read Chapter One.