

THE MISSING PIECE OF THE ELT PUZZLE

Willy A Renandya
National Institute of Education
Nanyang Technological University, Singapore
willy.renandya@nie.edu.sg

Abstract

Alan Maley, a renowned ELT expert, proclaimed that Dadok, or Extensive Reading (ER), is probably 'the single most important way to improve language proficiency' (2005, p. 354). And he is not alone; a growing number of ELT scholars and practitioners now are actively promoting ER in the classroom (see www.erfoundation.org). Curiously however, despite strong research evidence that supports Maley's claim, ER has not become an important part of our L2 curricula. In this presentation, I first discuss the theory behind ER and provide research evidence that supports it. I then present some case studies of how avid L2 readers (students and teachers) developed a high level of proficiency in English. The next part of my talk will touch upon some of the main reasons why the adoption of ER in schools has been slow. I will conclude by offering practical tips on how English teachers in Vietnam can start an ER program in their schools. This presentation is particularly useful for English teachers and lecturers who are interested in helping their students develop a higher level of proficiency in English.

Key Words: E.R, language learning

1. INTRODUCTION

How would you describe ELT in Indonesia? Would you say that generally people are happy that our students are successful in learning English? The answer can be quite mixed depending on whether you are referring to students studying in elite private schools or those studying in other schools. The success rate is quite high for those in elite schools, but not so high (or even rather low) for the other groups of students studying in normal schools. Since the great majority of our students find themselves studying in the latter, it is of interest to us to ask why their level of English proficiency remains low despite the number of years of studying English.

There are many reasons for this undesirable situation, including low student motivation, large class size, poor learning resources and more importantly perhaps, the way English is taught in the classroom. Repeated observations show that English is often taught as a subject of study, and not as a skill to be acquired through meaningful practice. It is for example not uncommon to see teachers spending a lot of classroom time talking about or explaining grammatical concepts or new vocabulary words. The students are just there sitting and listening passively to their teacher's explanations. Language learned in this way (if learning happens at all) plays a limited role in the acquisition process.

After years of research into the nature of L2 learning, we now know that language learning is greatly facilitated when students get to frequently see and hear meaningful language. When students understand messages presented in this way, they not only enjoy the learning process better, but they also get to learn a lot of language in the process. Language features that are learned in meaningful contexts are more easily retrievable and come in handy when students try to express themselves in writing or in speaking.

It is this opportunity to experience meaningful language on a daily basis that our students are missing. I suspect that it is probably the missing piece in the ELT puzzle that we've been looking for. This missing piece is called Tadoku in Japanese, Dadok in Korean,

Membaca Ekstensif in Bahasa Indonesia and Extensive Reading in English (also called Pleasure Reading).

In the next section, I will define what ER is from a pedagogical perspective.

2. WHAT IS ER?

Alan Maley, a renowned ELT expert, proclaimed that Tadoku, or Extensive Reading (ER), is probably ‘the single most important way to improve language proficiency’ (2005, p. 354). And he is not alone; a growing number of ELT scholars and practitioners now are actively promoting ER in the classroom (see www.erfoundation.org).

But what is ER?. There are many definitions of ER, but one definition that attempts to capture all the key elements is provided by Renandya & Jacobs (2016):

ER involves L2 students reading large amounts of motivating and engaging materials which are linguistically appropriate over a period of time where they read with a reasonable speed for general understanding, with a focus on meaning rather than form.

a. Large amounts of motivating and engaging materials.

There are two points worth elaborating here. The first one refers to the quantity of reading. The general rule of thumb is: the more the merrier. The more students read the more language learning benefits they will get out of their reading (Renandya, Rajan & Jacobs, 1989). Some ER scholars (e.g., Nation & Wang, 1999) have suggested that students should read a book a week. If students follow this advice and read for the whole year, they will read about 50 books. This may seem a lot for our students, but as ER books are usually short graded readers that can be read fairly quickly, the suggestion seems quite reasonable. Others have suggested that students should spend roughly half an hour a day on reading. If they do this over a period of one year, they will have read about one million words. ER practitioners believe that the effect of ER is noticeably more meaningful after students have seen about one million words. The second point, which is related to the first one, is that the materials will have to be motivating and engaging. When students find the graded readers enjoyable, they will want to finish the book quickly, return it to the class library and borrow a new one. So the two points will have to go hand in hand. We can’t expect our students to read in quantity unless the books are of great interest to them. As Mori (2015) points out, “motivation is essential to reading extensively” (p. 129).

b. Linguistically appropriate.

One of the reasons our students dislike reading in English has to do with the linguistic elements of the book. When the book contains a lot of unfamiliar words and complex language structure, students will find reading a frustrating experience. They read, and stumble over too many difficulty words and as a result, they don’t understand very much the contents of the book. When this happens, students will soon lose interest in reading, thinking that reading is not the best way to spend their time.

It is therefore important to make available reading materials that are at the right level, one that is not too easy and not too challenging. If it’s too easy, students can get bored. On the other hand, if it is too difficulty, they will simply put down the book after reading a few pages. It is worth pointing out here that when we work with students whose has very little experience with reading, it is good advice to start with easier materials. This will boost students’ confidence and motivate them to pick up the next book.

c. Speed

Speed is important in reading. Students should be reading fast enough (but not too fast though) for comprehension to happen. When they read too slowly, it is difficult to put the key ideas together to build a coherent representation of the overall meaning of the text. Because ER materials are simple enough for students to process, they can read with a faster speed and with greater comprehension as well. Our job then is to make sure that the materials are at the right level so that students can read with sufficient speed and comprehension.

d. *For general comprehension*

The purpose of ER is different from intensive reading (IR). In IR, students are normally expected to demonstrate in-depth comprehension of the reading passage. In ER, we simply want students to read for general comprehension. The purpose is not so much about extracting detailed information but about understanding the main ideas. In fact when students read a story, we just want them to know what the story is about and if they find the reading enjoyable. There is no need to remember specific details about the story e.g., the name of the street where an event took place, the exact time the main character had dinner, etc. They are not reading the story for a test; they are doing it for enjoyment.

e. *Focus on meaning not on form*

In ER, the focus is on meaning not on form. The comprehensible input theory developed by Stephen Krashen (2004) is relevant here. The theory says that when students understand a lot of interesting messages, they will gradually acquire the language used to convey those messages. Thus, in ER our main job is to give students a lot of opportunities to have meaningful encounters with language. Stories, because they are interesting and easier to understand, are often used to introduce students to the world of reading for pleasure. According to Krashen, students will inevitably acquire the form (e.g., words, idiomatic expressions and grammatical features) will take care of itself when students focus on meaning.

3. LANGUAGE LEARNING BENEFITS OF ER

The language learning benefits of ER are numerous. Summarizing years of research into extensive reading, Bamford and Day (2004, p.1) describe what can happen when students read extensively over a period of time:

Good things happen to students who read a great deal in the foreign language. Research studies show they become better and more confident readers, they write better, their listening and speaking abilities improve, and their vocabularies become richer. In addition, they develop positive attitudes toward and increased motivation to study the new language.

As can be seen from the quotation above, ER can improve students' overall proficiency. They understand the language better (i.e., their listening and reading comprehension abilities improve) and they can express themselves better too (i.e., their speaking and writing skills also improve).

In addition, ER also has positive effects on students' affect; their confidence level also goes up and their motivation increases and their attitudes towards language learning become more positive. We know from experience and research that the affective aspect of language learning is as important, if not more so, than the other aspects of language learning (e.g., linguistic and cognitive aspects). Successful learners of English are those who have high motivation and show positive attitudes towards learning. ER can be an important affective booster for our students. Zoltan Dornyei (2001), a top L2 motivation researcher, says that motivation accounts for a big variation in the ultimate achievement of our L2 students. Those who have sufficiently high motivation and who are able to sustain their motivation are likely to develop good proficiency in the language.

4. CONCERN AND QUESTION ABOUT ER

When I ask teachers about why they are not implementing ER, some say that they have heard about ER but are not sure about its effect on language learning. Others say that they know about the benefits of ER but are concerned that ER would take up too much of their curriculum time. And yet others say that they don't know how ER can be integrated into their existing curriculum. I discuss in more details below some of the key concerns.

a. *The delayed effect of ER*

Teachers are concerned that ER does not produce immediate effects. This is a valid concern because it can take up to one year to see noticeable effects of ER. In other words, the improvement would translate into improved reading, listening, speaking and writing skills after

students have read extensively for a rather long period of time. But it does not mean that they are not learning anything during this period. They are learning a lot of things. Their word recognition improves, their reading fluency also improves, they know a lot more useful vocabulary and their 'feel' of the language also improves. But these are not typically measured in school, thus giving the (erroneous) impression that students don't learn anything much in the first few months of doing ER.

b. The issue of legitimacy

ER promotes enjoyable reading; ER is about reading for fun not about reading for study purposes where students spend one class period dissecting the reading passage for a detailed linguistic analysis at the word, sentence and text level. For some reason, this type of reading activity is highly valued in our society. Reading for fun and enjoyment on the other hand is not associated with the traditional notion of school learning. This being the case, teachers might be constrained when they introduce silent reading for pleasure during curriculum time for fear that the parents and school leaders might think that they are not doing a good job teaching in the classroom. A good teacher, many believe, is one who is actively talking in the classroom, explaining a concept, clarifying students' confusion, checking and monitoring students' learning etc. Students reading silently and enjoyably unfortunately is not considered 'serious learning'.

c. Lack of suitable ER materials

This is another area of concerns that teachers often raise, i.e., how to get suitable ER materials. A couple of decades ago, finding ER materials could be quite challenging. There were only a small number of graded materials (simplified classics such as Charles Dickens, Moby Dick, Tom Sawyer etc) and they were rather costly too.

But things have changed nowadays. There is now a huge range of graded ER materials available in the market. These include movie tie-ins (e.g., Baywatch), popular novels (simplified novels by John Grisham for example) and specially written graded readers (called L2 learner literature). These materials are more interesting and enjoyable to read. If your schools have the financial resources, you could simply contact the sales representatives of publishers such as Cambridge and Oxford and purchase graded materials from them.

If your school runs on a limited budget, you could go online and explore free ER reading materials for your school use. Some popular websites for ER include <http://www.er-central.com/> and <http://www.storylineonline.net/white-socks-only/>. The second one provides a wealth of interesting stories read aloud by native speakers of English. Students can listen and at the same time read along with the reader, thus benefitting from two modes of language input: oral and written exposure to English.

5. Implementing ER

Despite concerns discussed in the previous section, it is heartening to note that a growing number of schools are beginning to implement ER programmes. As with the implementation of other school-wide programmes, some schools are more successful than others in implementing and sustaining their ER programmes. Those that are more successful tend to show the following characteristics:

- The programme is supported by everyone in schools i.e., teachers, librarians and school leaders.
- Both teachers and students are enthusiastically involved in the running of the programme.
- The programme is nicely integrated into the curriculum. Some schools set aside 15 minutes in the first period three times a week for silent reading where everyone, including the teacher, is reading books of their choice. Classroom time is also used by students to share their thoughts and feelings about the books they have just read.
- The programme receives support from parents as well. When parents are fully informed about the benefits of ER, they will do their part and encourage their children to read for pleasure at home too.

- The programme makes available a wide range of graded readers on various topics. This is important as students should be able to and are given the freedom to choose the type of books that they want to read.
- The programme ensures that students get to read in quantity. This point cannot be overemphasized. Students get the most benefits from the ER programme only when they have read a large amount of interesting and enjoyable materials (Renandya, Rajan & Jacobs, 1999; Renandya & Jacobs, 2002)

5. CONCLUSION

We have tried different ways of teaching English in the classroom. We have tried different methods of teaching, from the old grammar-translation method to the newer and more communicatively oriented methods such as the CLT and task-based learning approaches. But we continue to face the same problem of a low success rate in our students' learning of English.

Is it possible that we have been looking at the wrong place in our earnest attempt to help our students become more successful learners of English? Given the compelling evidence for the effectiveness ER in supporting L2 learners' language development (see Nakanishi, 2015 for a meta-analysis of research into extensive reading), Is it possible that perhaps Tadoku or Extensive Reading is the missing link in the ELT puzzle?

6. REFERENCES

- Bamford, J., & Day, R. R. (Eds.). (2004). *Extensive reading activities for language teaching*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Dörnyei, Z. (2001). *Motivational Strategies in the Language Classroom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Krashen, S. D. (2004). *The power of reading* (2nd ed.). Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Maley, A. (2005). Review of "Extensive reading activities for the second language classroom". *ELT Journal*, 59, 354-355.
- Mori, S. (2015). If you build it, they will come: From a "Field of Dreams" to a more realistic view of extensive reading in an EFL Context. *Reading in a Foreign Language*, 27(1), 129-135.
- Nakanishi, T. (2015). A meta-analysis of extensive reading research. *TESOL Quarterly*, 49(1), 6-37.
- Nation, I. S. P., & Wang, K. (1999). Graded readers and vocabulary. *Reading in a Foreign Language*. 12, 355-380.
- Renandya, W. A., & Jacobs, G. M. (2002). Extensive reading: Why aren't we all doing it? In J. C. Richards & W. A. Renandya (Eds.), *Methodology in language teaching: An anthology of current practice* (pp. 295-302). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Renandya, W. A., Rajan, B. R. S., & Jacobs, G. M. (1999). Extensive reading with adult learners of English as a second language. *RELC Journal*, 30(1), 39-61.
- Renandya, W.A., & Jacobs, G.M. (2016). Extensive reading and listening in the language classrooms. In W.A. Renandya & H.P. Widodo (Eds.), *English Language Teaching Today: Linking Theory and Practice*. New York: Springer.