

EXTENSIVE READING AND THE UPPER PRIMARY/JUNIOR SECONDARY SCHOOL ENGLISH CURRICULUM

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Reading can play an important role in developing English as a second language skills among students at all levels. It is, in fact, encouraging that some countries in the South Pacific have now begun implementing whole language, story book-based curricula in their early primary English programmes. The Cook Islands, Fiji, Kiribati, Tonga and Vanuatu are prominent in this development.

This article suggests, however, that the value of incorporating reading into the Year 7 and 8 levels has not yet been fully accepted nor has it been exploited. Although cost may be one discouraging factor, I believe that the main reason may be that curriculum planners and teachers feel that there is no room for extended periods of reading in an already crowded curriculum. In a survey conducted in Fiji in 1989, for example, teachers regularly reported to me that they did not use the background 'readers' (story books) recommended by the Ministry of Education in their Forms 1 and 2 (Years 7 and 8) classes because there was "not enough time"! This was despite the fact that literature is an integral and major component of the junior secondary curriculum and is examined at Form 4 (Year 10) level. The exclusion of extensive reading from many Year 7 and 8 classrooms' English curricula thus revealed a very short term view of the students' education. On the contrary, I would argue that adding a full reading period at the expense of other 'lessons', for example, on writing or grammar, may well lead to better acquisition of language skills. Indeed, there is now quite a substantial body of literature to confirm this. For example, Elley (1992), while referring to a world-wide survey and focussing on first language literacy, provides solid evidence of the crucial role of reading in the development of language skills generally. Pillai reviews three South Pacific research studies and states conclusively: "The three research studies...furnish empirical evidence to show that the story-reading method...produces the desired learning outcomes" (1991:11).

Before turning to reasons why reading helps students learn English (as well as much other valuable knowledge), one must stress that there are admirable

exceptions to the picture painted so far. There are schools in several countries where reading is valued very highly and its potential to lift literacy and language levels is exploited. Many schools, for example, have introduced Sustained Silent Reading (SSR), in which the whole school "drops everything and reads" (DEAR is in fact another acronym for the same thing). By and large, these schools report highly favourable outcomes of such initiatives. Let us turn briefly to some of the reasons why reading helps.

Although the arguments are quite well known and reviewed in the articles referred to earlier, I will reiterate five of the major reasons in favour of reading as an important component of an ESL curriculum.

Reading provides comprehensible input (Krashen 1985), or a source of language for the learner to acquire. It is worth elaborating here that strong support for the role of reading or exposure to a rich print environment in promoting language acquisition is provided in a recent article by Krashen (1992). In the article, Krashen cites a variety of studies, such as ones which show that

"Better reading comprehension, writing style, grammar, vocabulary, and spelling are associated with more access to print outside of school and/or more leisure reading."

(It is argued here that the same "leisure" type of reading can be effectively promoted in schools, and in fact needs to be, as most Pacific students do not have access to good reading materials outside the school. Lack of such materials in schools is the first problem to overcome).

It is also important to note here that Krashen's input hypothesis convincingly proposes that "acquisition", which is superior to "learning", results from learners having exposure to oral or written language which is just above their current level of knowledge (his $i + 1$ formula). Indeed, among the studies cited to confirm the hypothesis is Elley and Mangubhai's Fiji Book Flood (1981).

- *Good models of language are provided.* Any language learner needs such models and story material exposes learners to an excellent variety of sentence patterns, vocabulary and several other language features.

- *Reading is pupil-centred and individualised learning is possible, even in very large classes.* In implementing an English extensive reading programme in Hong Kong, Yu reports that "students welcomed this pupil-centred mode of learning, which allowed them to work at their own pace and be responsible for their own learning" (1993:5). One must hasten to add, however, that generalising from Hong Kong to Oceania is done cautiously.

- *High levels of motivation are characteristic of successful extensive reading programmes.* It is worth stressing again that high motivation, or eagerness to learn, is a crucial variable in enhancing second language learning.

- *Students can work at their own levels, thus avoiding the lock-step syndrome characteristic of other lessons, in which the whole class is expected to work through the same exercises at the same pace, so that faster and slower learners often experience frustration.*

At this point, however, the characteristics of "good" reading material need to be clarified. To be successful, an extensive reading programme must offer material which is good enough to hook students on reading or to gain and maintain their interest and enjoyment. Without these, the programme is much less likely to achieve its goals. The following features are offered as *some* aspects of a good extensive reading programme

- It must interest the student.
- It needs to be at a wide variety of levels, so that students can select, or be guided by the teacher to select, material pitched slightly above their current reading levels.
- It should be material which the students can relate to. This means that a good amount of Pacific-based stories/reading material should form part of the resources. In a small-scale survey I carried out in 1989, I found junior secondary school students

rated a local short story text as the best component of their whole English curriculum (Benson: 1989).

- Encouragement and feedback from the teacher who supervises and monitors the programme are important.

- In view of the previous point, worthwhile and meaningful exercises (dare I say "assignments"), such as brief oral re-telling of stories, need to be set.

- Students need to feel that they are making progress - this feeling will result from appropriate feedback, guidance and encouragement from their teachers.

- It is helpful if teachers set a good example of reading for students to follow. Teachers should also read to their classes at this, as at other levels.

A major obstacle to implementing a successful extensive reading programme in schools in Oceania is the cost of providing sufficient good reading material. A few suggested solutions to this problem are:

- Donors need to be persuaded that providing funds for the production and purchase of good books (and other reading material) is an important and effective use of aid money.

- Various ways of producing and distributing low cost but good quality books must be pursued. The Institute of Education at the University of the South Pacific is already a publisher of such resources. Its **Waka Story Book** series is at least partially filling the need for low-cost local reading materials in Oceania - it offers a range of material from pre-school to upper primary/junior secondary levels. Schools can also build up their own sets of materials in the form of reading cards, hand-made books written by students as well as teachers, extracts from newspapers/magazines and any other reading materials which they know will interest the students and which are at appropriate levels.

- The concept requires a role for teachers which differs from the widespread view in our region that good teaching is teacher - rather than learner-centred. There is a need to encourage teachers to see themselves as facilitators and providers of

resources, giving individual attention to learners who spend sustained periods of time reading. One aim of this article is indeed to convey this message to curriculum developers and teachers in Oceania. The message also needs promoting through all other possible means - teachers' slots in schools broadcast programmes (although these programmes are only in an early stage of development in some countries of our region) and at in-service courses are two obvious ways of encouraging more widespread use of extensive reading in English curricula.

Cross-age tutoring, in which proficient readers from higher classes give help and encouragement (and read to them) to children in classes below them, is another strategy which has potential to boost achievement in schools.

· The public, especially parents, also need to be made more aware of how reading can help their children to succeed at school. This awareness can be promoted through the various media, as well as by educators in their contact with the public.

Conclusion

The "reading method" is not at all new in second language learning and teaching pedagogy. Unfortunately, however, it has been almost completely excluded from English as a second language curricula in our region for the past 25 years, during which a rigid version of the behaviourist-structuralist approach has been the basis of language curricula from early to upper primary levels. It is therefore very encouraging that a story book-based approach is now having a major impact on early primary ESL curricula in several countries of Oceania.

This brief article strongly recommends a region-wide campaign to make extensive reading an integral component of Year 7 and 8 English curricula. Readers of this article are requested to send in any information they have on programmes already in existence - sources of low cost materials will also be welcome, as will reactions to the opinions and ideas presented here.

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