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Why Youngkyu Can't Read

Richard R. Day
(University of Hawaii)

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Students studying English as a foreign language generally do not enjoy the process of learning to read. They may be avid readers in Korean, but all too often they do not become readers of English. Can reluctant readers be reached? I believe they can. It is possible for students to learn to read EFL and to enjoy EFL reading. Not only that, they can enhance their ability to pass examinations and increase their English proficiency at the same time. This can be done by incorporating extensive reading into the EFL curriculum. In this paper, I discuss four approaches to the teaching of EFL reading: grammar-translation, comprehension questions, skills and strategies, and extensive reading. After brief descriptions of the first three, I introduce extensive reading through a discussion of ten principles. Extensive reading programs that incorporate the ten principles are generally successful: their students become better readers; their attitude toward learning English improves; their motivation to learn English increases; and other aspects of English competency also improve.

I. INTRODUCTION

Students studying English as a foreign language generally do not enjoy the process of learning to read. They may be avid readers in Korean, but all too often they do not become readers of English.

Youngkyu, of course, is not a specific individual. I use the name simply as a point of reference for my contention that, in general, students studying English in Korea generally do not enjoy the process of learning to read and, sadly, do not read English once they leave the classroom. Youngkyu may do very well on answering reading comprehension questions on examinations, but he does not read English books, magazines and other material for enjoyment and pleasure.

Part of the problem is the way in which English as a foreign language (EFL) reading is taught. The goal of my remarks today is to present an alternative approach to the teaching of EFL

reading that will help Youngkyu read English and enjoy it. I begin with an overview and critique of the three most widely used approaches to the teaching of EFL reading: grammar-translation, comprehension questions, and skills and strategies. I then turn my attention to a less-widely used approach, extensive reading. I describe its ten principles and discuss the benefits of an extensive reading approach. I conclude my remarks by describing what materials students might read in an extensive reading approach.

II. THREE APPROACHES TO TEACHING READING

1. Grammar-translation

In EFL teaching environments, oral fluency in English is generally of less importance than a reading knowledge of the language. In such situations, teaching English and teaching the reading of English are often synonymous. As a means of studying English, students are taught to read texts written in English by translating them into the native language and by learning the grammatical rules of English. Hence the term, grammar-translation.

A grammar-translation approach to the teaching of foreign language reading often has this procedure in the classroom: The teacher reads aloud a short passage in the foreign language while the students follow along in their textbooks. The teacher then reads the passage sentence by sentence, and the students read each sentence aloud after the teacher. Next, the students orally translate the passage, word-by-word and sentence-by-sentence. Meaning is taken at the word and sentence levels, with little attention, if any, paid to the meaning of the text as a whole. Meaning is also constructed via the native language, not directly from the foreign language.

Grammar-translation work well where the teacher is one who knows the foreign language but has not been trained to teach it. Hino in an article describing 'yakudoku,' the Japanese variant of this approach, claims that it "requires little professional training, and also little preparation is needed for each class. Anyone who has studied English through yakudoku is able to teach it in the same way without much effort."

The grammar-translation approach to the teaching of EFL reading is used in many parts of the world, not just Korea. In addition to a goal of learning the target language, this approach aims at character building. Perhaps its primary purpose is to prepare students for national or other examinations that include translation. These examinations may be seen as rites of passage and as measures of general scholastic aptitude as much as measures of foreign language ability.

The major problem with the grammar-translation approach to the teaching of EFL reading is

that students think it is reading, when in point of fact it is in reality translation. While some learners enjoy translating from English to Korean, most find it difficult. So it is no wonder that EFL students in Korea do not generally become readers when they leave school.

2. Comprehension Questions and Language Work

Another common approach to teaching EFL reading centers on a textbook containing short passages that demonstrate the use of English words or points of grammar. These texts, short enough to encourage students to read them word-by-word, are followed by comprehension questions and grammatical exercises.

A comprehension question approach has this form in class: The teacher introduces the text to be read, and usually pre-teaches any new vocabulary. The text is then assigned for reading as homework, together with the comprehension questions from the textbook. In the next class, students read the text out loud, with the teacher correcting pronunciation mistakes. Next, students are called on to answer the comprehension questions. Various grammar and vocabulary exercises from the textbook are worked through. The purpose of using language exercises and texts that exemplify points of language is, like grammar-translation, the teaching of English. However, the purpose of the comprehension questions is ambiguous. Williams and Moran (1989) ask if they are "meant to check comprehension, facilitate comprehension or simply ensure that the learner reads the text" (p. 225). My guess is that it is all three.

A comprehension question-based approach to teaching EFL reading, like grammar-translation, prepares students for examinations. Short reading passages followed by questions are characteristic of many local language examinations, as well as international ones such as the Test Of English as a Foreign Language. Also in common with grammar-translation, with this approach a knowledge of the foreign language is sufficient background for teaching it. Little, if any, knowledge about the nature of reading or the teaching of EFL reading is required.

Although grammar-translation and comprehension questions are common approaches to EFL reading, they attract relatively little attention from second language reading experts. This is most likely because both approaches confuse the teaching of reading with the teaching of the foreign language, and because they are based upon tradition rather than theories of reading or the teaching of reading.

3. Skills and Strategies

In the 1980s, the comprehension-question approach lost popularity to a skills and strategy approach. This third approach to teaching EFL reading concentrates on teaching to learners the

skills and strategies used by fluent readers to understand a text. In a typical classroom, the teacher prepares students to read a one or two-page passage from a textbook by providing or activating any background knowledge necessary for comprehension. This may include pre-teaching certain vocabulary items that appear in the reading passage. Students then read the passage silently at their own speed while keeping in mind two or three 'while-reading' questions, the answers to which they will find in the passage. After reading, the students share their answers to these questions, perhaps in pairs or small groups. Students then complete various tasks or exercises that require them to demonstrate a global comprehension of the passage and their grasp of particular reading skills or strategies (e.g., finding the main idea; making inferences; guessing the meaning of an unknown word by using context clues).

The skills approach first appeared in English as a second language (ESL) reading teaching in the 1960s. Because there was an urgent need in the United States to improve the reading ability and study skills of international students who had some degree of English reading ability, textbook writers borrowed the kind of academic reading training given to native-speaking high school and university students (Silberstein, 1987, p. 29). This approach was subsequently adopted to the teaching of second language reading at all ability levels.

Some form or variety of the skills and strategies approach remains one of the major ways of teaching EFL and ESL reading for a number of reasons. First, it gives teachers something to actually teach. In the translation or comprehension-question approaches, teachers can really only help students with the language of a particular passage in order to facilitate the reading or translating of it. The assumption of skills and strategies is that, through sharpening students' reading skills and teaching strategic reading, teachers can directly affect how their students read. A second reason for the widespread acceptance of this approach is that it is consistent with generally accepted theories of reading as an interactive process: by supplying knowledge and teaching behaviors associated with fluent reading, teachers can help second language readers interact with a text as fluent readers do. However, I do mean to imply that a skills and strategies approach is based upon accepted models of the reading process any more than the grammar-translation and comprehension questions approaches are. The major finding of a meta-analysis of materials used to teach first language reading by Stahl, Simpson, and Brozo (1988), is that the teaching of college reading subskills is "overly dependent upon a curriculum of tradition rather than one driven by current applied research and/or theory" (p. 31). Paran (1996) comes to a similar conclusion when he claims that second language reading instruction has failed to keep pace with, and has become detached from, mainstream models of the reading process.

4. A Summary of the Three Approaches

The term *intensive reading* is often applied to the skills and strategy approach and the comprehension question approach to the teaching of second language reading. Intensive reading generally has as its goal accurate reading; the purpose for reading is to answer questions; its focus is on the meaning and pronunciation of words. In addition, students do not read much, and the little they do read is done slowly and carefully. Students often refer to their dictionaries.

In practice, these three approaches to the teaching of reading are not mutually exclusive and elements of one may be mixed in any particular course or classroom. A skills-based reading course may contain a great deal of comprehension questions. Similarly, a grammar-translation textbook may include comprehension questions and language exercises (e.g., Cortazzi & Jin, 1996, pp. 66-67). A reading textbook may combine strategy instruction with comprehension and language exercises.

III. A FOURTH APPROACH: EXTENSIVE READING

The fourth approach to teaching EFL reading, extensive reading, contrasts sharply with the other three approaches. An extensive reading approach aims to get students reading in the English language and liking it. It is an approach that sees reading not merely as translation or as a skill, but as an activity that someone chooses to do or not to do for a variety of personal, social or academic reasons. Its primary goal is to help students become readers—individuals who will continue reading English and enjoying it after they leave the classroom.

Extensive reading can be blended into any EFL curriculum, regardless of that curriculum's methodology or approach. For example, programs that utilize a skills approach can add extensive reading without modifying existing goals and objectives. Extensive reading complements a curriculum because, while helping the program achieve its objectives of teaching students to read and pass examinations, it broadens those objectives and improves students' attitude toward achieving them. Please note that I will deliver a concurrent presentation on how to put extensive reading into the foreign language curriculum. If you are interested in this topic, feel free to attend.

IV. TEN PRINCIPLES OF EXTENSIVE READING

A good way to understand extensive reading is by looking at its ten principles.

1. The Reading Material Is Easy.

Learners read materials that contain few or no unfamiliar items of vocabulary and grammar. (A useful rule of thumb is no more than two unknown vocabulary items per page.) Learners at advanced levels of foreign language proficiency will be able to choose from reading materials written for native speakers of that language. Most learners, however, are at lower levels of proficiency. In many languages, books and magazines have been especially written for language learners at different ability levels from beginner to advanced. If this *language learner literature* is not available, carefully chosen children's literature and (for high-intermediate learners) young adult literature may be suitable. The reading material in an extensive reading library may be subdivided into difficulty levels so that learners of various ability levels can find material that they can easily understand.

2. A Variety of Reading Material on a Wide Range of Topics is Available.

This variety ensures that learners can find things they want to read, whatever their interests. Different kinds of reading material also encourage a flexible approach to reading. Learners are led to read for different reasons (e.g., entertainment, information, passing the time) and, consequently, in different ways (e.g., skimming, scanning, more careful reading).

3. Learners Choose What They Want to Read.

Self-selection of reading material is the key to extensive reading. Learners are also free, indeed encouraged, to stop reading anything that isn't interesting or which they find too difficult.

4. Learners Read as Much as Possible.

For the language learning benefits of extensive reading to take effect, a book a week is an appropriate goal. Books written for beginning language learners are very short, so this is normally a realistic target for learners of any proficiency level.

In compulsory education programs, teachers often set a minimum or target number of pages to be read per week or term. In voluntary education, attractive and appropriate reading material together with teacher encouragement and peer example are usually enough to lead to reading in sufficient quantity.

5. Reading is Individual and Silent.

Learners read at their own pace. In some schools, there are designated silent reading periods when students read their self-selected books in the classroom. Most extensive reading, however, is homework. It is done out of the classroom in the student's own time, when and where the student chooses.

6. The Purpose of Reading Is Usually Related to Pleasure, Information and General Understanding.

In contrast to intensive reading and the detailed understanding it requires, extensive reading encourages a variety of real-world reading purposes. Rather than 100% comprehension, sufficient understanding to achieve one's reading purpose is what is required.

7. Reading Speed is Usually Faster Rather than Slower.

Because learners read material that they can easily understand, it is an encouragement to fluent reading. Dictionary use is normally discouraged because it interrupts the reading process, making fluent reading impossible. Instead, learners are encouraged to ignore or guess at the few unknown language items they may encounter.

8. Reading is its Own Reward.

Because a learner's own experience is the goal, extensive reading is not followed by comprehension questions. At the same time, it is common for teachers to ask students to complete some kind of follow-up activity after reading for a variety of reasons: to discover what the student understood and experienced from the reading; to keep track of what students read; to monitor student attitude toward reading; to link reading with other aspects of the curriculum. What is important is that any follow-up activity respects the integrity of the reading experience; the most successful activities are those that resemble what people normally do after reading.

9. The Teacher Orients and Guides the Students.

Students are normally not used to freedom and choice in school. When introducing extensive reading into the curriculum, the teacher must begin by explaining that extensive

reading leads to language learning, and that choosing what to read is an essential part of extensive reading. A simple way for teachers to introduce extensive reading is to call it language practice: a way for students to practice the language that they have worked so hard to learn in the classroom.

Orientation continues with the methodology of extensive reading. Learners may need assistance in selecting appropriate reading material of interest to them. They may also need assurance that a general, less than 100%, understanding of what they read is appropriate for most reading purposes. It can be emphasized that there will be no test after reading. Instead, the teacher will be interested in the student's own personal experience of what was read—for example, was it enjoyable or interesting, and why? Orientation is not only an initial, but an ongoing part of an extensive reading approach. The teacher will want to keep track of what and how much students read and their reactions to what was read in order to guide them in getting the most out of an extensive reading experience.

10. The Teacher is a Role Model of a Reader.

Example is the most powerful instructor. If the teacher reads some of the same materials that the students are reading and talks to them about it, this both gives the students a model of what it is to be a reader and makes it possible for the teacher to recommend reading material to individual students. In this way, teacher and students can become an informal reading community, experiencing together the value and pleasure that may be derived from the written word.

V. COMPARISON OF INTENSIVE AND EXTENSIVE READING

With this overview of extensive reading completed, it is helpful to look again at intensive reading. Figure One contrasts intensive and extensive reading. As can be seen in Table One, there are striking differences between intensive and extensive reading. This highlights the importance of orienting and guiding students who are engaging in extensive reading. Students accustomed to wading through difficult English texts might drown when suddenly plunged into a sea of simple and stimulating material. Serious-minded students, for example, in thrall of the macho maxim of reading instruction, *No reading pain, no reading gain*, might not understand how reading easy and interesting material can help them become better readers.

TABLE 1
Chart Contrasting Intensive and Extensive Reading (adapted from Day & Bamford, 1998, p. 3)

Type of Reading	Intensive	Extensive
Class goals	Read accurately Learn skills and strategies	Read fluently Use skills and strategies
Students' reading purpose	Translate Answer questions 100% understanding	Get information Enjoy General understanding
Focus	Words and pronunciation Sentences	Whole text
Material	Often difficult Teacher chooses	Easy Student chooses
Amount of reading	Not much	A lot
Speed	Slower	Faster
Method	Students must finish the text; they often use their dictionaries.	Students are free to stop reading a text; they are encouraged not to use their dictionaries.

VI. THE BENEFITS OF AN EXTENSIVE READING APPROACH

An extensive reading approach can play an important role in helping students to learn to read fluently. To begin with, it helps move students away from processing a text word-by-word, encouraging them instead to read for the general meaning the text, ignoring (rather than worrying about) any details they do not fully understand. Further, when students encounter the same patterns of letters, words and combinations of words over and over, they begin to process them more quickly and accurately and, as a result, increase the size of their sight vocabularies (words that are recognized automatically). This helps them to increase their reading speed and confidence. This, in turn, allows them to give more attention to constructing the overall meaning of what they read.

There are numerous studies in the literature that report how extensive reading helped students become readers in the target language. For example, Mason and Krashen (1997), in a study of university students in Japan who were failing their EFL classes, found that extensive reading turned the students from poor readers into eager and confident readers. The students began with cloze test results behind those of a comparison class. But after they each read about 30 English language learner literature books during the semester, their cloze test results almost matched those of the comparison class that had had traditional reading instruction.

In addition, research has established that through extensive reading, through independent, self-selected foreign language reading, students develop positive attitudes toward and increased

motivation to study the language. This is important. As teachers, we want our students to read English long after they have left our classrooms. Unless we help them to enjoy the experience of learning to read in our classrooms, most likely they will not read when they have finished their education. Extensive reading provides the opportunity for students to learn to read and to enjoy the experience.

Further, there is a robust body of research that has established that students who read extensively make significant gains in other aspects of foreign language competence such as oral fluency, writing and vocabulary (See Nation, 1997, and Day & Bamford, 1998 (pp. 32-39) for summaries). That is, extensive reading can be a factor in helping students in listening, speaking, writing, and vocabulary. This means that extensive reading is for anyone who teaches a language, regardless of the language or country in which it is taught. Davis (1995) puts it in these terms: "Any ESL, EFL, or L1 classroom will be poorer for the lack of an extensive reading programme of some kind, and will be unable to promote its pupils' language development in all aspects as effectively as if such a programme were present" (p. 335).

Day and Bamford (in press) have edited a collection of 100 activities that teachers can use in their classrooms regardless of the focus—grammar, listening, speaking, writing, or reading—, in whatever teaching situation teachers are in—an intensive program or a class that meets once a week—, and regardless of the age of the students and their level of foreign-language proficiency. Extensive reading can be a resource for communication, both oral and written, in the language classroom, providing a whole new range of topics and ideas beyond the confines of the lives and experiences of teachers and students alike. Reading takes us to the most incredible places, places that can be used to stimulate and excite students, and help them use the new language in ways not generally found in traditional classrooms. Extensive reading can also be used to support content area courses, especially culturally or sociologically oriented.

VII. READING MATERIAL

For teachers who want students who both can and do read in English, their first thing they must do is find materials that their students will find easy and interesting to read. When searching for reading materials, regardless of age or proficiency in the target language, the students' interests must be the most important consideration. Davis (1995) puts it this way: "The watchwords are quantity and variety, rather than quality, so that books are selected for their attractiveness and relevance to the pupils' lives, rather than for literary merit" (p. 329).

1. Materials for Beginning and Intermediate Students

For beginning and intermediate students the most suitable reading materials are books, magazines and newspapers especially written for EFL learners. My colleague Julian Bamford and I call this *language learner literature*. Elsewhere, we write,

> We see the term *language learner literature* as analogous to the terms *young adult literature* and *children's literature*--established genres in their own right. It includes fiction and non-fiction, original writing and texts adapted for language learners. But whatever form it takes, language learner literature presupposes the integrity that marks all genuine writing: that it be not a lesser version of something else but a fully-realized, complete-in-itself act of communication between author and audience. (Day & Bamford, 1998, p. 64).

Language learner literature is published in growing quantity, variety and sophistication by both local and global publishers. There are literally hundreds of attractive fiction and non-fiction books appropriate to students of various ages and interests, including folk tales and science fiction, thrillers adapted from best-selling writers like Stephen King, Scott Turow, and Michael Crichton, classics such as Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, travel guides and novels based on popular movies or TV shows such as *Fly Away Home* and *NYPD Blues*. Titles of books are listed in the catalogs of such publishers as Cambridge University Press, Oxford University Press, Longman, and Heinemann.

In addition to language learner literature, books and magazines produced for native-speaking children and teenagers can be a useful source of reading material. With big print and colorful illustrations, children's books are relatively easy for EFL learners to read. They are short and some can be read in a few minutes. Children's magazines might also be appropriate. For information, you could look at *Magazines for Kids and Teens* (Stoll, 1997); it lists more than 200 magazines by target age and subject. Popular teen literature, such as novels by Judy Blume (e.g., *Deenie*; *It's Not the End of the World*) and Paula Danziger (e.g., *The Cat Ate My Gymsuit*), are often much enjoyed by high-intermediate learners of all ages. Finally, not be to overlooked are the pleasures of comic books, from Mickey Mouse, beloved by all ages.

2. Materials for High-Intermediate and Advanced Students

In addition to the high levels of language learner literature, high-intermediate and advanced students will probably enjoy reading carefully chosen English-language books, newspapers, and

magazines. Teachers might consider subscribing to a local English-language newspaper, or one published internationally such as *The International Herald Tribune* or *USA Today*. In addition, certain magazines might be appropriate. For example, general interest magazines such as *People* with its celebrity interviews and gossip, or specialized magazines (e.g., sports, fashion) might be of interest to some students. When reading materials are in the students' fields of interest, comprehension is made easier because of their knowledge of the subject matter.

VIII. CONCLUSION

The goal of my remarks today has been to present an alternative approach to the teaching of EFL reading that will help Youngkyu learn to read English and enjoy it. In the brief time that we have together today, I hope that I have sparked your curiosity about extensive reading, and that you pursue the possibility of incorporating it into your teaching.

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Richard Day
Dept. of Second Language Studies
University of Hawaii
1890 Eastwest Rd.
Honolulu, Hawaii 96822. USA
Tel: +1 808 956 2788
email: rday@hawaii

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