INTEGRATING EXTENSIVE READING AND READING CIRCLES IN ESL

Nagwa A. Soliman
nagwa.soliman@bue.edu.eg
The British University in Egypt

ABSTRACT
Reading is one of the most important academic skills that enables students to learn new information, and find about different perspectives and interpretations. Fluency in reading is crucial to the students' academic performance in their content subjects, as they need to read the lengthy prose in text books related to their majors. Students' inability to read may often lead to their failure in their academic areas. Moreover, ESL learners need to be able to communicate with others through an authentic atmosphere that motivates them to use the language freely with no constraints. Extensive reading (ER) and reading circles (RC) are closely connected. While the former can be defined as reading great amounts of information on a wide range of topics for pleasure and general understanding (Day and Bamford 2002), the latter is to have the same readers sit in groups (circles) to discuss, analyse and answer questions related to the material that was read. This article proposes setting up a reading program that integrates extensive reading (ER) with reading circles (RC) to improve second language fluency.

I. INTRODUCTION

Reading is crucial to the functionality of our society – our institutions and practices are built upon the written word. Reading is also one of the most sophisticated mental functions and the one which contributes to the uniqueness of the human mind. With the advent of technology, students tend to spend more time on Facebook, on-line games than on reading their textbooks. Moreover, this significant and on-going increase in information technology is making us drift swiftly in isolation and passivity. This is clearly apparent everywhere at home, at work and in the classroom. With the family gathering at home, it is expected that talk will take place, but what really happens is another phase of silence and isolation, as each member of the family is surfing the internet on a different laptop. The same scenario is repeated in the classroom as some teachers prepare power point presentations and lesson plans that have students remain listening and watching passively in class. Reading followed by group discussions or Reading Circles (RE) breaks the silence that accompanies reading.

Reading and speaking are both essential skills that non-native speaking (NNS) learners or (EFL) students need to master especially in college. Reading in the ESL class is one of the most important academic skills that enables students to learn new information, and find out about different perspectives and interpretations. Reading is the means that enables them to synthesize, and evaluate thus practice the highest-order thinking skills. Reading is the most essential means of independent learning whether the aim is to improve language proficiency or learn more about subject matter One of the main aims of an ESL program is to assist students to enhance their reading and speaking abilities in order to comprehend academic texts in their majors. Fluency in reading and speaking are both crucial to the students' academic performance in their content subjects.

A lot of research has been conducted on the benefits of extensive reading. However, as of now, there has been scant reporting on using (ER) followed by (RE) in an ESL classroom. It is the aim of this article to show the need for creating reading circles within the ESL class to tailor to the needs of students which are crucial in making the ESL classes effective. Many students may not be used to reading academic texts that need comprehension, synthesis, and critical thinking (Grabe, 2004). The present article attempts to fill this gap as it puts forward suggestions that could be used in the EAP classroom. The aim of this article is to show that extensive reading and reading circles can have a place in an EAP program. This article first

presents a definition of extensive reading (ER) and reading circles (RC) , then a review of previous and current research on these areas, next special recommendations for EA classes with regards to using this technique (ER &RC) integrated with their EAP module will be demonstrated and finally a sample ER and RE task will be pointed out in an attempt to help EAP instructors to use this method to increase Ss's language proficiency, so that they are able to cope with their field specialized modules.

A. What is Extensive Reading (ER)?

Extensive reading is reading in vast amounts for enjoyment and "in order to gain a general understanding of what is read. It is intended to develop good reading habits, to build up knowledge of vocabulary and structure, and to encourage a liking for reading" (Schmidt 2000). It involves the motto "reading gain without pain"(Day & Bamford,1998,pp. 121). It is different from intensive reading where students have shorter quantities of material to read and then are required to answer a set of exercises to check their understanding of the text. Krashen supported ER showing that theoretically it has two main benefits namely *input hypothesis* (Krashen, 1985, pp. 2–3) and *pleasure hypothesis* (Krashen, 2004). The former is when learners comprehend messages and acquire language in a non-stressful environment. According to Krashen this 'comprehensible' input "is the essential environmental ingredient – richly specified internal language acquisition device" (1989) which makes a significant contribution to language acquisition. The latter which is Krashen's (2004) pleasure hypothesis indicated that the pedagogical tasks which help in language acquisition are those that the learners enjoy. However, Krashen believed that enjoyment alone "does not guarantee language acquisition" (p. 28), but it does lead to the creation of positive attitudes with regards to reading (Mason and Krashen, 1997). In other words, the learner in the ER programme is flooded with comprehensible input with the purpose of getting the reader to enjoy reading and simultaneously improve his/her overall language proficiency.

Day and Bamford (2002) have suggested a list of ten principles for implementing a successful ER program:

1. The reading material is easy.

2. A variety of reading material on a wide range of topics must be available.

3. Learners choose what they want to read.

4. Learners read as much as possible.

5. The purpose of reading is usually related to pleasure, information and general understanding.

6. Reading is its own reward.

7. Reading speed is usually faster rather than slower.

8. Reading is individual and silent.

9. Teachers orient and guide their students.

10. The teacher is a role model of a reader.

Using all ten principles in an extensive reading program will create the right conditions for reading, which will lead to students enhancing their language skills and proficiency. However, when they are used in EAP classes, some modifications need be made as will be suggested later in this article.

B. What are Reading Circles (RC)?

Reading circles are groups of students that meet in order to discuss what they have read. Each student is assigned a role and students should be prepared to share their views and answer questions prepared by one of the members of the group. It is a type of "literary circle activity" (Rodrigo, p.109) where students interact while discussing and analyzing the material that was read. So RC not only improves students' language fluency, it also enhances their critical thinking skills which all lead to their socializing into their academic fields.

According to Vygotsky (1978) learning takes place on two planes: 'intermental and 'intramentel'. The former is when the reader interprets and internalizes the reading material in his mind and this occurs during silent reading. The latter is when what is read becomes 'externalized' which is when readers discuss and speak about what they have read. Those two procedures occur in the ER and RC programme, as students first read and then sit together to discuss the texts.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Over the past decade or so, there have been numerous research studies on the benefits of extensive learning. Not only does it enhance the students' reading habits and proficiency (Camiciottoli, 2001; Nash & Year 1992; Renandya, et al., 1999; Tse, 1996), but it also improves their listening proficiency (Elley & Mangubhai, 1983), reading speed (Bell, 2001; Walker, 1997), and writing ability (Mason & Krashen, 1997; Tsang, 1996). In addition, it leads to vocabulary building (Horst, 2005; Leung, 2002; Mu & Carrington, 2007; Rodrigo, Krashen, & Gribbons, 2004; Taguchi et al., 2004; Walker, 1997). Extensive reading not only makes ELL enjoy reading, but it also boosts their confidence and motivates a positive attitude towards reading (Asraf & Ahmed, 2003; Cho & Krashen, 1994; HItosugi & Day, 2004; Leung 2002). Furthermore, when students read different kinds of texts which include different topics this leads to the development of their topical knowledge (Renandya & Jacobs, 2002). In other words, learners through extensive reading can improve their knowledge of the world, general vocabulary and syntactic knowledge (Iwahori, 2008). Etsuo Tauguchi (2004) conducted a study in which he proved that assisted repeated reading and extensive reading improves fluency. Beniko as Mason and Stephen Krashen (1997) confirmed the value of extensive reading in English as a foreign language when they conducted three experiments on EFL students in Japan. In the first experiment 'reluctant' students by the end of the program caught up on a cloze test with the traditionally taught students and in the second experiment, extensive readers outperformed the latter. In the third experiment, extensive readers who wrote summaries after reading showed better gains on a cloze test than a comparison class who was traditionally taught and spent a great deal of time on close exercises only and did not read extensively. Moreover, Dale Brown (2008) calls for including material involving extensive reading in textbooks.

Nevertheless, there are a number of research papers that have showed some concerns with regards to extensive reading. Davis (1995) stated that the benefits and results of extensive reading do not appear in a short period of time. Krashen (1993) also agreed with this point as he mentioned that, "Short-term projects are not as consistently successful. However, this drawback

could be overcome by conducting long term programs that would last for at least one academic year as suggested by krashen, Day and Bamford. Another concern is the practicalities of implementation with the teachers 'complaints of lack of time, costs and issues regarding monitoring students' reading. Again, however, this could be easily overcome through organizing and prioritizing ample time, required resources and appropriate technology via an ER & RC program that will be proposed in this article in the context of ESL.

While previous studies have illustrated the positive effects of extensive reading, the present study expands on this issue as it draws attention to an important but not sufficiently heeded strategy (to my knowledge) which is to use reading circles (RC) together with extensive reading in ESL classes to help ELL (English language learners) develop their oral fluency and critical thinking abilities which are extremely necessary for their success in their majors. In other words, the article does not adhere to krashen's (1993) bold claim that extensive reading alone will lead to improvement in language fluency, as we suggest that it should be coupled with Reading Circles that will allow learners to improve all their language skills and thus be prepared for their leap to their academic mainstream.

With regards to previous research on the development of oral academic discourse, there have been early studies on its importance and several activities were designed for students such as: class participation, group-work, debates, and oral presentations (Ferris & Tagg, 1996). Other research focused on enhancing the oral academic discourse of university students through multiple-case studies (e.g., Kobayashi, 20003; Morita, 200; Robinson, Strong, Whittle, & Nobe, 2001; Weissberg, 1993). While previous research studies show the importance of developing oral academic discourse and ways to enhance it, this cannot take the place of authentic interactive oral communication "since the interlocutor's response in real life will be unpredictable and difficult to process by the non-native speaker"(Clennell, 1999) and the simulated exercises cannot provide the same 'socio-pragmatic' information that is found in authentic communication (Thomas, 1983). There has also been language acquisition research studies that demonstrate the benefits of L2 students' interaction which include positive language practice (Doughty and Pica, 1986; among others), creation and expression of students' personal views in academic settings (Morita, 2004), and student-to-student ' scaffolding' during challenging tasks (Storch, 2001). In other words, students' interaction with the each other with regards to the texts that they read improves their reading comprehension ability, critical thinking skills, and overall fluency. The present study adds to the existing body of research as it provides a sample extensive reading task followed by a reading circle example that an EAP lecturer may use to launch the ER & RC program in an EAP class. Moreover, it points out certain criteria that teachers should take into consideration when choosing material for this ER &RE Program.

III. DESIGNING AN ER & RC PROGRAM FOR AN EAP CLASS

1. Reading Materials

a. *Text Selection:*

Day & Bamford suggested in principle 3 of their list that students should select their own material. Moreover, Victoria Rodrigo et.al maintain that readers are motivated when they are given the chance to select the material according to their interest. However, this when implemented might take a lot of time as students sometimes do not

decide easily especially when they are working in groups. I agree with Nike Arnold (2009) in having the instructors preselect the reading material before the start of the program. This is because some of the students may be 'overwhelmed' when requested to make a choice as they may not be used to do so (Katz and Assor 2007).   Instructors could choose topics that belong to different fields that would fit different interests. Teachers could pick double as much books and have students pick from this list and the latter could vote and choose 24 books. Moreover, the selected material should be rotated between the groups in the ESL class. This would give the teacher and students a chance to make a whole class discussion on the material that was read all through the program.

b. *Text type:*

  John Macalister (2006) used graded readers for his extensive reading research participants because according to a vocabulary test (Nation 1990) that the students administered at the start of the extensive reading program, they did not master the 2000-word level that was needed to read academic texts. Takako Nishino (2007) in his study also, used graded readers with the participants according to Nation and Wang's (1999) suggestions. The latter believed that students acquire new vocabulary if they read a minimum of five books at each level, one book per week and new vocabulary is studied for the first one or two books. I agree with John Macalister in the need to determine the students' proficiency level first, before deciding on whether or not to use graded readers, as they tend to simplify vocabulary and sentence structure and they are not authentic. According to Day & Bamford (1998), the language level of the material selected for the ER programme should be identified. There is also a need to keep in mind ,when choosing the text, the cultural context in which it takes place and its connection to the ELL as the importance of this issue has been illustrated in learning strategy research (Hsiao and Oxford, 2002; Zhang, 2003).

c. *Text Level:*

 Day and Bamford (1998) believed that the text should be somewhat below the students' proficiency level (i minus 1 level) to allow fast and easy reading. Unlike Krashen's 'comprehensible input' (i plus 1) where he advocates that the texts should be above their current proficiency level (Krashen, 1981). I agree with Nation and Hsueh-Chau (2001) that students should know at least 98% of the words in the text to be able to guess from context the meanings of new vocabulary. Students should be encouraged not to interrupt their reading flow and to try to figure out the meaning from context, as otherwise reading becomes a tedious chore if they have to look up every word they do not understand in a dictionary.

2. Reading Circles (RC):

 In order to create RC, students should be divided into groups of four. Each student should be assigned roles. These roles are as follows:

- Leader: this role involves leading the overall discussion, making sure everyone in the group is engaged and keeping the conversation flowing.
- Question Maker: this role would be to   prepare five discussion questions.
- Vocabulary Master: this student compiles a list of words that may be new or not used by the students.
- Illustrator: this is a somewhat difficult role because the student has to choose a short paragraph or two and read them out aloud and comment on them. The choice

could be based on various reasons such as that they contain symbolism, foreshadowing, personal connection, culture relevance or any other reason which make them stand out.

It is clear that the objective of these assigned roles is that each student should bring in something for the group discussion other than regurgitating the exact context. Students should learn to analyze, infer and practice critical thinking through these discussions. The roles should be rotated so that each student gets a chance to try out different tasks and feel comfortable with working in groups.

IV. SAMPLE ER & RC PROGRAMME FOR AN ESL CLASS

- .**Program Preparations**:

Teachers should have selected the whole material of the program which should be both hard copy and on-line. Since the program should last for a whole academic year, the number of books should be around 24 (six groups with four students in each group). The number of books is decided according to the number of groups that are formed in the class. The teacher should prepare 48 titles and post them on-line and the class should be given a chance to vote and choose 24 books. This is to follow Day and Bamford's (2002) principle that students should choose the books they want to read. The teacher's having the list of titles ready for students to pick from will save a lot of time and thus the class will be able to start the ER & RC program once the students vote and choose their books. Each group should have access to four books. It is suggested that two books are on-line and two hard copies. This is due to the fact that the former could be easily accessed via the Internet and as for the hard copy books, they could be with two participants in each group and then they can swap their books. The material should be read in one week. Students should decide on their roles in the reading circles. Each group should present this information (the chosen book with the name of the reader and the participants' role in the Reading Circle). Teachers are recommended to prepare tables for students to register this information. It is also advisable to have teachers accompany students to the lab before the start of the program to test and record their reading speed and reading comprehension. The results should be registered and teachers should have tables to record the pre and post test. Each student could have a separate sheet in which he records all the books (24 books) that he/has read, the dates when he started and finished reading and the results of the test. This test should be administered before and at the end of the program. All the program steps and instructions should be prepared before the start of the program and students should receive a hard or soft copy of the whole program and the tasks that they have to do during and at the end of the week. When another student in their group reads this book, he/she is supposed to comment on what his friend wrote. They should also write about their own interpretation and evaluation.

- **The ER & RC Program:**

A. *First Session***:** Teachers should have the chosen list of books and the hard copy books and students should form six groups each group should include four members. It is recommended that they each pick a letter A, B, C,D, E, F, and choose their role in the group. Then each group is divided into pairs and each pair either chooses on-line or hard copy stories. Teachers should hand out the instructions and information that will help students know what is expected of them in this ER & RC. Teachers should ask students to start a blog for this ER& RC program where they will record their reflections on the book they read at the end of each week. They could pick certain parts of the book where they might find personal connections and write about them in their blog. This procedure should not take more than 30 to 45 minutes of class time. Each student should read one book per week, as was recommended by Nation and Wang (1999) to achieve the benefits of extensive reading and was also suggested by Day and Bamford (2002) to develop a reading habit.

B. *Second Session***:**
    Students swap books and swap RC roles so that they could focus on something different while reading. They are also going to continue writing their weekly blog about the book they read. The teacher should ask the students after reading their second book to log on their colleague's blog and read the latter's reflections and comment on them. The teacher could on a weekly basis take part in commenting on the students' blogs so they feel that they are being monitored which could motivate them to carry on with the program. This would only take 30 to 45 minutes of the ESL class and could be conducted at the end of the class.

C. *Third Session and the start of the Pair RC***:**
    Students talk in pairs about their books and pre- prepare before the class according to their role and their talk and discussion could last for 30 to 45 minutes. Then the pairs swap books and they read their third story and write about it in their blog.

D. *Fourth Session and the start of the Group RC:*
    Students repeat what they did in the second session as they swap the two books and discuss and talk about them according the their roles which should be different each week. By the end of week four each group should have read four stories and the whole group could sit together for 30 to 45 minutes and talk. It is also suggested that each group has a Forum where they could discuss on-line the four books and compare between their views and analysis. The teacher could moderate the discussion to boost the students 'motivation.

    The above procedure is repeated till the end of the 24 weeks. In order to avoid confusion, it is suggested that the groups swap books according to the following sequence: A to B –C to D- E to F (8 weeks), A to E- C to F- D to B (8 weeks), A to C – E to B – D to F(8 weeks). The teacher could have prizes prepared for the group or student who manages to read the 24 books on time and to comment in his/her blog and take part in the Group Forum. A follow-up activity would be to have each student choose one of the books that he/she enjoyed most and to write a short book review. All these tasks would not be graded because students will not be tested except to check whether or not their reading speed and comprehension improved as a result of taking part in this program. The test will be conducted for research purposes and teachers should clarify this to students together with the fact that the

intended learning objective of the program is to enhance their language skills. At the end of week 24 there could be a whole class discussion where the teacher could prepare discussion questions and have the students prepare other questions and the whole class could talk and interact in different groups. Prizes could be handed out to the winning groups. The book reviews when written could be compiled in a folder for future ER & RC programs to refer to when choosing their books. A website could be created for the program with these folders, pictures the names of the winners to encourage other students to take part in this program.

CONCLUSION

With the increasing developments in the ESL curriculum, it is crucial to consider carefully the importance of ER and RE in ESL. Certainly, while the above programme represents only a sample of a potential ER & RC scheme, educators are advised to reflect upon the best way to integrate this programme to tailor for the needs and classroom context and to simultaneously address differentiation. Extensive Reading and Reading Circles when used in an organized motivating fashion and integrated with the ESL class can provide learners with a "rich mental yeast which ... [they] can use to interact with others, while still retaining ... [their] individual take on the texts and the world (Maley 2009).

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