



Reading is its own reward

A reply to Ben Shearon: 'Where is the extensive in extensive reading?'

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Benefits of silent reading

Ben Shearon exhorts teachers not to ignore the 'extensive' in extensive reading, and not to be distracted from the essential task of reading, by their perceived obligation to provide supplementary activities. This emphasis on reading rather than supplementary activities certainly has support: "Reading is its own reward" urge Day and Bamford (1998, p. 8). Referring to a summer reading program for children in the USA, Shin and Krashen state: "We recognize the importance of students being able to discuss their reading and share their enthusiasm with others, but there must be some time each day when they can read in absolute silence and be undisturbed by others" (2008, p. 93). Ben Shearon acknowledges that supplementary activities do have a place, but nevertheless should not constitute the core of the extensive reading program.

Background to my ER program

After reading Ben Shearon's insights I felt obliged to re-examine the rationale of the supplementary activities I set for my extensive reading program. I may have inadvertently had them spend more time on their written responses than the actual reading. I have my students read a book a week and write a short response. The topics of the response vary each week, and tend to require personal responses such as whether the students can identify with the characters and why. Sometimes I have them choose their favourite quotation from the book, and explain their choice. I can tell from the originality of the students' responses that many of them are actually reading, enjoying the stories, and thinking critically about them. Furthermore I have a particular interest in extensive listening, so I tell them to only borrow books with a CD, to first read and listen, and then to listen without reading to try and understand the story without visual support.

Disadvantages of silent reading

Indiscriminate reading cannot necessarily be considered beneficial. Wallas (1926, cited in Krashen, 1992, p.15) warns against "industrious passive reading" because of the possible interference with the "incubation of new ideas". Green criticizes the situation in Hong Kong, in which extensive reading is conducted in a silent teacher-fronted room. Students are required to produce a book report, the purpose of which is to enforce the reading scheme rather than

solicit students' personal responses to the story. Green cautions:

Schemes which emphasize individual and largely unguided activity fail to provide a clear and direct purpose for the reading and do not exploit the opportunities extensive reading presents for the dynamic process of presenting and debating what has been read. Extensive reading left to be done silently by individuals goes against the tenets of interactionist theory. (2005, p. 307)

What kind of supplementary activities will students benefit from?

Perhaps our duties to our students are, after having encouraged them to read extensively, to reflect on what they have read and then to develop their skills of critical thinking by forming a response. This needs to be distinguished from comprehension exercises. Closed-questions rob students of the enjoyment of the story, and are not authentic tasks. Open-ended questions, which require students to produce an original and creative answer, are likely to be satisfying to the student because responding to something one has read is an authentic activity. The relative merits of supplementary activities could be identified according to where they rank in Bloom's taxonomy of thinking skills (1956, cited in Davidson and Becker, 2006). Comprehension questions demand the exercise of

lower-order thinking skills, and this is an inefficient use of our students' time. Rather, questions could be devised which require students to produce an original response to the story, which conform to the 'Synthesis' level of the higher level thinking skills of Bloom's taxonomy. These higher-level thinking skills encompass the lower ones because comprehension is assumed to have happened before a response can be made. Tokuhama-Espinosa (2010) outlines the characteristics of critical thinking, one of which is intellectual generosity: "sharing ideas breeds greater insights than does hoarding" (p. 127). Critically exploring the literature can only extend the gains students have made from the reading.

Responding to a text may take the form of discussion or a written response. The role of expression in order to clarify thought has been long recognized. French essayist Joseph Joubert (1754-1824) notes "We only know just what we meant to say after we have said it" (Crystal, 2005, p.466). The act of responding to a text naturally fosters critical thinking skills. Krashen highlights how the act of writing helps refine thinking:

We write for ourselves, to clarify and stimulate our thinking. Writing, in other words, doesn't make you a better writer, but it can make you a better thinker. (1992, p. 16)

Writing concentrates the mind and leads writers to crystallize their thoughts. Krashen argues that writing "makes profound contributions to cognitive development" (1992, p. 11).

Extensive reading in the context of other skills

Arguably, extensive reading could be situated in the context of the other essential language skills. Firstly, extensive reading should be valued in its own right, and certainly not be sacrificed to supplementary activities, precisely as Ben Shearon explains. Secondly, extensive reading could lead into responses which demand the use of higher order thinking skills, such as open-ended questions about characterization and plot, which prod the student to connect prior knowledge to the story, and make personal connections with the story. As Green argues:

Extensive reading, if done in interactive mode, supports the negotiation of meaning

in texts, helps prevent the fossilization of interlanguage structures, and provides contexts in which learners can encounter and debate ideas, and analyse and practise language features found in the texts. (2005, p. 311)

Clearly, as Ben Shearon suggests, supplementary activities should not constitute the core of an extensive reading program. One of the aims of extensive reading is for it to be pleasurable, so students do not need to have their pleasure disrupted with inane comprehension questions. Teachers who must assess hundreds of students each week may have to make use of such questions, when the sheer volume of marking renders responding to individual essays impossible. For those who have the luxury of smaller classes though, after students have indeed read extensively, a judicious selection of activities which require creative responses to the literature may help them consolidate what they have read, and refine their critical thinking skills.

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