

Graded Readers for Improving Reading Fluency and Enjoyment

Kim Robert Kanel, Professor of English
English Division, Language Education Department
Assistant Director, Kinki University Central Library

Introduction

For the past six years the English Division of the Kinki University Language Education Department has been placing students in their first and second year classes according to their English proficiency levels. Beyond the obvious advantages that this affords teachers in curriculum development and syllabus preparation, it also allows teachers to select materials appropriate to the students' levels in terms of vocabulary and grammar. The main question that educators are left with is what specific types of textbooks and supplementary materials are available that can take advantage of this situation. This paper discusses an often overlooked yet very practical approach to reading instruction at any level of English proficiency.

Since the early 1980s English as a Second / Foreign Language (ESL / EFL) pedagogy has stressed the importance of 'comprehensible input' for language development (see Krashen, 1982). This means providing both listening and written materials which students can understand relatively easily, and perhaps more importantly, enjoy. One effective way of providing such reading materials is by having students read many short, simple adaptations of stories and novels. This approach, known variously as *graded reading*, *basal reading*, *simplified reading*, and more generally as *extensive reading*, offers students materials written at their particular level of grammatical and lexical difficulty, while still presenting them with stimulating readings and styles that they expect in their own language. The Kinki University Library has supported this approach to developing students' reading skills by acquiring hundreds of such reading materials from a number of publishers.

Problems with Authentic Reading Materials and Intensive Reading

Authentic English reading materials written for native speakers of English might be motivating for learners whose reading ability is close to a native speaker's, but if the reading is too difficult, learners may become frustrated, lose motivation, and in the end, give up. Such materials require lower proficiency students to read *intensively*, which is to say, read and define many unknown words in order to decipher the meaning. If students are only given intensive reading tasks, which cause them to focus only on difficult vocabulary, they will not get practice in reading for the overall meaning. When students rely too much on their dictionaries, or when their books are covered with notes and translations, then it is likely that they are reading *too* intensively. While *intensive reading* may have a place in the reading curriculum, particularly in expanding students' specialized vocabulary, this approach does not allow students to develop fluent reading skills, or actually enjoy what they are reading. Too often students are asked to read texts well above their reading level, which in the long run lessens their motivation to read.

Intensive Reading vs. Extensive Reading

Whereas *intensive reading* aims more to build students' language knowledge and extend vocabulary, *extensive reading's* goal is for students to read a larger (extensive) quantity of material in order to actually practice

reading, and increase fluency and motivation. Krashen (1982) argues that extensive reading can lead to language learning when certain conditions are met: enough exposure to the language, interesting material, and a relaxed learning environment. Reading material carefully selected for extensive reading programs addresses students' abilities, needs and interests, and motivates them to read books. Educators also point to the value of extensive reading in developing students' confidence and ability to deal with longer passages. Moreover, studies have shown significant improvement in students' written work (Hafiz & Tudor, 1989; Robb & Susser, 1989). These results suggest that reading programs using extensive reading can be an effective means of helping students develop their writing skills along with their reading skills.

Graded readers – a definition

As the goal of extensive reading is learning to read fluently, choosing reading materials at the proper level for learners is essential. *Graded readers* offer teachers an excellent resource for helping students accomplish this goal. They are short stories, popular novels, biographies, travel books, and other non-fiction works, which have been adapted to particular language proficiency levels according to specific guidelines. They allow students to read and understand more of what they read.

Graded readers are simplified by limiting vocabulary, and using simple phrasing or sentence structure; in other words, vocabulary, grammar, and content are carefully controlled. In many instances, especially at lower levels, pictures are provided to illustrate and reinforce new or more unfamiliar vocabulary.

The vocabulary of these readers is *graded* (rated according to level) mainly through the so-called *headwords*. Publishers generally grade these readers according to the number of headwords used in each title. Headwords are chosen from a list appropriate to the students' level, and students at that level are expected to know, or at least be familiar with, these words. For example, a 500-headword reader is written with few words beyond the 500 most frequently used words as determined by that publisher. The readers themselves are generally between 20-100 pages long and are available in various genres. Depending on the publisher and series, the level of difficulty can range from very low to highly advanced. This allows teachers to gear their syllabi for a number of language levels using the same series, or several series at comparable levels. A graded reader series is like a small library with a vast range of titles, which can appeal to a wide range of students at a number of levels.

Differences Between Graded Reading and Extensive Reading

Because *graded reading* is often thought to be the same as *extensive reading*, the terms are sometimes used interchangeably. There are, however, some significant differences. For example, *graded reading* uses materials designed specifically for students at various steps of language ability. *Extensive reading*, on the other hand, employs unedited authentic materials as well as graded readings. In addition, whereas the goal of *extensive reading* is geared more toward increasing students' motivation, *graded reading's* purpose is more for readers to develop sufficient reading fluency to enable them to move to the next level of proficiency. Most graded readers are designed for extensive reading tasks and are often used outside the classroom. Other graded readers are designed more for *intensive reading*, and may include exercises or other activities at the end of each chapter.

Setting Up an Extensive Reading Program at Kinki University

With the abundance of graded reading materials available at the Kinki University Library, it should not be difficult for teachers to set up extensive reading programs in their classrooms. The only real problems might come from a lack of knowledge of this availability and the amount of time and effort needed to implement such

a program. Described below are three very basic steps that involve little time, effort or expertise:

- 1) Teachers familiarize themselves with the various series of graded readers at the library, and select those that they feel might satisfy the interests, goals and language abilities of their students. *Appendix A* lists the series presently available. Complete lists of all the titles are available at the library. Teachers are encouraged to make a trip to the library to review them in person. Many of the titles are grouped together on the 5th floor of the library, and the staff will be more than happy to assist. In addition, the series and most titles are listed on the Library Homepage: <http://lbsrv02.clib.kindai.ac.jp/main.html>.
Enter the series title or publisher's name in the search box on the Homepage.
- 2) Teachers provide students with a list of titles obtained directly from the library or the library's Homepage, or actually bring samples of the readers to class to show the students. Have students browse through them individually, in pairs or small groups to find their preferences. Teachers can also make arrangements with the library for conducting class in one of the large reading rooms on the 5th floor.
- 3) After students have selected and read the books either in class or for an outside-class assignment, have them write, or deliver orally, short book reports (100-200 words) on the readers. Since one of the main goals is for students to enjoy and look forward to reading, these reports should be less for grading purposes and more for demonstrating to the teacher that the students have actually read the books. Teachers might consider the quantity of books read as much as the quality of the reports. Teachers may also provide students with forms to keep track of titles read, number of pages read, and the proficiency levels as they progress.

How to Obtain Graded Readers and Extended Reading Resources

Most bookstores and libraries, including the Kinki University Library, have a number of series of professionally produced graded readers (*see Appendix A*). It is possible to obtain books of similar difficulty from different publishers, however, since publishers use different criterion for their headword lists, especially at the higher levels, it may be difficult to categorize books from different publishers.

Other helpful resources include a guide to *Class Readers* (i.e., books that the whole class reads together) by Greenwood (1987), Ellis and McRae's (1991) helpful hints and advice for using graded readers, and Hill's (1992) description of how to set up an extensive reading program.

For further information teachers are directed to Day and Bamford's *Extensive Reading In The Second Language Classroom* (1998), a reference work offering teachers advice on all aspects of extensive reading. Finally, a special issue of The Japan Association for Language Teaching's Journal, *The Language Teacher* (May, 1997, Vol. 21, No. 5), is devoted almost exclusively to extensive reading.

Reading for pleasure with graded readers can help build and reinforce students' vocabulary and reading fluency. However, perhaps the most productive use of graded readers is in providing students with interesting material for *extensive reading* as a practical alternative to the still predominantly used *intensive reading* approach.

Ten Principles for Teaching Extensive Reading - adapted from Day & Bamford (1998).

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 serves as a role model for students.

Benefits of using Extensive Reading

- It provides 'comprehensible input'.
- It motivates learners to read.
- It improves learners' general language competence.
- It increases students' exposure to the language.
- It builds confidence to read longer texts.
- It increases knowledge of vocabulary.
- It leads to improvement in writing.

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APPENDIX A: Graded Reader Series available at the Kinki University Central Library

The series listed below offer *graded / guided readers* at a variety of levels, and in a number of genres. Many of the titles have two or more copies. Complete lists of titles are available at the library. Teachers are invited to come to the 5th floor of the library and inspect the readers. In addition, the library welcomes recommendations for other series that teachers think might be appropriate for use at Kinki University.

Publishers	Series Titles	Number of Titles
Cambridge University Press	Cambridge English readers	60 +
Grosset & Dunlap	All aboard reading / All aboard science reader	110 +
HarperCollins	Let's read and find out science	100 +
Heinemann English Language Teaching	Heinemann guided readers	200 +
Macmillan Heinemann English Language Teaching	Heinemann ELT guided readers	60 +
Oxford University Press	Oxford reading tree / Oxford bookworms library	250 +
Pearson Education	Literacy land	120 +
Pearson Education	Penguin readers	500 +



Reading Room (5F)



Graded Reader Series