

Creating and Continuing Positive Experiences with Graded Readers by Jason Williams

Introduction

By now, almost everyone involved with teaching English in Japan is familiar with Extensive Reading (ER) including its materials, instruction and benefits. In a relatively short time, ER has become so widespread that programs can now be found at universities, junior and senior high schools, and private language schools. Individual ER libraries range in size from a few hundred to, like my university, a few thousand graded readers (GRs) and cover every level and genre imaginable. Indeed, providing learners with abundant and diverse material to choose from is one of the key characteristics of ER (Bamford & Day, 1998). It also feeds into another key characteristic - learners being responsible for selecting their own reading material.

When choosing a GR, there are two fundamental principles that a learner should follow. One is that it should be at the appropriate reading level; and the other is it should be something the learner will enjoy reading (Bamford & Day, 1998). The first one is rather simple for the learner to discover. A GR at the "right" level is considered to be one at which the learner can read without aid of a dictionary and understand most of the language, at a pace of 80-100 words per minute (Waring, n.d.). These criteria ensure the learner will be able to reap the linguistic benefits of ER, which include increased reading speed and fluency, vocabulary acquisition and automatic word recognition (Waring, 1997).

The second principle, learners selecting and reading only those GRs they find enjoyable, is harder to discern. Because the term is subjective,

it is impossible for any research to explain what "enjoyable" means. One common piece of advice for teachers to allow learners to quit reading GRs they do not find enjoyable, and to select and begin reading a new one (Bamford & Day, 1998). However, is this kind of trial and error really the best way? From many ER instructors I have spoken with, it simply is not practical. Most have schedules and activities tied to ER that make it nearly impossible for learners to begin reading one GR, quit, select a new one and still finish on time. A more important problem is that the new selection may not be any more engaging for the learner than the first one. And even if a learner has success and selects a likable GR once, she might not be able to do so again. How many "un-enjoyable" GR experiences will it take for a learner to decide that ER in English just isn't pleasurable and develop a negative attitude towards it?

This article will give practical tips on how to provide learners with initial and continuing positive encounters with GRs and ER, as well as the various benefits of doing so.

The more information learners initially have when making selections, the better their chances of choosing GRs they will not want to give up on. The following two tips are designed to assist students in making informed selections from the outset.

Rating System

Discovering and keeping track of which GRs individual learners have actually been satisfied with is perhaps the least complicated way to begin. This can be accomplished by making use of a simple rating system.

How

- Create and attach a rating sheet inside the front cover of each GR.
- Have learners rate each GR they finish reading. Learners should not be allowed to quit GRs, but encouraged to read all the way through in order to give a reliable rating.

Benefits

- The ability for you to identify and then inform learners of specific titles their peers rated highly. This information can be spread via handouts, in-class announcements and posters.
- Learners can make use of the rating sheets if they are making unsupervised selections.

Japanese Blurbs

Publishers aid the selection process by printing blurbs on the backs of GRs. Alas, observation of my students revealed that they mostly ignored the English language blurbs even after we had used them in class activities. This prompted me to experiment with blurbs written in Japanese.

How

- Japanese blurbs are available from individual publishers' catalogs and web-sites. Seek permission from the publisher before using them.
- Attach the Japanese blurbs under, or over, the English ones and inform the learners.

Benefits

- Reading the Japanese blurbs is now the first thing most of my students do when choosing GRs, soon followed by looking at the rating sheets. Consequently, they spend more time on the selection process and have shown higher levels of satisfaction with what they read.

Once learners are able to and confident that they can select GRs that they will enjoy, it is important to continue to provide them with positive reading experiences. The following tips are designed to promote this.

Title Overlap

There is no reason learners should not, or would not want to, read the same story more than once. Various publishers have adapted the same stories in to GRs and, fortunately for learners, tend to differ in the level of their adaptations. These stories are an excellent way to provide continuous positive reading experiences to learners.

How

- After a particular story receives several high ratings, acquire as many versions from as many publishers as possible.
- Inform learners what the titles are and at which levels they are available. For example: "Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre is available in Level 2, Level 3 and Level 5."

Benefits

- Learners progressing to a higher reading level can start with a story they have already read and liked. The story will be familiar and they may feel less intimidated by reading something they know will be more difficult. Their first reading experience at a new level will be a positive one.
- Learners at different reading levels can experience and share thoughts about the same story instead of not being interested in a story outside their current level.

Series·Characters·Authors

Providing learners with opportunities to return to storylines, characters and authors they enjoy is another way to keep them interested in ER. Many publishers have series that span multiple GRs as well as feature characters that appear repeatedly. There are also several authors, both classic and contemporary, with multiple works adapted in to GRs.

How

- Use publisher catalogs. Note that these types of GRs can all appear in one level, or be spread over different levels.
- Inform learners. Mark the GRs with stickers signifying they are part of a series and their order in it. Or, use "Other works by this author..." or "This character appears in ..." labels or posters.

Benefits

- Learners become invested storylines and characters, motivating them to read more.
- Works by the same author can give learners a sense of familiarity and comfort, and a feeling of anticipation.
- As with re-reading the same story, moving to a higher level via a series can help make the transition more enjoyable, smoother and less daunting to learners.

Audio

I have found that the techniques used to help learners have positive reading experiences can be used with GR audio as well.

How

- Recommend learners to start off with audio from a GR they have read and given a high rating. This way they will be familiar and comfortable with the story.
- Alternatively, they can select a "Recommended Reader" that they are interested in.

Benefit

- While hesitant to use the audio at first, anecdotal evidence from my students has been encouraging. None of them objected to reading the same GR again and more than a few claimed that it was more enjoyable the second time because the audio made the stories "come alive." I am not sure if this would have been the case if they had selected the audio at random.

Conclusion

Hundreds of GRs are currently available to English language learners with scores of new ones coming out every year and finding their way into various ER programs and libraries. This abundance allows learners to have a variety of reading experiences, but also increases the likelihood of them encountering GRs they just don't find appealing. One necessity for the success of ER is for learners to take pleasure in reading. While it may be impossible to guarantee this, with the right procedures it is within our power to increase the potential for it to happen.

References

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