A Debate on the Desired Effects of Output Activities for Extensive Reading

How far has extensive reading (ER) come since the great flood? Elley and Mangubhai's (1983) documentation of the Fijian book flood was nominated by Stephen Krashen as 'the most significant event in the history of ER' (Stewart et al., 2008). Their study examined proficiency gains over two years amongst three groups of learners, differentiated by three different kinds of instruction: (i) the 'shared book experience method' (reading by both the teacher and students, plus follow-up activities); (ii) 'the silent reading method' (students reading alone, with no book reports or other activities); and (iii) traditional audio-lingual instruction. The success of the first two methods over the third held great interest for second language acquisition (SLA) researchers because it signaled the learning potential of extensive reading (ER). However, ER theorists continue to debate procedural distinctions evident in the first two groups: should ER constitute both reading and follow-up activities, or simply be reading alone? (For the record, Elley and Mangubhai drew no conclusions either way.) The purpose of this chapter is to consider the implications of this debate for ER materials design and suggest a way forward for ER teachers.

Bruton (2002) criticizes ER for being contradictory: it promotes free, pleasurable reading but allows for a range of assessment types; it stresses personal response yet formulaic questions are utilized. In truth, ER is no different to any other language teaching methodology in that it has core principles, but their application varies according to specific contexts. One commonly held belief about ER is that the silent reading method is best. In the words of Day and Bamford (1998), 'Ideally, … no postreading work should be required, the act of reading being its own reward. Students read and that is all' (p. 140). In reality, however, we know that follow-up activities that require students to report on their reading are a common feature of ER courses (e.g., Bamford and Day, 2004; Green, 2005; Helgesen, 2005, 2008; Lee, 2006; Lida & Smith, 2001; Rodrigo et al, 2007; Wolf & Bokhorst-Heng, 2008). Having students express reactions to books through structured tasks is, paradoxically, both commonplace and controversial. As we shall see, there are varying reasons for the use of such

activities (pedagogy, curriculum, motivation, accountability etc.), but equally, there are good reasons to use none at all. This paper attempts to aid the confused ER teacher by critically assessing all sides of the debate.

[A] Arguments against follow-up activities

Most teachers will accept that any kind of assessment (even comprehension questions) endangers the nature of ER as an enjoyable activity. Enjoyment is paramount for successful ER, and Krashen's (2003, p.22) 'pleasure hypothesis' suggests that enjoyable activities promote acquisition. Researchers such as Fox (1990), Hsui (2000), Lida and Smith (2001) and Prowse (2002) point out that assessment activities undermine students' willingness to read. (Although Green (2005) has argued that an ER course without assessment can become marginalized in exam-oriented cultures such as Hong Kong.) Book reports may not be assessment tasks as such, but many ER practitioners claim that they are de-motivating (Krieger, 1992; Lida & Smith, 2001). As Cliffe (1990, p.29) puts it, 'If there are no tasks attached to the reading, the students are willing to view it as reading and not as a study'. Helgesen (2005, 2008) warns against the deadening effects of repetitive reporting, as evidenced in Wolf and Bokhorst-Heng's (2008) example of the Singaporean secondary students who complained about the tiresome nature of online reading logs. A second argument is that book reports take away from reading time, which may negatively impact on students' opportunities to develop proficiency (Fox, 1990; Mason, 2005; Schmidt, 2007). Smith (2006), for example, compared a group of learners who did sustained silent reading (SSR) for a year with a group who did SSR and reaction reports, and found that the former improved more on vocabulary and comprehension tests. A third objection is that book reports disadvantage lower proficiency learners. Krieger (1992) argues that good readers do them well while bad readers do them poorly – although this objection only holds for those cases in which the reports are graded for the quality of content or expression, which is probably the exception rather than the rule, at least in second language education. A final objection is that book reports can be 'quickly and cleverly circumvented by enterprising students' (Robb, 2002, p.147).

[A] Arguments against the reading-only approach

Although the above arguments are powerful, there are, equally, a number of problems with the reading-only approach. Firstly, in those cases where 'reading-only' literally means that only reading occurs in the lesson, gloomy classroom dynamics can ensue. Green (2005, p. 308) has described how whole-class reading sessions throughout the Hong Kong school system degenerated into 'particularly monastic detention session[s] with teachers sitting at the head of the class enforcing a rule of silence'. In the more relaxed context of a United States adult literacy program, Rodrigo et al. (2007) describe students losing attention and growing sleepy. These accounts echo van Lier's observation that 'instead of comprehensible input it is better to speak of language engagement … In order to profit from exposure to language the learner needs to be receptive to the exposure-language' (1996, p. 48). Simply making students read does not guarantee they will learn. We should note, however, that this argument pertains to the least attractive version of 'reading-only' – where it is lengthy and/or forced (it need not be either).

A second argument surrounds the problematic association in students' minds of the reading process with the study process. That is, the goals of ER are undermined if students continue to equate 'reading' with 'school' rather than 'joy'. Fox (1990), a proponent of the reading-only approach, advises that students be encouraged not to read in places they associate with study – which raises the paradox of how, then, teachers can have students read in class. Day and Bamford (1998) and Helgesen (2005) have argued that such students may never develop a personal reading habit, since they would have only ever done regulated school reading.

Waring (2007, p.38) expresses a third dilemma: 'Reading is sometimes taught in a special reading class, and at other times, it is taught as part of what is done in a general English class … the problem many teachers face is knowing where to put ER into their curriculum'. The luxury of one class devoted only to ER is not available to all institutions. EFL students, in particular, do not have many

(or any) opportunities to speak outside of class. Therefore, a comprehensive four-skills approach can be most appropriate: speaking, writing and listening pervade all lessons, allowing students to maximize the few chances they have to interact in the target language.

Like all instructional approaches, ER cannot be blindly transplanted into any curriculum without regard to the sociocultural context. Robb (2002, p.146) objects to Day and Bamford's (2002) attempt to distill ER into ten universal principles, on the basis that the principles cannot be 'valid for all settings'. Examples of disastrous implementations recur in the literature. Williams (2007) reports on the failure of ER in Malawian primary schools due to the mismatch of its well-meaning western promoters and the beliefs of the local teachers. Green (2005) describes teacher resentment of ER in Hong Kong due to policy imposed from above. Wolf and Bokhorst-Heng (2008) discuss the complex challenge of realizing ER goals in the face of Singaporean educational bureaucracy.

It is becoming less and less useful to speak of the 'right' and 'wrong' way of implementing ER. The reservations expressed in this section are not based on empirical research, but recognize the need for practitioners to apply empirical findings within workable frameworks – an illustration of the 'postmethod pedagogy' envisaged by Kumaravadivelu, in which the curriculum 'must be sensitive to a particular group of teachers teaching a particular group of learners pursuing a particular set of goals within a particular institutional context embedded in a particular sociocultural milieu' (2001, p. 538).

[A] Benefits of follow-up activities

The literature points to several significant benefits of follow-up activities. One is that they allow ER to be combined with oral communication, creating a more stimulating version of both subjects. Communicative language teaching (CLT) has been criticized for lacking content and purpose, in part because it often revolves solely around the skill of speaking. Criper (1986), in arguing against the oral-centrism of CLT, has called for the provision of meaningful, comprehensible input as a powerful

way of creating a need for meaningful communication. Similarly Waring (2007) notes that stories not only provide overarching structure for verbal recounts, but also engender a rich variety of linguistic features in output and provide a genuine reason for interaction (i.e. hearing others' stories). Helgesen (2008) goes further, pointing out that having students evaluate stories – in addition to merely re-telling – engages them in higher order thinking.

Including an interactive element in ER, as suggested above, also aids in the creation of a reading community. Book discussions promote a sense of community, since students read for the group. They have the pleasure of sharing ideas and feelings about their reading, thus providing them with a high motivation to read. Furthermore, such activities allow students to share recommendations for further reading. Book lists, library tours and teacher recommendations all have their place, but none can compete with the dynamism of face-to-face book discussions with peers, and peers are the only true arbiters in such matters as cultural/generational relevancy, subject matter, style, and level of difficulty.

A third major benefit of follow-up activities is accountability. According to Krashen (2003, p.18), accountability is what distinguishes ER from similar activities such as sustained silent reading (in which 'students read whatever they please (within reason) for a short time each day and there is no accountability required') and self-selected reading (in which 'the entire class period is devoted to reading, and occasional teacher-student conferences are scheduled'). Most teachers need some way of tracking students' reading, not to mention having to provide grades. Written reports are the most common form of doing this. However, it is commonly accepted that accountability measures should be designed so as to provide the least disruption to the main course goal of enjoyable, lengthy reading.

Turning to book reports in particular, one advantage is that they provide a tool by which the teacher can orient and guide students (which, according to Day & Bamford (2002), is one of the instructor's

essential functions in a successful ER program). To carry out this role, teachers need to keep track of what and how much students are reading and have an understanding of what their reactions are. Based on this, they can encourage and guide through personalized written feedback on submitted reports.

Book reports can also aid the teacher in displaying him/herself as a model reader. Day and Bamford (2002) state that effective reading teachers are themselves readers and their example is evident to students. Personalized comments on students' reports allow teachers to demonstrate this facet of their personality. This is supported in Hayashi's (1999) research on Japanese students' attitudes to ER (and reports), which pointed to the importance of teachers' positive comments. Similarly Green (2005) noted that ER was a failure in Hong Kong because there was no opportunity for the teacher to present him/herself as a role model.

None of the five benefits outlined above constitute necessary conditions for a successful ER course, but all are of potential help for teachers faced with instituting formal ER programs. For example, in my own teaching situation – an ER course at Kanda University of International Studies (KUIS) in Japan – two of the five conditions are expected of me (i.e., all courses are expected to have an interactive element and accountability procedures), while the other three simply work well with my students: they enjoy having a reading community, receiving guidance from the teacher and receiving written feedback. In addition, my students do get sleepy when asked to read in class, yet they do read outside of class if asked. For these reasons, I use follow-up activities.

[A] The Effect of Follow-up Activities on Student Motivation

For any ER practitioner including follow-up activities in his/her course, a primary consideration will be the impact they have on student motivation. Since draconian assessment measures can engender disenchantment with the reading process, most ER teachers face a balancing act of the virtues and necessities of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Ideally, they envision their students reading for

pleasure, but in reality they need to implement methods of tracking and grading and in some cases urging students to read.

The interplay of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation is highly complex and constitutes a field of its own in psychology and SLA. However the description of the various forms of motivation provided by Ryan and Deci (2000) presents ER instructors with a useful model for materials design, since their framework closely matches the predicament of ER students and teachers. They point out that intrinsic motivation is, naturally, a wonderful state of being for any human, and may even be a somewhat innate condition, since children seem to exhibit it without needing any rewards. However, as time goes by, extrinsic motivation becomes a fact of life as 'the freedom to be intrinsically motivated is increasingly curtailed by social pressures to do activities that are not interesting and to assume a variety of new responsibilities' (p.71). There is no point denying extrinsic motivation, since it is an inevitable fact of all sociocultural environments – any ER course being an example thereof. Instead, Ryan and Deci point out that extrinsic motivation needs to be more closely understood within a taxonomy of different types, all varying along a cline of self-determination. The key for ER follow-up activities is to align them with that form of extrinsic motivation which is closest to intrinsic motivation. In the words of Ryan and Deci (2000, pp. 72-3):

> … the most autonomous form of extrinsic motivation is <u>integrated regulation</u>. Integration occurs when identified regulations are fully assimilated to the self, which means they have been evaluated and brought into congruence with one's other values and needs. Actions characterized by integrated motivation share many qualities with intrinsic motivation, although they are still considered extrinsic because they are done to attain separable outcomes rather than for their inherent enjoyment.

The next question, therefore, is how can follow-up activities be implemented yet achieve integrated regulation?

[A] Engendering Integrated Regulation through Varied Book Reaction Reports

One way to engender integrated regulation is to ensure that follow-up activities involve variety and creativity. Ryan and Deci (2000) state that activities that have the appeal of novelty and challenge intrinsically motivate people, a fact that has been noted by several ER researchers. Day and Bamford (2002, p. 137) nominate 'variety of reading material' as one of the ten fundamental principles for teaching ER. Helgesen (2005, 2008) points out that that variety should therefore extend to the reporting process – students should not be engaged in the same form of follow-up activity every time they read a book. Apart from the benefits for intrinsic motivation, variety also concords with the fact that different students have different learning styles – and therefore individual differences need to be recognized and supported as much as possible in the design of activities and materials. One way of achieving this is by employing the full resources of multimodality (e.g. forms of visual expression) rather than merely having students react to books through conventional written genres.

The term 'book reaction report' can therefore encompass a wide range of creative modalities that provide students with fresh, interesting and motivating ways to express emotional and intellectual reactions to books, while also allowing teachers to maintain a satisfactory degree of accountability. Students are extrinsically motivated to complete them, but every effort is made to induce a state of integrated regulation, and the centrality of pleasurable reading is never lost sight of.

The list below itemizes a resource bank of book reaction reports that has been developed and implemented at KUIS. One goal of the collection is to provide students with the option of never repeating the same book reaction report within a school year. In class, students spend about 15 minutes working on a report, then form a discussion group to share reactions orally. Although the materials were created in-house, influences can be observed from other sources that describe creative approaches to book reporting: Bamford and Day (2004), Fox (1990), Helgesen (1997, 2005, 2008), Hsui (2000), Krieger (1992), and Lida and Smith (2001).

- Standard Book Report: write a short summary; provide adjectives to describe two characters; give a personal opinion of the book.
- Picture: draw a scene (or series of scenes) from the book and write a few sentences explaining the context of the picture.
- Choice: explain one example in the book when a character had to make a choice; give a personal evaluation of whether the decision s/he made was right or wrong.
- Quotation: choose 1-3 sentences from the book that made a strong impression, for positive or negative reasons; explain the reason(s) for choosing this quotation.
- Dear Diary: choose one character and create four diary entries for him/her, detailing events that happen in the book through his/her eyes.
- Movie Poster: imagine the book is to be made into a film; create a promotional poster that contains the following elements: a new title, a simple picture, names of famous actors cast as characters, and two quotations from the press.
- The Gift: choose a gift for one of the characters; write a card to go with it that explains why s/he will enjoy receiving this thing.
- Library Termination Notice: imagine the school library has elected to remove the book from its collection due to its unsuitability for students; write a letter protesting the decision.
- Four Adjectives: select four letters from the book title; think of four adjectives that begin with these letters and that describe the book or some aspect of it; explain the choices.
- Relationships Diagram: draw boxes with characters' names inside; use arrowed lines between boxes to indicate relationships; write words/phrases along the lines to explain

relationships; write adjectives next to boxes to describe characters and words/phrases to indicate what they have done.

- Your Life, Your Book: think of something in the book that is somehow similar to something that has happened in your own life; explain both happenings and how they are similar.
- Vacation: choose one character to take away on vacation; demonstrate a deep understanding of him/her by choosing a suitable destination to visit; write a short postcard to the teacher.
- Points of Interest: on a boxed grid, plot five points along the horizontal axis to represent significant moments in the story; placement on the vertical axis represents the degree of interest to the reader (high, medium, low); write a sentence or two below the grid to describe each point.
- A Proverb: select a proverb – either from the English language or translated into English – and explain how it sums up one of the themes of the book.
- A Letter: choose one character and compose a letter from him/her to a friend, explaining what s/he has been through.
- Quiz: create a multiple choice quiz about the book that can be administered to classmates.
- Your Books So Far: write a comparison of a book just read to several others read recently.
- Descriptive Paragraph: write one paragraph that describes the setting of the book.
- School Visit: imagine one character is going to visit the school; prepare for the visit by providing a description of his/her personality, advice as to his/her most suitable club activity and a member of the class s/he would get along with, and an assessment of his/her ability to adjust to the new language and culture.

- Genre Switch: decide which genre the book belongs to; choose a different genre and explain what changes can be made to the book to make it fit this genre.
- Future Conversation: imagine two characters meet again one year after the date of the book's conclusion; compose a conversation that the two characters might have.
- Peer Questions: answer two questions about the book written by a classmate.
- For and Against: list the positive and negative aspects of the book in a split table; write a brief judgement as to whether the book ought to be read by classmates.
- Join Your Family: choose one character to become a member of your family; explain which role s/he might adopt and explain the choice.
- Questions to One's Self: compose two questions about a book before reading it (based on the cover, blurb and any other impressionistic information); after reading it, answer the questions.
- Three Objects: select three objects of significance in the book; explain the choices.

The attempt to provide variety and creativity in the tasks also incurs drawbacks. Some formats do not suit certain types of books (e.g., 'The Gift', 'Relationships Diagram', and 'A Letter' require characters and/or narrative, both of which may be absent in a non-fiction book). This can be solved by allowing students to choose the format they think most appropriate, or using the 'Standard Book Report' as a fall-back option. Some formats lead to <u>overly</u> creative writing that may not reflect any knowledge of the book (e.g., 'School Visit', 'Future Conversation'). Teacher feedback and course guidelines are then required to push students to display familiarity with their books. Some students may be uncomfortable with, or unused to, writing about their personal life in relation to their books (e.g., 'Your Life, Your Book', 'Join Your Family') – again, alternatives can be offered or guidance

given. The above list has been tried and tested successfully in the KUIS program and is provided as a set of examples that can be adjusted for other contexts.

[A] Perceived Effects by Students

Three consecutive cohorts of second year KUIS English majors (over 150 in total) used the materials during the period 2006-8 and were surveyed by way of a simple paper questionnaire, given at the end of the academic year, to gauge attitudes to both the written and spoken aspects of the classroom follow-up activities. The students completed the feedback in English, in class, and were asked not to write their names on the papers (although anonymity was questionable given the handwritten nature of the responses). They were encouraged to answer the questions as honestly as possible, in sentence form. It should be noted that, overall, these students were relatively well motivated learners by the standards of Japanese university students, and also of an intermediate to advanced level (again, by Japanese university standards). Due to the casual nature of the feedback process, no strong claims are made on the basis of the results, however they do help in understanding the students' perspectives to some degree.

They were first asked about writing book reaction reports, and whether they were (a) 'enjoyable' and (b) 'useful'. As regards enjoyment, responses were consistently positive (there were virtually no negative comments) with the key concept of variety appearing to contribute greatly to integrated regulation. Typical responses were: 'If the book reports are same every week, I might not enjoy. But we did really interesting reports every time, so I enjoyed very much' and '…the way to write a report was different each week. It made me keep my motivation.' However, this may be due to an assumption on the students' part that some form of assignment is inevitable – i.e., if given the option of no accountability at all, it is possible the reports would not be viewed in such a positive light. A secondary (though less prominent) theme was enjoyment of the teacher's personalized responses (e.g., 'I liked the comments from Ben everytimes'), lending some support to the role of

the materials in facilitating individualized teacher-student interaction about books – something that is difficult to achieve orally in large classes. The only negative feedback came from one student who suspected some classmates of not having read all they claimed to. However, ensuring less cheating involves increasing accountability, which usually means decreasing motivation.

As regards usefulness, responses were again almost exclusively positive. Students perceived the reports to be a valuable aid in developing meta-cognitive awareness of their reading material, which in turn seemed to enhance satisfaction with the course. For example, students responded, 'By writing book reports, I could understand how much I could understand about the books' and '…they're great opportunity for me to THINK of books again!' Again, however, students may be defining 'usefulness' within the teacher's parameters – i.e., it is useful to have an aid in recalling the books because part of ER class time is devoted to book recollection. Alternatively, the responses may indicate that pleasure can be derived in ER not only from subconscious processes, such as becoming 'lost in a book', but also from conscious engagement. Perhaps cultivating a meta-awareness of a previously subconscious state is an inherently stimulating and meaningful process. Some students pointed to the value of the reports in improving their writing skills (e.g. '…it was good practice for writing different types of writing in English'), perhaps viewing the variety of imaginative written tasks as a de facto creative writing course. However, it is likely that any gains were perceived, rather than actual. The only negative feedback centred around the unsuitability of some report formats for some book genres (a problem addressed above).

The second questionnaire item asked students about 'discussing books in class' and whether that activity was (a) 'enjoyable' and (b) 'good for my English'. For part (a), students overwhelmingly enjoyed the chance to talk about books, for two main reasons. Firstly, the discussions created a sense of community amongst the readers: 'When I found I like a book which my friend liked, it was nice.' Secondly, the discussions gave students an opportunity to obtain recommendations from classmates: 'Through this discussion, I could find various kinds of books that I'm interested in.'

For part (b), the most common response was that book discussions were beneficial for oral communication skills. A typical response was: 'We could get a lot of chances to tell our own opinions about books and it was really good practice to tell my ideas to other people.' Interestingly, however, the difficulty of explaining books orally was the one aspect of negative feedback contained in the surveys. This feedback actually represents two sides of the one coin: explicating books is difficult but the challenge is beneficial. As one student put it: 'It was more difficult to explain the storyline of book than I thought, but it was good challenge for me to do that and actually I could get new words from other classmates, so it was good.' In particular, the skill of summarizing was often singled out as a challenge: 'I think it's good for my speaking skill, but I had much difficulty to summarize the story.' This data suggests that regular book discussions may be the kind of oral activity that Skehan (1996) calls for in his framework for tasks that effectively develop students' interlanguage – i.e., a task that balances lexicogrammatical variety, cognitive complexity, and communicative pressure.

[A] Conclusion: Effects of Output Activities

No claims are being made here that book reaction reports and discussions of themselves directly improve reading proficiency. Reading itself has that effect, as several decades of ER research has shown (and book reports could even negatively impact on proficiency if students' reading opportunities significantly suffered because of them). Rather, the desired effects of the materials presented in this chapter are:

- to increase the student's integrated regulation of activities
- to increase accountability
- to increase the teacher's visibility as a role model and guide
- to increase ER's integration with other parts of the curriculum (if required)
- ultimately, to contribute to language acquisition by facilitating the best possible ER course given institutional constraints

These goals recognize the reality of ER in its sociocultural context as a school subject that has to exist within curricular specifications which vary widely from one site to another. The key point is that ER (as an activity, not a subject) can have a significant, positive effect on a student's second language proficiency, but a poorly designed ER course can negate or disrupt that effect in a multitude of ways (e.g., by decreasing motivation due to boredom, or hampering opportunities to read due to a heavy additional workload). We therefore need materials that satisfy contextual constraints while maintaining the integrity of enjoyable, extensive reading.

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