

A Brief Analysis of the Role of Extensive Reading in the EFL Classroom.

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Abstract

This paper looks in detail at what the term extensive reading means from a linguistic and educational perspective and how certain needs such as learner style and preference should be taken into account, along with standard readership level, when implementing an extensive reading component into an EFL course.

Introduction.

Implementing extensive reading programmes into the EFL classroom here in Japan is fast becoming the requisite pedagogic duty of an informed and responsible educator. The implication being that in light of the overwhelmingly favourable linguistic research (Bamford and Day: 1997, Krashen: 1997, Carrell and Grabe: 2002) into the impact of extensive reading on second language acquisition carried out over the last few decades, we as teachers not being fair to learners unless we include extensive reading in any reading programme and are in fact obliged to prescribe it in more general English as a foreign language (EFL) communication courses as well (Hill:1997:18). This view has evolved in part due to the emerging understanding over the last fifteen years or so (Eskey: 1998:93) of reading as an interactive process involving simultaneous evaluative manipulation of both bottom up *and* top down reading skills. Where the former skill has been given much attention in the classroom with conventional sentence- level reading practice focusing on grapheme and local context, understanding the latter (involving activation of relevant schemata and global context understanding) has been neglected. Extensive reading is seen as the opportunity for learners to practice both the skills in tandem as readers do naturally when reading in their first language.

Not by any means do I wish to put the genie back in the bottle, as I too have clearly understood the potential language development benefits of extensive reading in EFL learning and I hope to illuminate some of these herein, but I would also like in this paper to suggest caution in designing one reading programme to fit all, by highlighting a few problem areas that have emerged in relevant research and that I have encountered with some readers over the years teaching in Japan.

By examining some specific problem areas it is hoped that we can arrive at a more precise awareness of some learners' needs and armed with this foresight can maximize the potential of the extensive reading innovation to be more popular *and* more overall effective. I shall also, in this essay, attempt an analysis of the interactive process of reading itself and from this viewpoint establish a perspective on the possible effectiveness of extensive reading in promoting language development and reading skill.

What is extensive reading?

For many teachers and their learners extensive reading is synonymous with *graded reading* also known as the reading of basal or simplified texts. However there is a difference and this may be in the process of becoming more distinct. Teachers are using graded readers in the classroom in a teacher-led environment, in some cases choosing the reader for their students and having learners all read the same text. These pedagogic variants differ from my understanding of extensive reading that has at its heart learner-led principles. The original view of extensive reading as, for example, Waring (2000:6) describes it with; "*huge amounts of very simple text,*" "*done out of class,*" "*well within ability,*" where "*readers choose their own book*" different "*from other readers*" from and of a "*wide variety*" with a "*focus on general comprehension and on developing reading fluency*" as the key definitive components.

It is clear from this that there are differences between the terms *extensive* and *graded* reading. Discussing the particular variants within graded reading is not the aim of this paper, they are mentioned only to demonstrate a slackening of the extensive reading

definitive perimeters out of which graded reading was born and to establish a basic distinction that may be widening.

I understand extensive reading in EFL to be an umbrella term including the innovation of graded reading. Extensive reading does not deny the possibility of reading unsimplified texts and in fact has this as its end goal, whereas graded reading was specifically designed for pedagogic purposes (albeit with similar ultimate goals). For this reason, allowing for idiosyncratic interpretation by individuals, graded reading may eventually mutate into a term closer to semi-extensive for some teachers in some classes.

Waring (1997:9) sees three important differences in the terms extensive and graded reading. Firstly, he writes, graded reading needs specially prepared text while extensive can but need not. Secondly, extensive reading emphasizes fluency where graded reading materials can be used for intensive study too. Finally, that extensive reading sees pleasure as the motivating factor, where graded reading principles suggest that moving up to the next level of reading is the compelling motivating factor.

I would like to add however, to Waring's third point that extensive reading is not only for pleasure, for some it may be a duty; for example when professionals are expected to read around or research a subject extensively. Here the motivating factor is to obtain information, the by-product of which may or may not give pleasure.

The term extensive reading as it is used in an educational context was introduced by Palmer in the 1960's (cited in Bamford and Day: 1997:6) to distinguish the style from the common pedagogic practice of *intensive* reading. This distinction is valuable because in looking at the antonymous procedure we can clearly see what extensive reading is not and therefore likely closer approximate what it is. *Intensive* reading is a close-up word-by word or chunk- by- chunk analysis of text. It is teacher-led by definition since the teacher is responsible for providing answers and clues and is present for the duration of the reading. It teaches explicitly the use of strategies in de-

coding; objectives include being able to summarize main points and by examining text in detail to provide practice and training in syntax and the way language is formed. The focus is on this form.

By contrast, *extensive* reading focuses on meaning. It is done individually therefore can be, and with graded reading should be, level specific. The topic is chosen by the reader (for motivational purposes), it can be done anywhere, anytime (encouraging learner autonomy) and perhaps most importantly and definitively it aims to develop the *habit* (Bamford and Day: '97:7) expressed in the timeworn but still somewhat valid adage *you learn to read by reading*.

Extensive reading is a style- a behavioral response to the written word chosen by the reader. It is not implicit in the text itself but rather a way of reading the text. It is a style that optimizes scanning and takes a general understanding of content in global context as its main objective (Williams: 2002: Unit G).

To sum up, I understand *extensive* reading to be a linguistic term that covers both the fluent, preferably speedy and plentiful reading by EFL learners of texts both designed for native speakers and for the language learning community. Graded reading is the single major innovative component of extensive reading in the EFL curriculum today. Having made the distinction it is important to note that the two terms are very often used interchangeably.

What is reading?

If extensive refers to a quantity read for a variety of reasons but mainly for pleasure with its focus on content not form what precisely do we take to mean by reading? Every teacher has had (or has been) a foreign language learner who can sound out words well but has no idea of their meaning. Is this reading? If not, how much do we have to understand before it is said that we are reading?

Although he does not answer this particular question therein, Kenneth Goodman (Carrell, Devine and Eskey: 1998:12) provides a clear definition of the interactive

process of reading:

“Reading is a receptive language process. It is a psycholinguistic process in that it starts with a linguistic surface representation encoded by a writer and ends with meaning which the reader constructs.”

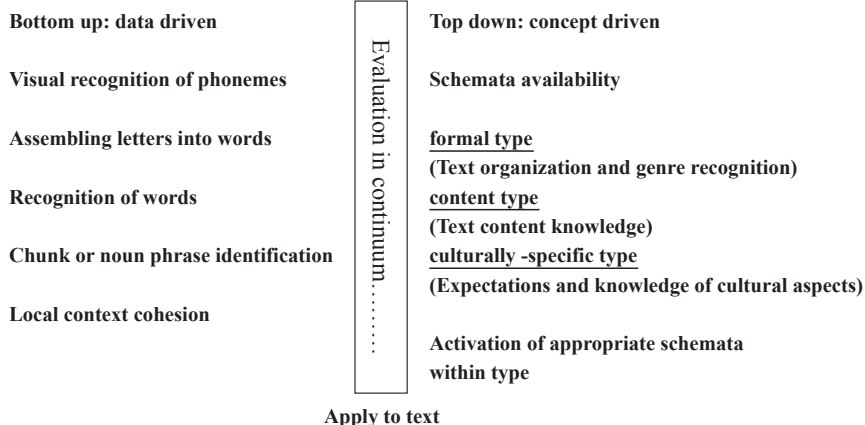
I should like to add and Goodman goes on to explain that this process is not static but constantly changing and in various stages of success or *short-circuiting* as we read (see Clarke, M.: 1998). This is true of learners in a foreign language and in our native language too. We are constantly assessing, making connections and then rejecting or confirming those assessments of our understanding before and as a pre-requisite usually for proceeding with a text.

This top-down de-coding of meaning is working closely or should be with the bottom-up processes of graphic and syntactic de-coding. Meaning is given life through a visual on-going realization. The thought or semantic connection we bring to the text is woven into this visual process. Reading is interactive because of the reliance we have on both bottom-up and top-down reading skills and the psychological element of engaging in a rapport with the writer and the content of his/her text. Have we understood what the writer intended us to understand? A reader’s proximity to the writer’s intention might help us differentiate reading ability level but also might caution us. If learners cannot get close to the meaning are they lacking some vital clue that may be a cultural unknown or simply a lexical void?

(see Anderson and Pearson:1998:ch 3)

These latter concerns are those of the teacher *and* her learner. Before moving on to a discussion of exactly how effective extensive reading has been found to be in the EFL situation I would like to clarify the complex interweaving and interactive components of the reading process with a parallel processing model below. Understanding this process is important in helping us assess reading ability and development and offer the most effective training in reading.

A Parallel Processing Model of Reading.



Apply to text

For other visual models of the reading process please see chapters 1-4 (Goodman et al.) in Interactive Approaches to Second Language Reading (Carrell,P Devine,J Eskey,D:1998)

All of these components are in constant, changing evolution as we read. The speeds at which they are accessed and activated and the results they produce demonstrate reading ability. Each of the components can be taught separately along with appropriate reading strategies (see for example Hosenfeld, C: 1984) but it is the effective combination of the use of these strategies that results in bringing meaning to the reading.

Having looked briefly at definitions of extensive reading and the interactive process of reading itself, I would like to turn to how I believe extensive reading can and can not be used to develop language and reading skill in EFL.

How effective is extensive reading in promoting language development and reading skill?

This is a main concern for teachers and learners alike. If we are to begin including extensive reading programmes in EFL courses, involving costly and time consuming curriculum innovation as well as careful management of participation and assessment

organization, we have to be confident in justification for the innovation. It is not enough to say *everyone should read more, it's bound to help* when learners are busy struggling with a heavy curriculum load and massive amounts of homework in other subjects in the case of some university students.

The beneficial effects of extensive reading are thought to include mainly:

“ building reading speed, lexical speed access, reading fluency, and the ability when reading to move from working with words to working with ideas.” (Waring:1997:9)

The value of extensive input at the right level in the target language is now considered undeniable in language development. Through carefully chosen extensive or graded reading the learner is at very least revising and re-cycling vocabulary. He/she is also practicing all of the components described in the parallel model herein; making contextual guesses, skipping unknown lexicon, re-reading, reading for gist, recognizing grammatical structure and rules and generally working her way through a large amount of “*syntactic mazes*” (Rigg in Carrell, Devine and Eskey: 1998: 213) without having to stop and answer to anyone. In this way autonomy of reading develops. It is thought, moreover that learners who complete a reading project will be motivated toward “*further study and reading*” (Nation 1997:15) In graded reading, carefully constructed text re-cycles words to provide learners with a condensed way of meeting words the necessary amount of times and in a variety of contexts that is thought necessary for acquisition to take place. Similar effect can be had through extensive reading of unsimplified texts but this would take much longer. Learners who prefer unsimplified text reading therefore may need to have a programme made for them whereby they can restrict content (and therefore vocabulary) and have a focused review of content and vocabulary in class time with teacher support, this is discussed later in this paper.

Extensive reading as an integral part of the EFL course is still a baby and therefore still open to development. Long-term definitive results are still to be infallibly proven. Although there is plenty of evidence of benefits, these benefits are hard to unify

because of the difficulties involved in assessing them.

Since extensive reading is by nature a private, silent, autonomous process assessment of benefit has to be done in a retrospective manner allowing for possible distortion and inaccuracy. Moreover cross “*contamination*” (Carrell and Grabe: 2002:247) may occur from other learning activities throughout the period of reading and there is the added concern of the length of time needed to achieve result during which cognitive development may or may not have taken place because of the reading or other external language learning activity. The length of time needed for progress to be assessed too presents the practical problem of following the same group of learners for an extended period.

Two important studies with positive findings into effectiveness of extensive reading on language development and reading skills have included Mason and Krashen’s (1997) experiments with reading only learners in a prestigious Japanese university and a junior college (attempting to merge both high achievers and lower level readers) and Elley’s (1991) book flood project that was conducted over a longer period of time (12-36 months). However these studies are not totally without shortcomings.

In Mason and Krashen’s highly controlled and monitored experiments the precision of favourable conclusion is hard to dispute but what is open to question is whether or not being under such constant rigorous surveillance was a key component itself in improved performance and diary comments from learners “*that they were amazed at their improvement*” (op.cit: 93) are less than reliable when a student is under surveillance pressure or when diaries are going to be used as circumstantial evidence. Also, since the extensive reading was backed up by intensive reading in the classroom it is hard to assess whether or not reading speed and comprehension improvement was a contingent of extensive reading alone.

Elley’s studies (1991) including those with Mangubhai were with children and showed very favourable results in development, however the learning community was made up

of children who may be in an initially more ready-to-learn mode than some of our older learners and anyway do not represent the widest range of EFL populations.

More research needed

If however, out of the research conducted so far- and there is still relatively little of it compared to other language learning research areas- we trust these hopeful and encouraging studies and our own instincts that extensive reading does have a useful role to play in language development for the EFL learner, we should take a closer look at how it can be effective in order to be able to tailor its usage to our learner's needs more accurately.

Is it necessary for example to include extensive reading in a solely listening and speaking course where 'reading' and writing are considered well taught and 'finished with' as is the case in some Asian countries where students have so much more training in the latter than the former. This is an area that needs more attention. For which level of learner from early beginner through to advanced will extensive reading benefit or is there no distinction? This is an area that needs much more research.

So too is the case of reluctant readers. It is not true that all learners embrace the idea of learning through reading; in fact many students I have found to be rather critical and uninspired by the idea. How can we motivate these students and present extensive reading as an attractive and rewarding language learning tool, if that is what it is. I shall try to answer these questions by starting with the case of one learner who demonstrates my position or view that extensive reading should be adapted and adopted to suit a learner's particular needs.

One case study

In the ideal teaching environment learners (and their teachers) are dedicated, hard-working and motivated in their search for both better learning materials and language development. For most of us however our classes are a mixture of learner types; learners who possess all of the above qualities for several months or even years, others for whom the same is true for several hours and still others for only several minutes at a time. Extensive reading is learner sustained and these qualities are therefore important pre-requisites for the success of the individual learner's reading programme. Lack of them can seriously impede progress from the outset. On this matter Eskey and Grabe (1998:230) point out the importance of *continued* sustained reading effort and point out that "*for students who are not strong self-motivators, who for example have not developed the habit of reading in depth in their own language this may be a major problem*".

One such student was Sumiko. An active, fast-talking, person in her thirties, Sumiko wanted to be able to read English newspapers in order to gain a Western perspective on the world. Sumiko's starting level of English was very low and a good deal of time had to be spent on formal word level strategy training before the time came for this goal to be even half way realized. Sumiko's reading style is highly impulsive. Jumping to conclusions early on about text context and more locally, word formation, she was inclined to race through the text as if finishing it was the goal. When asked comprehension based questions, it was evident time and again that she had reached wrong conclusions and by forming a judgement early on she had great difficulty adapting this understanding in light of new information as it arrived. This caused confusion and frustration. Rather like looking at the vase/kiss picture in psychology the image we see first is hard to erase and replace. In linguistic terms the activation of relevant schemata and corresponding evaluative skills are not working in harmony. What she brings to the text interferes. It is the ability to constantly evaluate and update writer's intention that is vital for successful reading as shown in the process model previously.

Sumiko's reading style was overly subjective. An overly personal interpretation of text latches onto the familiar and shuts off the un-expected or new. Interestingly this is in diametrical opposition to Sumiko's ultimate reading goals (expressed in the opening of the previous paragraph) implying that from the outset she may have been unconsciously aware of her own difficulties.

Integrator types.

In research carried out by Block in 1986 (cited in Carrell:8) attention is drawn to her group of *integrator type* readers who responded to reading in an 'extensive' mode. By this was meant those readers who manage to separate themselves from the text and envisage the author's intent; understand the writer's message. This objectivity seemed to be a key factor in the greater progress of this group compared to the more subjective mode of the *non-integrator* group. This might suggest that integrator types would benefit most from the speed-focused nature of extensive reading as a language benefit tool in that their objectivity would provide better general comprehension ability, in turn leading to increased motivation and the sustained effort essential for development.

Another factor relating to Sumiko's particular case is theorized by Kagan (cited in Carrell:1998:110). His hypothesis of "impulsivity/reflection dimension" makes perfect sense to me. All learners possess impulsivity and reflection in various measures and bring this to their reading. Hewitt (also in op.cit) found in studies related to this idea that reflective learners achieved better reading scores.

For impulsive readers like Sumiko extensive reading may be consolidating their problem. When Sumiko took several level 1 readers home and read them in her own time it was clear that even though the level chosen was appropriate for her actual word knowledge level defined by Waring (2000:11) as two or three unknown words per page her summaries written in Japanese and oral response to questioning indicated several contextual misunderstandings.

In Sumiko's case we abandoned the graded readers and settled on a programme of content-based semi-extensive reading (Chrichtley:1998:15) in class where she could manage shorter texts both out-loud and silently with immediate paragraph by paragraph recall and guidance, including cultural reference close at hand. We limited the reading topics to several that she chose and we used newspaper articles that were graded (*Mainichi* weekly student paper). In this way she began to show much faster reading skill development and content recognition confidence.

Impulsive and non-integrator type readers may or may not be a minority. It is reluctant readers that are quoted most often as learners who may not respond well to extensive reading challenges. Despite her content recognition problems Sumiko remains an eager and motivated reader; she reads plentifully in her first language. Many learners are simply not interested in reading.

Reluctant readers

One class recently of 15 bright upper level university students in oral, informal feedback voiced a general dislike of reading and a genuine disbelief that autonomous reading could improve reading skill and language ability given so little teacher support. Also, graded readers I was told were somehow childish and not intellectually satisfying.

In Japan there is a tradition of story-telling (*kami shibai*) where the listener watches one reader relate a story with large pictures held up. There is a cultural difference in intrinsic attitude to reading which is complex and can often be negative. It may include a number of factors such as a complicated reading system and the overwhelming popularity and availability of cartoon books and computer games. Reading is taught intensively with university literature major students laboriously studying only one book a year and primary children (including my own) reading the same two page text in class for several weeks with the aim of memorization. It may be that many EFL learners have a lack of confidence in their abilities to sustain out of

class reading for any length of time without teacher support because of numerous cultural variants.

If learners are voicing fears and apprehension these must be heard. Certainly these are valid concerns from the learning community. This particular reluctant group embarked on an extensive reading programme of Oxford University Press' *factfiles* that offer informative factual reading for learners unmotivated by fictional or traditional storytelling. It is being introduced with silent sustained reading of their chosen book in class for fifteen minutes at a time. Results of this research are not available yet.

Skill development claims

Reading skill or "*information processing techniques that are automatic*"(Paris et al. in Williams: E3) is closely linked to speed. "*Good readers, by definition read fast*"(Eskey and Grabe: 233). It is thought that by reading at the correct level in the EFL speed increases (Waring: 2000). Learning to skim text for information is the goal. It seems likely given the research, that some students can well improve reading speed through extensive reading. However, the text level has to be just under the present reading skill level in order for progress to be made (Waring: 11).

Due to the polysemous nature of many words vast exposure is needed for vocabulary acquisition to take place, involving meetings of words in a variety of contexts (Schmitt: 2000). It is hard to provide such exposure time in the classroom and it is felt that extensive reading out of class fills this gap.

Hafiz and Tudor (in Nation: 1997) found simplified text in graded readers in their study of second language learners in England, encouraged learners to simplify their own syntax in their English writing. This research again implies that extensive reading may reinforce existing knowledge rather than teach new skills. Whether it is valuable that learners simplify writing is debatable. Many second language learners wish to adopt the more complex structures employed by native speaker or more fluent writers. I feel

that advantages claiming to simplify syntax would be appropriate for certain learners in certain cases only.

Mason and Krashen's studies mentioned previously also included the impact of extensive reading on writing in the target language. Cloze tests and ratings of summaries showed statistical gains in six out of seven cases. Massive incidental exposure to syntactical rules and grammatical devices is thought to have a direct impact on writing skill. Previous receptive knowledge of style is confirmed repeatedly by the learner as he/she reads the target language text and the point of transfer to productive skill comes closer.

In order for this transfer to take place; *for input to become uptake*, it is expected that the learner read a vast amount; a recommended minimum of a "*book a week at her level of difficulty*" (Waring: 2000). This will usually involve a great deal of encouragement from the teacher and a lot of effort from the learner. Moreover this reading will have to be sustained over a long period of time. In the case of graded readers, this will be until the highest level has been reached and with un-simplified text reading far longer.

These claims; for speed, for confidence, for vocabulary acquisition, for writing skill and for the very necessary practice in the particular scanning style of extensive reading that utilizes those interactive skills described in my diagram, are the main ones in the case for the effectiveness of extensive reading in EFL language development.

Practical ways to maximize effectiveness

In Richards' *Profile of an Effective L2 Reading Teacher* (1989) he illustrates the importance of the role of the teacher in implementing an effective reading programme. He demonstrates how a teacher can include silent sustained reading in class time most effectively and offers practical suggestions for how to teach reading strategies including the idea of *the tool kit*. This is a kit of strategies that learners are encouraged to dip into and choose from to assist their understanding of a text. Although this approach may be seen as semi-extensive, it is a clear and helpful account of how it is

possible to adapt the ideology of extensive reading (autonomous, silent, learner led..) into a more easily monitored, pedagogically applied form. Each reader can be reading at his or her personal level, his or her own choice of book, and for the sustained period can be encouraged to make use of the tool kit of strategies to practice autonomous reading control but in a netted arena with the teacher at hand. In this way I think many learners can be encouraged to take the first step toward self-motivated extensive reading, in a secure environment.

In line with this, because the tool-kit mentioned contains strategy types, Carrell (1998) argues that second language learners should be *metacognitively* aware of effective interactive reading strategies; that learners should be cognitively aware of the reading process in order that they may be able to manipulate text with appropriate strategies. Certainly this would seem to be an important consideration. In the article '*Can Reading Strategies Be Successfully Taught*' Carrell outlines how three types of cognition awareness labeled '*declarative, procedural and conditional*' (by Paris, Lipson and Wixson in Carrell op,cit. 10) can be made accessible for utilization by all levels of learners.

As well as the ability to manipulate *and know about* appropriate reading strategies which cannot be dealt with in detail here, reading comprehension relies heavily on the reader's ability to relate information in the text to pre-existing cultural schemata. This is of particular concern in EFL reading because background knowledge and expectations vary widely from culture to culture. Steffenson (1998) exemplifies how misunderstanding occurs when cultural expectations of the marriage ceremony differ in the reading of a text around this theme by American and Indian subjects. Recall of the text differed revealing an angle of perception heavily influenced by pre-existing cultural values and perspectives.

This suggests that to maximize effectiveness, there may be a need to teach certain cultural schemata or background knowledge to readers before they embark on a particular reading assignment.

In the graded reader “*The Death of Karen Silkwood*” (Bookworms: level 2: Hannam: 1991) for example, there are several references to the trade union in the United States. Understanding the power of the union to help Karen is pivotal in understanding the significance of her actions. The word *union* for example appears in the glossary with a definition thus: “*a group of workers who join together to talk to managers about pay, hours of work, etc.*” This information is not really enough. The complete history of the trade union is not needed but some insight into the protective power that a working union can offer is important. In Japan trade unions have very little power and very low enrollment. My students were confused by this difference and needed to know that the union can be a powerful ally in circumstances like Karen’s where she was gathering incriminating evidence against her employers.

Finally, and to sum up; in order to maximize effectiveness of extensive reading we have to consider learners as individuals with specific wants, needs, lacks and aversions. These considerations have to be part of the equation; whether we introduce an extensive reading programme at all, the role of the teacher in it, how best to assess benefits and development (not discussed here) and above all, how to ensure that each learner’s particular needs and each reader type are accounted for in terms of content selection, topic and genre, and of how much teacher support and class back-up is needed for each individual. Evaluation should take into consideration the reader’s wants. For some, the very act of having to write a report or diary after reading may be de-motivating. These learners might benefit from a more oral based feedback system. The ability of extensive reading to develop target language skills is tied so closely to the sustained effort of the learner, aided by her teacher’s encouragement and at times interventional assistance, that for this reason alone an individualistic needs-focused approach to implementing extensive and graded reading programmes is vital.

Conclusion

In this paper I have tried to describe extensive reading as I understand it to be from a linguistic perspective. This led to a closer look at the process of reading itself - in a

parallel processing model. This model served as the catalyst for further discussion on how effective extensive reading is in promoting language development and reading skill. This discussion then led into how certain learners with handicaps of reluctance and impulsivity may be encouraged by and need to adapt traditional interpretations of extensive reading to suit their needs. I concluded that extensive reading is a potentially effective language development opportunity for many learners; that there appear to be few adverse results in research and most of the research to date looks hopeful and positive. However, caution needs to be exercised in advocating one programme to fit all; for by sweeping the extensive reading brush over a whole class of learners we may in fact be doing some learners harm. Individual learners should be consulted and their learning styles and reading types considered before extensive reading can reach its potential to stretch and promote target language development in the most effective way.

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