

CAPE Alumni Internet Connection: English Teacher Talk

CAPE Internet Talk was started as part of CAPE follow-up activities to continue ties with CAPE alumni and those who are interested in professional development in English teaching. It is hoped that this would increase our bond and aloha among former participants, and that the information in the TALK would help our alumni and friends/members review what they know and deepen their understanding of issues and interest in the ESL field.

Zarina's Discovery (or how one teacher found what was missing in her language classroom)*

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A slight smile spread across Zarina bt. Ibrahim's face as her class ended. She was pleased at the progress her students were making in learning to read English. Zarina had just finished a lesson on scanning. She had given the students an activity in which they had to find quickly certain information from an English newspaper. Most of them did it easily and accurately.

Zarina was teaching English to secondary school students in a fishing village in Terengganu, Peninsula Malaysia. She enjoyed her work. It was lessons such as the one that had just ended that fueled her enthusiasm for teaching. Of course there were frustrations, and times when she wondered if she was really a good teacher.

Zarina sat at her desk and reflected on the lesson. Yes, she thought, the primary goal for the class had been achieved. Her 40 students were able to scan with a good degree of accuracy. And the previous classes had also gone well. The students were slowly but steadily learning a number of skills and strategies that would help them in reading English.

But something was bothering Zarina. She couldn't quite figure out what it was. This "something" had been in the back of her mind for a month or so and recently had become more and more persistent.

"I wish I knew what it was," Zarina thought to herself. Rather than worrying about it, however, Zarina decided to take about 30 minutes and try to finish the latest John Grisham book she was reading. She really enjoyed reading and read as much as she could in English; she believed that it helped stop her from losing English and that it was a good source of new vocabulary.

After about five minutes, there was a knock on her door and one of her students entered. The student started speaking in Malay, but Zarina stopped her and told her to try to use English.

"Cikgu Zarina, I have question on scanning," the student began, using English as best she could. Then she stopped, and her eyes grew big.

"Is that English book?" she asked.

"Yes, it's an exciting story by John Grisham. He's one of my favorite authors." replied Zarina.

"You read English?"

"Yes, of course. I try to read two or three books a month. Now, how may I help you?" Zarina asked.

After the student had left, Zarina picked up her book and resumed her reading. But she was not able to concentrate. That “something” was back again, and this time she could not ignore it. There was a connection between the visit of her student and this “something.” Zarina just had to figure it out.

Her eyes glanced toward the John Grisham book she had just placed on her desk. She stared at it and then, all of a sudden, Zarina realized what had been bothering her. It hit her with such force that she almost fell off her chair.

“My students don’t read English! They never read English outside of my reading class!”

Over the next several days, Zarina thought about the fact that her students did not read English unless they were in her classroom and that they really didn’t understand, much less appreciate, the joys of reading in another language. At first she was upset and started to think that she was a failure as a teacher. She even thought about quitting. But she realized that she liked teaching and that she was probably a good teacher. So she decided that she had to change, to do something differently.

Zarina began by questioning her colleagues, the other English teachers at her school. That didn’t help much, and one even told Zarina that she should not worry about whether students read or liked reading English. He told Zarina that her job as a teacher was to make sure her students could pass the examinations.

Not being satisfied, Zarina looked through some journals. She found an article that described an approach to foreign language teaching called *extensive reading*. The more Zarina read, the more she became excited. On the spot, Zarina decided to learn all she could about extensive reading.

It took Zarina about three months to make a list of books and articles on extensive reading. She then tried to get a copy of as many as possible. Zarina also found an extensive reading Web site for extensive reading (<http://www.kyoto-su.ac.jp/information/er/er.html>) that was very helpful. Since she was a full-time teacher, Zarina did not have much extra time. But she used every spare second she had. This is what she learned.

What Is Extensive Reading?

Extensive reading is an approach to the teaching and learning of language that involves students in reading large quantities of material in the new language. The goal is to improve students' overall language proficiency and their attitudes toward the target language and motivation for learning. It can be blended into any language course and program, regardless of the focus or methodology.

Ten Principles:

Zarina learned that extensive reading as an approach to language teaching can be understood through ten principles:

1. The reading material is easy.

Learners read materials that contain few or no unfamiliar items of vocabulary and grammar. (A useful rule of thumb is no more than two unknown vocabulary items per page.) Learners at advanced levels of foreign language proficiency will be able to choose from reading materials written for native speakers of that language. Most learners, however, are at lower levels of proficiency. In many languages, books and magazines

have been especially written for language learners at different ability levels from beginner to advanced. If this *language learner literature* is not available, carefully chosen children's literature and (for high-intermediate learners) young adult literature may be suitable. The reading material in an extensive reading library must be subdivided into difficulty levels so that learners of various ability levels can find material that they can easily understand.

2. There is a variety of reading material on a wide range of topics.

This variety ensures that learners can find things they want to read, whatever their interests. Different kinds of reading material also encourage a flexible approach to reading. Learners are led to read for different reasons (e.g., entertainment; information; passing the time) and, consequently, in different ways (e.g., skimming; scanning; more careful reading).

3. Learners choose what they want to read.

Self-selection of reading material is the key to extensive reading. Learners are also free, indeed encouraged, to stop reading anything that isn't interesting or which they find too difficult.

4. Reading is individual and silent.

Learners read at their own pace. In some schools, there are designated silent reading periods when students read their self-selected books in the classroom. Most extensive reading, however, is homework. It is done in the students' own time, when and where students choose.

5. Reading speed is usually faster rather than slower.

Because learners read material that they can easily understand, it is an encouragement to fluent reading. Dictionary use is normally discouraged because it interrupts the reading process. Instead, learners are encouraged to ignore or guess at the few unknown language items they may encounter.

6. The purpose of reading is usually related to pleasure, information and general understanding.

In contrast to academic reading and the detailed understanding it requires, extensive reading encourages a variety of real-world reading purposes. Rather than 100% comprehension, sufficient understanding to achieve one's reading purpose is what is required.

7. Reading is its own reward.

Because a learner's own experience is the goal, extensive reading is not usually followed by comprehension questions. At the same time, it is common for teachers to ask students to complete some kind of follow-up activity after reading for a variety of reasons: to discover what the student understood and experienced from the reading; to keep track of what students read; to monitor student attitude toward reading; to link reading with other aspects of the curriculum. What is important is that any follow-up activity respects the integrity of the reading experience; the most successful activities are those that resemble what people normally do after reading.

8. Learners read as much as possible.

For the language learning benefits of extensive reading to take effect, a book a week is an appropriate goal. Books written for beginning language learners are very short, so this is normally a realistic target for learners of any proficiency level. Alternatively, teachers may set a minimum or target number of pages to be read per week or term.

9. The teacher orients and guides the students.

Students are normally not used to freedom and choice in school. When introducing extensive reading into the curriculum, the teacher must begin by explaining that extensive reading leads to language learning, and that choosing what to read is an essential part of extensive reading. A simple way for teachers to introduce extensive reading is to call it language practice: a way for students to practice the language that they have worked so hard to learn in the classroom.

Orientation continues with the methodology of extensive reading. Learners may need assistance in selecting appropriate reading material of interest to them. They may also need assurance that a general, less than 100%, understanding of what they read is appropriate for most reading purposes. It can be emphasized that there will be no test after reading. Instead, the teacher will be interested in the student's own personal experience of what was read--for example, was it enjoyable or interesting, and why?

10. The teacher is a role model of a reader.

Example is the most powerful instructor. If the teacher reads some of the same materials that the students are reading and talks to them about it, this both gives the students a model of what it is to be a reader and makes it possible for the teacher to recommend reading material to individual students. In this way, teacher and students can become an informal reading community, experiencing together the value and pleasure that may be derived from the written word.

What Zarina Liked About Extensive Reading:

Zarina saw that her approach to teaching reading involved her students learning skills and strategies. Her students did not read very much. This was a problem, Zarina learned, for we learn to read by reading, just like any other skill. We can't learn to ride a bicycle or to cook unless we actually spend time riding the bike or in the kitchen cooking. Nor can we learn to read unless we read.

Zarina also realized that she had paid no attention to the affective aspect of reading, that is, to ensuring that her students enjoyed reading in English. One of the primary considerations of an extensive reading approach is that learners experience reading as pleasurable and useful. When they discover this, they will start to do the reading necessary to become fluent and skilled readers. In addition, research suggested that the students' enthusiasm widens so that they develop positive attitudes toward and increased motivation for learning the new language.

A further reason that Zarina was attracted to extensive reading is because it helps students become autonomous and independent learners. In extensive reading, students take responsibility for their own learning; they decide what, when, how and even how much to read.

Some Answers to Questions:

In her research into extensive reading, Zarina learned that teachers had a number of concerns about that approach. Here are some of them and the answers she found:

- *Does extensive reading affect other aspects of second language learning?*

Yes. Research shows it to be related to gains in reading comprehension skills, vocabulary, and overall language proficiency including grammar, writing and spelling.

- *My students have to pass national examinations. Will time spent reading extensively help or hinder their doing well on such exams?*

Because students who read widely in the new language show overall increases in general language proficiency, they should do as well or even better than students who do not read extensively.

- *Students should read easy books, material that is specially written for learners. But I hear a lot about the benefits of reading authentic texts. Should our students be reading authentic materials?*

There is no agreement as to what *authentic* means. For the purposes of discussion, let's assume *authentic* means materials written for native readers. The problem with having beginning and intermediate EFL students read authentic texts is that it is much too difficult for them. When learners read difficult material, they tend to get frustrated and do not enjoy the experience.

In addition, when people say that learners should read authentic texts, they are confusing what we eventually want our students to do with the process of getting there. We should start where our students are and not where we want them to end up.

Finally, most of the major ELT publishers are turning out excellent, well-written language learner literature. It is exciting to think that the days of the stilted, poorly written simplified and adapted texts are behind us.

- *How can I tell if my students are actually reading?*

There are a number of clever activities that teachers can use to ensure that their students are reading. One easy way is to have brief discussions with your students individually in which you ask several well-chosen questions. This can help you determine quickly if a student has read the book.

- *What should my students do when they have finished reading a book?*

Have them read more. However, there are some good reasons for having students make use of what they have read. One reason relates to the previous question--you want to make sure that the reading is being done. Equally important, doing activities helps to build and maintain a community of readers in your classroom. Students will come to think of the classroom as an exciting place to share their reading experiences with their classmates. Post-reading activities are also excellent language learning experiences.

Zarina's Decision:

Zarina learned that having her students read extensively is a low-risk, high-gain activity. She also learned that it would take time, money and hard work to try to help her students to enjoy reading in English. She realized that not all of her students would become readers. However, she believed that the rewards made it worth doing, and she made a decision.

In the teachers' room after lunch one day, Zarina poured a cup of coffee. A slight smile spread across her face as she opened the first publisher's catalog. She found a list of fiction and non-fiction books for language learners. It was the first step.

Finally, here are some of the books and articles that were helpful to Zarina in learning about extensive reading.

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*Although names, places and events have been changed, this story is based on real people and experiences.

The complete reference for this article is:

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Please take the time to give us the addresses of anyone else you think might be interested in receiving this newsletter of the CAPE Internet Connection: English Teacher Talk. And don't forget to write us with any comments you might have. Mahalo!

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