



Targeting Literacy Goals

Paul Nation looks at the objectives of an extensive reading program and the conditions needed to achieve them

A growing number of studies have demonstrated the values of extensive reading for learners of English as a second or foreign language. These studies show that a sustained and well designed extensive reading program can result in a wide variety of benefits.

Here, we will give most attention to those benefits that relate to extensive reading, but as the research shows, extensive reading can have a variety of learning goals.

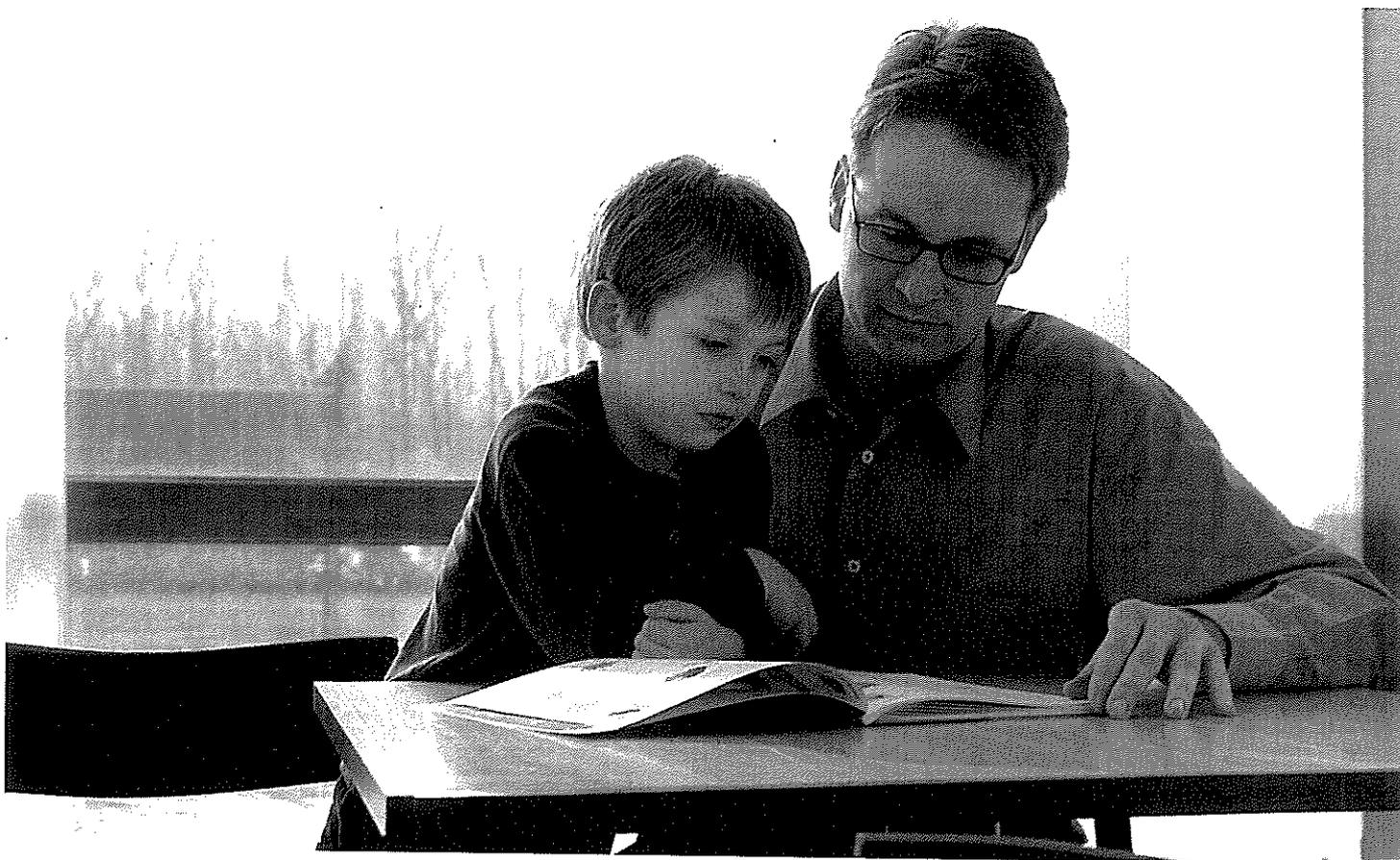
Language Learning Goals

One way of dividing up the goals of a language program is to separate out language, ideas and skills. Language goals include the learning of language items like vocabulary, and grammatical and discourse features. Ideas goals can include subject matter knowledge, knowledge of the target culture, and general knowledge. Skills goals can be divided into listening, speaking, reading and writing, and can be focused on accuracy or fluency.

The most obvious language learning goal in extensive reading is vocabulary growth. Somewhat surprisingly, vocabulary growth benefits are not as great as might be expected and depend upon some important conditions. Most studies show that the amount of vocabulary learned from reading just one graded reader is rather small. Among the best studies is that by Waring and Takaki (2003). In this study, learners read a simple graded reader, *A Little Princess* (OUP Bookworms Level 1). The reader was just under 6,000 words long

and contained 25 words which were unknown to the learners. It took the learners around an hour to read it. On average, the learners got just over ten items correct on the multiple-choice test taken immediately after reading the book (although this figure does not allow for guessing) and just under five on the vocabulary translation test. This is quite a good result for an hour's reading. A week later the number of items had dropped to eight and two, and three months later to six on the multiple-choice test and one on the translation test. This study showed that a small but significant amount of vocabulary can be learned from one graded reader, but that this knowledge will drop away if it is not strengthened by later encounters with the words.

It is thus important to realize that the vocabulary learning benefits from extensive reading are of at least two kinds. One involves gaining some knowledge of previously unknown words, and the other involves enriching and strengthening knowledge of words that have been met before. This strengthening effect is probably the more important of the two benefits. It is also clear from this study that it is important that an extensive reading program should involve a lot of reading. Some research has calculated that this should be at least one graded reader every one or two weeks (Nation and Wang, 1999). So, even though the vocabulary gains from reading one graded reader may be small, these gains accumulate and are strengthened in a long-term program. For this kind of learning to occur, the new vocabulary in a reader should not make up more than five percent – two percent of the running words (Hu and Nation, 2000). That is, there



should be less than one unknown word in every 20, ideally, one unknown word in every 50 running words.

There is also evidence that an extensive reading program can result in control of the grammatical features of the language. This evidence comes from the "Book Flood" research which we will discuss later in this article.

Ideas Learning Goals

There has not been much research specifically focused on learning ideas from extensive reading. This is possibly because extensive reading programs typically involve reading fiction texts where enjoyment is the focus rather than learning new ideas. Some studies have looked at whether extensive reading is enjoyable for learners. These studies have shown generally positive results. Certainly the skills and language knowledge gained from extensive reading will help with reading and gaining knowledge in content areas.

Skill Learning Goals

In the Book Flood studies (Elley, 1991; Elley and Mangubhai, 1981), three quarters of a regular EFL program was spent on extensive reading. This involved three out of the four hours a week devoted to English. A large number of appropriate, interesting and attractive books were made available for learners to read, and the teacher modeled and encouraged the reading. Learners read individually and at their own speed, choosing the books that interested them. The

main idea behind the Book Flood studies was that high interest, message-focused input would result in large amounts of different kinds of learning. These studies have supported this idea with spectacular results. In the early Book Flood study in Fiji, learners made 15 months progress in nine months compared to those who continued with the regular taught program. A year later, these gains were still maintained.

In the Book Flood studies, the measurement of learning was not limited to reading but also included tests of oral language and writing. Other studies have also found a positive effect on writing.

It has been suggested that there should be two strands to an extensive reading program. One of these would focus on providing opportunity to learn language items such as vocabulary and grammar, and to develop strategies like guessing from context. In this strand, only a small proportion of the language features would be outside the learners' previous knowledge. This reading should still be enjoyable and not involve a lot of dictionary use or assistance from the teacher.

The other strand would focus on fluency, helping learners make the best use of what they already know. In this strand, learners should be reading books that are well within their knowledge. They should not contain unfamiliar vocabulary or grammatical patterns. If a vocabulary test reveals that learners should be reading at Level 3 in the other strand of the course, then they should be reading books at Levels 1 and 2 in the fluency strand. Rereading books that they have read before is also a good thing to do in this strand. The purpose of



The Goals of Extensive Reading

LANGUAGE

- Learning new vocabulary
- Establishing and enriching previously met vocabulary
- Learning new grammatical structures
- Establishing previously met grammatical structures
- Becoming familiar with discourse features and patterns

IDEAS

- Gaining enjoyment from reading
- Getting information from the reading material e.g. learning about other cultures and the world

SKILLS

- Developing reading comprehension skills
- Becoming fluent in reading
- Developing knowledge to support written skills
- Developing knowledge to support oral skills



this strand is to develop speed of access to known language items and to strengthen and speed up reading skills. In many courses this strand is often neglected with the result that learners never get very good at using what they know. The small amount of research on the effects of extensive reading on reading fluency development indicates that extensive reading does improve fluency. If there was a specifically focused fluency development strand, this should have a striking effect on reading fluency as studies of second language speed reading programs using short texts have shown a strong effect (West, 1955; Bismoko and Nation, 1974).

The Book Flood studies and others like them were set up with the idea that most of the language course should involve extensive reading. However, there is plenty of evidence that the direct study and teaching of language features, and learning through oral skills and writing have very important contributions to make in a language course. An extensive reading program is an essential component in a well designed course, but it should not occupy more than about 20 percent of the time spent on the course, both in and out of class.

The Benefits of Extensive Reading

We have looked at the benefits of extensive reading across a range of goals and have noted that for most of these there is research evidence testifying to the positive effects. The quality and quantity of these effects depend strongly on the use of interesting and engaging reading material at a suitable level and on substantial amounts of reading.

When the language, ideas and skills benefits of extensive reading are all considered, then it is clear that an extensive reading program can make a very substantial contribution to a language program. **11**

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