

A Guide to Setting Appropriate Reading Targets for Extensive Reading

多読における適切な読書目標を設定するための指標

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ABSTRACT

To enable teachers to set measurable and fair reading targets for graded reading, the author used average word counts from major publishers to develop a simple rule of thumb. As many have found, setting an appropriate reading target for an extensive reading programme is not as straightforward as it might seem. A number of complex issues, such as how much reading learners need, and at which levels, makes target setting difficult. In order to justify the proposed rule of thumb, this paper explores how much reading is necessary for learners to be successful. The focus is on suitable reading volume and reading level.

KEYWORDS: extensive reading, reading, fluency, vocabulary development

要旨

教員がグレイディッドリーディングに対して測定可能で公平な読書目標を設定するために、著者は大手出版社の平均単語数を使用することで、分かりやすい指標を生み出した。多くの教員が直面しているように、多読において適切な読書目標を設定するのは容易なことではない。学習者がどのくらい読む必要があるのか、どのレベルかといった様々な問題が目標設定を困難にしている。本稿では、成功した学習者になるためにどのくらい読む必要があるのかということ考察し、提示している読書目標の適切さについて、主に、読書量とレベルに着目して議論する。

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper will discuss the setting of appropriate word targets for extensive reading (ER) programmes. It is the aim of this paper to advise teachers on suitable reading targets. It is sometimes the case that reading targets are set either too low or too high, or students read books that are not at a suitable level. Inappropriate targets and levels can have various negative effects such as minimal gains in reading proficiency and may be counterproductive to the goals of ER. It is hoped that this paper will go some way towards helping teachers select optimal reading goals. To do this, first the main goals of ER will be laid out. Then, the reliability of commonly suggested reading targets will be examined. Next, the amount of reading needed to reach the aforementioned goals of ER will be discussed. Finally, a method

for calculating reading targets will be presented.

2. WHAT ARE THE GOALS OF EXTENSIVE READING?

In order to know what constitutes an appropriate and worthwhile reading target for an ER programme we must first understand the goals of ER as a methodology. Nation and Wang (1999) state that ER goals "include gaining skill and fluency in reading, establishing previously learnt vocabulary, learning new vocabulary and grammar, and gaining pleasure from reading" (p. 356). Similarly, the Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics defines ER as an approach which is "intended to develop good reading habits, to build up knowledge of vocabulary and structure, and to encourage a liking for reading" (Richards, Platt, and Platt, 1992, p. 132 in Bamford & Day, 1998). Day and Bamford (1998) suggest as goals that students will "have increased word recognition ability... [and] read at an appropriate rate" (p. 45-46). From these examples, we can see that fluency, reinforcement of previously learnt vocabulary and grammar, and fostering a positive attitude toward reading in a second language are at the forefront of ER's goals.

3. WHAT IS THE MOST COMMON READING TARGET RECOMMENDATION?

As many may guess, as with any skill, "Reading must be developed, and can only be developed, by means of extensive and continual practice. People learn to read, and to read better, by reading" (Eskey, 1986, p. 21 in Day & Bamford, 1998, p. 4). "The more time allotted to a program, the more the students read, the greater the likelihood that they will become effective and efficient readers" (Day & Bamford, 1998, p. 46). Many studies have been conducted that back up these statements (see Day & Bamford, 1998, for an in-depth discussion of these studies), but what is the minimum amount of reading a learner should do if they want to make significant gains? The most common guideline given by ER advocates (Day & Bamford, 1998; Nation, 2009; www.erfoundation.org; www.robwaring.org) is one book a week at the learner's level. This simple piece of advice becomes difficult to follow however, when one discovers that different publishers, and even graded readers series from the same publisher, use different grading schemes. For example, a Penguin Readers level two book is not at the same level as an Oxford Bookworms level two book, and an Oxford Bookworms level two book is not even at the same level as an Oxford Dominoes level two book. Fortunately, standardising scales such as the Kyoto Scale and the Extensive Reading Foundation (ERF) Graded Reader Scale (www.erfoundation.org) can solve this problem.

Another complicating issue is the fact that books lengths can vary greatly. This is common, even among books from the same level, series, or publisher. For instance, Detective Work (Penguin Readers, level 4) is 10,933 words long while On the Beach (also Penguin Readers, level 4) is 32,655 words long. This kind of discrepancy means that even if students do read one book a week, the actual amount that each learner reads is likely to vary considerably, and some less motivated students may seek to lighten their workload by seeking out and reading short books. This of course means they will benefit less from the ER programme and, if students are being evaluated, will unfairly receive equal reward for less effort. A solution to this problem will be presented in the conclusion of this paper.

Obviously, the oversimplification present in the “one book per week” guideline, while having some merit in that it is likely to encourage a significant amount of reading, has the potential to have negative influences on an ER programme due to the discrepancies in book levels and lengths mentioned earlier in this section.

4. HOW MUCH READING IS NEEDED TO DEVELOP VOCABULARY?

Nation (2009) states that “one way an extensive reading programme can contribute to proficiency development is through vocabulary growth” (p. 54). Day and Bamford (1998) elaborate, claiming that “An extensive reading approach... ensures that students have the best possible chance to... learn words from context through multiple encounters and to become better readers so that incidental vocabulary learning becomes easier” (p. 18). Furthermore, Coady (1993, p. 18 in Day & Bamford, 1998) claims that “the incidental acquisition hypothesis suggests that there is gradual but steady incremental growth of vocabulary knowledge through meaningful interaction with text” (p. 17). Nation (2009) adds, however, that despite this optimism, incidental learning is fragile, and therefore, “it is important to have a quantity of input with substantial opportunities for vocabulary repetition” (p. 50) to reinforce learning. Nation (2009) also states that “it is important to make sure that there are repeated opportunities to meet the same vocabulary in reading, and these repeated opportunities should not be delayed too long” (p. 51). As Waring and Takaki (2003) found, over time, learnt vocabulary is forgotten when such opportunities no longer existed.

In a study which utilised the Oxford Bookworms series, Nation and Wang (1999) examined vocabulary learning possibilities using graded readers and found that in order to achieve sufficient repetition of the words at each level, learners need to read one book a week at levels 2 and 3 respectively, one and a half books at level 4, and two books at level 5 and 6 respectively per week. For reference, these levels correspond to Kyoto Scale levels 5, 6, 7, 8, and 9, and have average words counts of 5,973, 9,853, 15,881, 23,953, and 29,411 words respectively. Reading at this volume and pace ensures that the new words introduced at each level are met repeatedly and often enough that they can be learnt incidentally. However, reading two level 6 books per week, as Nation and Wang (1999) suggest is necessary for the acquisition of new words at that level, would amount to 58,822 words per week. It should be noted, that this suggestion is made with the caveat that, at higher levels, because the headwords occur with low frequency, a significantly larger amount of reading needs to be done to repeatedly encounter the headwords of that level. Nevertheless, if we imagine a fifteen week course, the projected reading target while reading at this rate would be 882,330 words; an unrealistic figure for most L2 learners. Using data from their study, Nation and Wang (1999) also concluded that in order to learn words through incidental acquisition it was necessary to read more books at higher levels than lower levels, and to proceed through the levels relatively quickly. They conceded, though, that this approach would be counterproductive to the goal of fluency development, as fluency development relies on reading easy books to build automaticity of previously learnt words. The notion that the goals of incidental vocabulary acquisition and fluency development are at odds to some degree will be dealt with in the conclusion of this paper.

5. HOW MUCH READING IS NEEDED TO DEVELOP FLUENCY?

Fluency development, one of the main goals of ER, involves large amounts of reading which can be of great benefit to learners. Beglar and Hunt's (2014) assertion that "reading fluency development is built on a foundation of large amounts of reading" (p. 32), has been echoed repeatedly by second language reading experts (Beglar & Hunt, 2014; Day & Bamford, 1998; Nation, 2009; Waring, 2009).

While it is true that a larger amount of reading will lead to more significant gains in fluency, it should be noted that even a limited amount of ER has been shown to have a positive impact on fluency. A compilation of studies by Beglar and Hunt (2014) demonstrated that both low intensity and relatively short ER programmes resulted in reading speed gains. For example, Sheu's (2003) investigation reported an average increase of 36.1 words per minute (wpm) during a low intensity programme, while Iwahori (2008), found an average increase of 28.64 wpm in a short programme. Sheu's (2003) study dealt with a low-intensity ER programme in which learners read only nine graded readers over the course of two semesters, while Iwahori's (2008) study examined an intensive reading programme that lasted just seven weeks. These results can be taken into account when considering a reading target for an ER programme.

To achieve significant gains in fluency, Beglar and Hunt (2014) found in their study that 200,000 words annually is the minimum amount that should be read at the beginner and intermediate levels. This goal seems to be backed by the results of the study which show that "the top quintile, who gained an average of 32.99 wpm, read an average of 208,607 standard words over the academic year" as well as Beglar and Hunt's impression that "a goal of reading 200,000 standard words in one year has been shown to be feasible in a variety of educational contexts" (p. 42). In this study, which focused solely on reading rate gains, it was also found that "lower-level simplified texts were more effective than higher-level simplified texts" in promoting fluency (Beglar & Hunt, 2014, p. 44).

The contrast between this finding, suggesting the efficacy of lower-level reading for fluency, and Nation and Wang's (1999) finding, suggesting the efficacy of higher-level reading for incidental vocabulary acquisition, adds further support to the notion that recommended reading levels differ depending on whether the goal of reading is fluency development or vocabulary acquisition. Again, this will be taken into consideration in the conclusion of this paper.

6. A METHOD FOR CALCULATING READING TARGETS

Minimum weekly reading targets using words read, and not books read, will be presented here. (For information on book word counts see the ERF Graded Reader List (<erfoundation.org>). The targets (see Table 1) are based on the average length of books from major publishers at each level (based on the Kyoto Scale). The rule of thumb I am suggesting is to use the average word count, at the appropriate level for each student, as a weekly reading target. As these are minimum targets, students should be encouraged to read more if possible by whatever means of motivation the instructor prefers. Of course, for significant reading gains, it is recommended that extensive reading be continued for several years.

Table 1

Average word counts of graded readers at different reading levels

| Kyoto Scale Level | Starter | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 |
|--------------------|---------|------|------|------|------|------|------|-------|-------|-------|
| Average word count | 545 | 1015 | 3459 | 3747 | 5163 | 8569 | 9890 | 13821 | 20153 | 22824 |

Note: *Recommended reading targets for each level (based on the Kyoto Scale), which have been calculated by simply finding the average word count of books from major publishers at each level.

As can be seen in Table 1, the length of books does not increase in equal increments through the levels. This is probably due to the variation of word counts between publishers combined with the fact that not all publishers have books available at each level. Despite word count variation and differences between publishers, however, if one does wish to designate measurable and fair reading targets for learners, then this table may be useful as a guide to enable them to do so.

7. CONCLUSION

The complicating factors of setting appropriate reading targets for an ER programme include the use of different grading schemes by publishers, as well as variations in the amount of ER and the way that ER should be done to achieve different goals (i.e., vocabulary development or fluency development). It has been demonstrated that the common recommendation of reading one book a week at the appropriate level works well as general advice, but needs qualification because there is significant variation in the length of books at each level depending on publisher and series. Other studies in ER have also identified that gains in fluency and overall reading proficiency are more achievable than gains in incidental vocabulary acquisition. And therefore, these goals should be prioritised in the language classroom. If reading large amounts is one of the best ways to become a good reader, and if vocabulary can be learnt in other ways such as with flash cards, it makes sense to set a minimum reading target that is more conducive to fluency development than to vocabulary acquisition. This seems prudent since, at advanced levels, intensive study that pays direct attention to low-frequency vocabulary appears to be more efficient and practical than relying on incidental acquisition by way of extensive reading. This view is supported by Brown (2008) who says that "There is no doubt that for simply learning the meaning of words, direct intensive methods are far more efficient than extensive reading" (p. 239), and Paribakht and Wesche (1997, in Huckin & Coady, 1999) whose study showed that reading coupled with vocabulary instruction leads to quantitatively and qualitatively superior gains when compared to reading alone.

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