

The Teacher Development SIG in Dialogue: An Interview with the Extensive Reading SIG's Mark Brierley

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Michael: Thank you to Mark for stepping in for Joanne Sato as a last minute change. I'd like to begin by saying that we recognize that the six people speaking in this forum are all white men, and that we need to do better and will make it our goal to provide more diversity in these forums in the future. That said, we're very happy to have Mark here to talk to us. I wanted to reach out to the Extensive Reading (ER) SIG in particular for this forum because, as a fan of ER myself, I've been to a lot of their activities and there was actually a good maybe hour-and-a-half to two-hour run yesterday when we were just going to the same presentations, because ER is so active and so well represented at events like this with presentations throughout the day. But I also feel that ER is a bug that you have to catch and not everyone has caught it. So I'm hoping that today Mark can show some of the great things that the ER SIG does, especially for you who haven't employed ER so much. So with that said Mark would you mind just introducing yourself and explaining your role at the ER SIG?

Mark: Thank you Mike. My name is Mark Brierley. I teach at Shinshu University in Matsumoto. I've been involved with the SIG for about 10 years now. I met Daniel Stewart at a JALT conference and he seemed very active. I joined the SIG and started off doing nothing. But they used to have their forum at the JALT International Conference—the ER colloquium—followed by an Annual General Meeting (AGM), and they used to shut the doors to stop anyone escaping, so they'd all stay for the AGM. I managed to avoid getting volunteered into a position one year but the following year I started helping Daniel doing the newsletter and then after a while I took over as editor of the ER SIG newsletter which I'm still doing now.

Mike: Can you talk about the SIG's goals as a whole. What kind of activities do you do and how do you achieve those goals?

Mark: Well the SIG's mission is to encourage more people to do extensive reading. We hold a seminar each year. We're also involved in the Extensive Reading World Congress which is held every two years. Two years ago it was in Tokyo. This year it is held in Taiwan in August which is very convenient if you live in Japan. We also have a newsletter. If you don't have one please grab a newsletter on your way out. If you do have one please grab another one. And we also have an online journal for more academic research.

There are two parts to our mission. One of them is persuading people to do extensive reading—because it's obvious that you should do extensive reading. And the

other part is to get more quality research to demonstrate how effective extensive reading is. And this is very difficult because I think for a start all language-based research is difficult. A lot of it is not very good and it's very difficult because there are so many factors that come into language that you can't possibly control for all the different variables. Very often you see research papers where they've done a treatment. For example I saw one where they were doing extensive reading and looking at grammar, so they had two groups of students. One group they just told to read the books and enjoy the books and ignore the grammar, and the other they told them to read the books and look out for the grammar. And then they tested to see who had noticed more grammar. And they found that the group who had been told to notice the grammar had noticed more grammar. This doesn't really help us very much except that some of the students were listening to what the teacher told them to do, which in itself may be a useful finding. There's a lot of research out there and a lot of it is not very good. It's very difficult to find good research but that's one thing that the SIG supports. At this year's international conference in Nagoya in November, Rob Waring will be speaking at the ER colloquium on the subject of where extensive reading research is now, and where we are going.

Mike: (to audience) How many of you identify as ER practitioners in your own context? Okay it's about half. I think it would be useful if you could just very simply explain what extensive reading is.

Mark: Extensive Reading is reading a lot of easy, enjoyable books. That's Mark Helgesen's definition of extensive reading.

Mike: Yeah I think that that's broad and simple. In that same vein what are some common misconceptions about ER that exist.

Mark: Oh, "We do ER... I got my students to read *Wuthering Heights* over a 15 week semester." That's not ER.

I think there are lots of hurdles to doing ER. There are people who kind of think it's a waste. Like, these books are far too easy and "our students know 5000 words. They have a vocabulary of 5000 words. Why are they reading these easy books?" Well, they learnt those 5000 words over six years and the most frequent thousand words, they haven't looked at for the last five years. The ones they learned in the last year of high school... If you look at vocabulary frequency then those first thousand words are seventy five percent of the English language, of everything that is written in the English language. The sixth thousand are about half a percent, and the way that schools often work in Japan is they have a thousand

words a year that they have to learn, and so they teach the next thousand each year.

When you look at the high school textbooks, what they've done in order to get those thousand very low frequency words is found a very difficult passage in English, then taken out all the easy words to make it fit into the textbook. So in fact if you look at difficulty of reading, the high school textbooks in Japan are more difficult than even most native-speaker focused books. There's this idea that when you're trying to get them to read something that's got 200 head words, it's far too easy. I guess fluency is something that is often forgotten in the scramble for more vocabulary and more grammar.



Mike: I'd like to pivot to the conference theme, the concept of teacher efficacy and just ask you to summarize some other methods employed within ER to assess student learning, as I think our efficacy should be defined by how much students are learning right? How can you prove that ER works?

Mark: Short answer: you can't.

Mike: OK, moving on...

Mark: No, I think because it's holistic language acquisition and a lot of the testing is very specific and it's looking at elements and looking at the nuts and bolts, while extensive reading is looking at their whole ability and I think there are all manner of benefits from extensive reading that are much bigger than any single test or indeed any kind of assessment.

Whenever you try and assess something there are two conflicting challenges. I guess the problems are that you want your students to read, as you remember "extensive" means "a lot" and, for practical purposes, a lot is hundreds of thousands of words, so you want your students—you need your students—to read that much. Where there is research a lot of it is on how many words you need to show progress. According to research by Hitoshi Nishizawa in a six-year combined high school and college, he found about one hundred thousand words is

how many words a student needs to read to break the translation habit, for them to read without translating without the natural knee jerk reaction to seeing something in a foreign language that you don't know. It's quicker to translate it into your language in order to understand it and to break that habit takes about 100,000 words.

He then found about three hundred thousand words is how many words you need in order to start getting positive results in formal, discrete-item language tests. So that's about three hundred thousand words. If your students have to read that many words, for a start if you want to test whether they've read each one of those words, that's going to be incredibly cumbersome. It's either going to be impossible or very intrusive, and there's a great danger that the assessment will put them off reading, especially when their fluent reading level is at a very low level and the kind of books they're reading are only a few hundred words long. If they have to read, and then if you're expecting them to write a book report they're going to spend an hour writing a few words which is going to be very painful and very time consuming for them. You're going to pick this up and think, "Well, this doesn't really show me whether they read it or not." So there's far too much writing for them if they do book reports and far too little writing for you in order to prove that they've read what they've read.

So the short answer is basically you can't possibly test with 100 percent reliability whether they have read the quantity that they need to read. There are various other ways. MReader and XReading are two systems that do have some kind of accountability. There are also various kinds of peripheral activities that you can do related to books that students have read which will be difficult for them to do if they haven't read the books. And very simple things like get the students to read in class and spend some class time reading.

Personally, I think it's very important to spend some of your class time reading because you can see whether they are reading or not. I mean they may just have their eyes open and be flicking over the pages. And of course there'll always be some people who will do that. But I think also it's very important to show the students that extensive reading is important: it's so important, we're going to spend some of our valuable class time reading, and the message that you send by spending time reading I think is very powerful as well.

If assessment is basically impossible, what you can do is just try and assess as many different points around the reading as possible. Also, I just trust my students and the fact that I'm trusting them I think gives them learner agency. One of the great things about extensive reading is it really puts the control into the students. I'm not going to tell you exactly which book to read. I'm gonna give you reading time in class but you can read at home, you can read wherever you want to outside the class. You can read which book you want; if you don't like the book just stop reading it, and go and pick up another book.

You don't need to read the whole book. When I read a book I don't do a test on it and I don't write a book report,

so I don't see why you should do that when you're reading a book in a foreign language.

Mike: The purpose of the report is only because you need to be assessed. That's what it comes down to?

Mark: Yes. Right.

Mike: Well I'd like to stay with the topic of assessment for the next line of questioning. I wanted to take on the role of one of my colleagues who kind of scoffs and laughs at extensive reading. On the topic of assessment. I think that there's a range of ways to assess that can be on one side a huge burden for the teacher to work through whether students have read -- reports and so on, if the teacher takes the time to do so. But on the other extreme, it can be very unsatisfying for the student if they just list their books and the teacher checks them off. How can we find a happy medium to assess effectively and satisfactorily?

Mark: I think just the simpler record of books, let the students say which books they've read and trust them, with some monitoring; for example if your student has read four Harry Potter books in a week in the wrong order, that's a bit suspicious. You have an idea of what reading level your students are, and if they're reading books that are way out of their level. If they say they've read a book that you know is not in the library, that's also something that you can bring up with the student, and maybe ask them where they found the book. Another thing is that sometimes I think our students mostly ignore what we say and copy people. Basically people copy what other people do. If we're trying to find the easiest, laziest way of doing things then our students will also find the easiest, laziest way of doing things and to some extent we need to try.

Mike: That's very true. So my colleague would say, holding a book called Three Great Works of Shakespeare that's maybe half a centimeter thick, "Is this really great works of Shakespeare?" Can graded literature have literary value and does that matter for extensive reading?

Mark: Yes. Yeah of course it has value. Shakespeare, apparently, used to edit the works of Shakespeare and when he was putting on a play he would sometimes add scenes and sometimes take out scenes, and sometimes the words would change. He wouldn't always have the same lines. Sometimes the actors would come in and say something different. Shakespeare is not set in stone.

Every single work of literature has been written for a particular audience at a particular level, often a particular age, sometimes a particular person: Alice in Wonderland is an example of a book that was written for one person, and everything is edited. Works of literature are often changed and adapted when they're translated.

If you read Shakespeare in Japanese, is that still Shakespeare or what? Shakespeare also spoke very different English; the language has changed a great deal since the first Elizabethan times. I think David Crystal has done work trying to reconstruct what Shakespeare actually sounded like. If you heard a Shakespearean play, if you could go back in time you wouldn't understand a word of it. So when we hear Shakespeare's plays being delivered in modern English then it's all... Literature... This idea of some books being sacred and this is an authentic text is I think not really relevant. Everything is adapted all the time.

The other thing is, when you say the argument: can students appreciate literature if it has been adapted? Well they can't appreciate literature in its original form because it's often much too difficult for them. So maybe eventually their English will get to a level where they can truly appreciate the literature in its original form, but appreciating in a simplified or modified form is a really important step. So that's a lot better than nothing.



Mike: Thank you. We're running out of time but I'll try to just ask two more questions, first one more challenging. You spoke before about trusting students that they're following the rules and I completely agree with that. We need to build an atmosphere of trust. But as you said, students do try to cheat and they get better at cheating over time. In an exit survey that I gave out last year a lot of the students who went through three years of ER expressed frustration that their classmates were cheating the system. How much should we and how much can we address noncompliance with ER?

Mark: This is a very difficult question. I think the bigger your programs are the more difficult it gets, and when you start to have programs across different teachers it becomes even more difficult. I think that's an ongoing question. In a way, if you make it more difficult to cheat, the students will just try harder to cheat, and be more difficult to find.

Mike: Right.

Mark: So, if it's easy to cheat it's easier to catch them. You can see it and then you can catch people cheating and make it known that you know that they didn't read Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix.

Mike: That's interesting because I just add more and more rules over time to the point that I forget all the rules.

Mark: Yeah I think that's what tends to happen is that we make rules and the rules become more and more complicated and often that's working against us, because some students will spend a lot more effort—as you know if you have been a student yourself once—you'll spend much more effort avoiding doing the work. For example when I'm typing something on a computer, I'll use copy and paste to copy this word from over here and it would've been much quicker just to type of the word, but I'm going to use copy and paste because I can, and I think students are like that as well. So fewer rules!

Mike: To conclude. Do you have any messages for anyone who might be interested in getting involved with the SIG and how they can go about doing that?

Mark: Yes, please, please get involved! To stay in contact, come along to one of the ER SIG events at JALT International.



Bios

Michael Ellis is the EFL program coordinator at International Christian University High School. He is interested in teachers' reflective practice among many other topics, and is currently program chair of TD SIG.

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