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Reading Engagement

Big Idea

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Reading Intensively and Extensively

Reading is often viewed as an integral part of learning. One requires the ability to read to learn new things and through reading, one becomes a better learner. We speak to the guest editor for this issue, NIE's English Language Senior Lecturer, Dr Willy Ardian Renandya, on why reading is important and how different kinds of reading have different learning benefits.

"It is my dream to write a book that uses *simple* language to explain *complex* ideas," Willy, who is part of the English Language & Literature Academic Group shares.

Willy acknowledges that it is not as easy as it sounds. To be able to write using simple language, one has to be competent in both intensive *and* extensive reading. These are two different yet complementary reading approaches that he believes are important to have for learners to succeed academically, as they help students become critical and fluent readers.

So what exactly is intensive and extensive reading?

Intensive Reading

Going deep into the texts; in a nutshell, this is what intensive reading is about.

"The goal of intensive reading in the school context is to equip learners with certain reading skills and strategies," Willy explains. "These skills and strategies are valued in school situations because students often have to deal with demanding texts during examinations."

These include inferencing and summarizing skills—skills that enable students to think critically about texts they have read. These texts are typically short; about one or two pages long.

Depth of vocabulary knowledge is extremely important. It shows how well you know a word. And if you know a word very well, you can use it creatively and in different situations.

- Willy Ardian Renandya,
English Language & Literature
Academic Group, NIE



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Students learn a lot from reading extensively. When they read a variety of texts, they also learn about words as they are used in different contexts.

- Willy on the benefits of extensive reading

Willy Ardian Renandya is a Senior Lecturer in the English Language & Literature Academic Group at NIE. His research interests include foreign language pedagogy, extensive reading, and language testing and curriculum development.

“Texts in intensive reading are challenging and usually more difficult than what students can handle on their own,” Willy adds. “So teachers will have to design their lesson in such a way that students can process the content of the reading passage efficiently.”

Typically, intensive reading is also accompanied with a series of questions that students have to answer. These questions require students to step into the shoes of the character(s) in the story to be able to answer them effectively. Sometimes, students also write book summaries, which require quite a bit of thinking.

To do well in intensive reading, one also needs to be able to read *extensively*.

Extensive Reading

“The goal of extensive reading is very different from intensive reading,” Willy explains. “Extensive reading is basically reading widely for pleasure and not for academic purposes.” By “reading widely”, Willy is referring to a variety of books of different genres.

Simply put, the ultimate goal of extensive reading is to develop a good reading habit; one that enables students to continue reading their favourite books outside the classroom. This means that students are able to read independently with little or no help from their teachers because extensive reading materials are typically less complex and easier to digest.

“Extensive reading is pleasurable,” Willy explains, “and when things are pleasurable, you will want to repeat the experience again.” Before long, students will find themselves picking up the habit of reading.

And when students read extensively and widely, their vocabulary will also improve greatly.

Reading Widely for Vocabulary Knowledge

“Students learn a lot from reading extensively,” Willy shares. “When they read a variety of texts, they also learn about words as they are used in different contexts.”

For example, the word “table” can have various meanings depending on the context (i.e., sitting at the table and calculating data based on a table). The repeated exposure of the same words used in different situations allows students to develop a depth of vocabulary knowledge, not just breadth, or what is known as surface-level knowledge.

This is something that many schools recognize. To help students learn better, they have introduced various forms of extensive reading programmes.

“Depth of vocabulary knowledge is extremely important,” Willy explains. “It shows how well you know a word. And if you know a word very well, you can use it creatively and in different situations.” Ernest Hemingway’s *The Old Man in the Sea* is an example of a book that uses simple language to describe complex ideas, Willy shares.

But most of the time, extensive reading programmes are not as straightforward because some students might not be familiar with selecting suitable books for themselves. The teachers then have an important role to play in helping them tackle this problem by providing additional support during the book selection process.

Supported Extensive Reading Programme

“Many schools look at extensive reading as self-directed or independent reading,” Willy explains. “But the reality is that many students do not know how to read on their own!”

To overcome this problem, Willy suggests that teachers help students pick out suitable books. This refers to books that are within their reading competency level and that are also enjoyable to read (see box story next page for the different levels of reading difficulty).

“Some books that students pick for themselves might either be too easy or too difficult,” Willy explains. “This is something that schools need to pay attention to when implementing an extensive reading programme.”

Willy also observes that teachers should read together with their students during the reading period to further support students in their extensive reading journey. “Teachers should send

a strong and consistent message to students that they value reading and that they too enjoy reading widely.”

As fiction author John Green once said, “Ultimately, what I like about reading together is that we all make it happen together.” So, collective reading, and sharing thoughts and opinions about those books together with students is definitely one way to inculcate a love of reading in them.

The Three Levels of Reading Complexity

According to Senior Lecturer Willy Ardian Renandya, there are typically three different levels of difficulty or complexity in the context of reading. These are, in order of difficulty (easiest to hardest):

- 1. Independent level:** This refers to texts that one can read on their own without any additional help.
- 2. Instructional level:** Slightly harder than the first one, the instructional level refers to the teaching level—not too easy but not too difficult either. At this level, there are usually teaching points with vocabulary or grammatical features.
- 3. Frustration level:** This refers to texts that are beyond one’s reading competency level.
“Extensive reading materials are usually at the independent level,” Willy explains. “These are reading materials that students can handle without any help from their teachers.”

Research

Effective Library Spaces in Schools

Many people see libraries as accessible, shared spaces where one can read and search for information. But how effective a space are these libraries actually? An NIE Assistant Professor decided to embark on a research journey to find out how library spaces can be effectively maximized to encourage students’ reading and learning.

School Library Underutilized

When Assistant Professor Loh Chin Ee was conducting research in schools, she found herself waiting in school libraries in between sessions. This resulted in an interesting observation: Students were not going to the library to read.

“This then sparked my interest to begin thinking about why students use or do not use the school libraries,” Chin Ee, who is with the English Language & Literature Department at NIE, shares.

For most avid readers, the library is where they are transported into a different space with every book that they read. While the school library should be a central hub for reading, things may be a little different in reality.

Following a school-wide survey, Chin Ee concluded that the library was indeed underutilized and this spurred her to examine why this was so and how to improve the use of libraries.

Mapping the Library

As part of her study, Chin Ee maps the space of the library to understand how social relations are shaped by the organization of space. This includes studying the layout, furniture and visuals in the library to help her understand the relationship between space, and how students are encouraged by the space towards certain kinds of behaviours and social interaction.

“For example, in one library, the tables were arranged in a large circle as the space was used as an extra classroom,” Chin Ee shares. In another instance, the placement of various



Chin Ee is interested in exploring library spaces and their impact on reading.

Very often, we ask why students don't go to the library. Rather than implying that students are the problem, we should look at how the library space or structure can be improved.

- Loh Chin Ee

English Language & Literature
Academic Group, NIE

comfortable armchairs and sofas around the library may encourage silent reading. Having round tables or sofa sets may also encourage collaboration and discussion.

"I also look at the kinds of displays the library has," Chin Ee adds. "This includes posters, art and even craft materials by the students themselves."

By examining these visuals, Chin Ee hopes to understand what they communicate to students about reading and the use of the library space.

Space, Not Students

"Very often, we ask why students don't go to the library," Chin Ee says. "Rather than implying that students are the problem, we should look at how the library space or structure can be improved."

Interviewing students with varying reading competency levels, Chin Ee then discovers an unusual response from them: Detention students in this school were sent to the library.

"I realized that many schools send their students to the library for detention," she shares. "This sends out a message to these students that libraries are negative spaces."

It is known that students get emotionally attached to different spaces within the school. In this case however, the punishment creates a "dis-attachment" to the libraries. Student feedback also further confirms that not many students visit the library, Chin Ee says.

To put it simply, there was nothing interesting enough at the library to draw them in.

More than Just a Library Space

Why should students go to the library and what can we do to make that happen? These are some questions that Chin Ee asks herself during her research.

"The library could be an emotional space that provides warmth and comfort, but we also need programmes," Chin Ee says. "The idea is to draw students into the library so they can see the relevance of the space." This can be achieved through activities such as book selection and author talks.

Progressing further into her study, Chin Ee finds that the role of libraries is also changing in the 21st century. On top of inculcating a love of reading in students, libraries today also play a big role in teaching them information literacy and how to be critical consumers of information.

"If you think of the library as a space for teaching students critical information literacy, you will need to teach students how to select books and sort out the information they get in both books and the Internet," Chin Ee explains.

Training Library Coordinators

Chin Ee hopes to work with MOE to enhance the professional development of existing school Library Coordinators who have little or no library background or training. This role is distinct from library assistants who typically manage the administrative aspects of the day-to-day operations of the library.

"Currently, our Library Coordinators are subject teachers who also have the responsibility of managing the library," she explains. "They may have a team to help them in some schools but may lack the expertise to do book selection and train students in information literacy."

In other countries such as the US and Australia, teacher-librarians are qualified teachers who also hold a Master's Degree in Library Science. Their job scope includes curriculum planning and working with English and other subject teachers to plan lessons. Teacher-librarians may also suggest books and online resources that could be useful in lessons.

Therefore, Chin Ee acknowledges the importance of training Library Coordinators in Singapore schools, and providing them with the skills and tools to manage their roles well. All this goes towards maximizing the potential of school libraries so that students are drawn to visit on their own accord.

At the end of the day, it is every teacher's wish that students see libraries as a positive space for reading and learning. As Chin Ee puts it: "Reading is important because you find out about yourself and the world, and it also stretches your thinking!"

Loh Chin Ee is Assistant Professor with the English Language & Literature Academic Group at NIE. Her research interests include literature and literacy education, reading and school libraries.

Reading Deeply, Widely and Broadly

Creating a school-wide reading culture is no mean feat. Not only is the support and involvement of all teachers crucial, it can also take months or years of experimenting to refine programmes and realize a shared learning vision. We speak to three teachers from Edgefield Secondary School about their school-wide reading programme and how it benefits their students.

Famous author Neil Gaiman once said at a lecture he gave in London: “The simplest way to make sure that we raise literate children is to teach them to read, and to show them that reading is a pleasurable activity” (Gaiman, 2013).

This is what teachers from Edgefield Secondary School are working towards through their Intensive and Extensive Reading Programme. Initiated by Vice-Principal Mr Tan Chai Hok in 2013 with teachers selecting newspaper articles for students to acquaint them with current affairs, the programme has since evolved into a comprehensive, school-wide effort to foster a love of reading in all students.

All Hands on Board

In 2014, a reading committee was formed to coordinate different aspects of the school’s reading programme.

Teachers play different roles in the committee, says Head of Department (English) Ms Tan Yih Tyan. To ensure a proper structure within the committee, she and Literature teacher Mr Brennan Kwa work closely to plan a customized reading schedule and activities for each level.

Each English Language teacher is assigned a different topic or genre and contributes four articles to a reading repository.

“Everyone contributes. That is how we came up with a whole repository of articles for each level,” explains Yih Tyan. “At the end of the year, the committee gets feedback from the teachers and reviews the articles to ensure they are interesting and relevant.”

Sparking Students’ Interest

Students read and learn from these articles during their dedicated weekly or fortnightly reading periods.

“But the way to kill their love for reading is to make it seem like it is an extension of an English lesson,” says Brennan. And so, teachers include a mix of both fiction and non-fiction topics outside of the school curriculum. The topics include sports, science, sci-fi, fantasy and even horror.

The Vice-Principal also supports the programme by contributing articles and his own writing. Some teachers also include comics in the reading articles or get students to view short clips during the reading lesson.

“We do this because we want to inculcate a love of reading in students,” Brennan explains. “These are things that students don’t always encounter if left to read on their own.”

Reading together with the students, the teachers then try to engage them by bringing them through a series of reflective discussion questions that are tailored to evoke various emotions and critical responses from students as well as encourage them to think critically.

Nurturing Engaged Readers

There are various ways to conduct a reading session in the classroom. Some teachers read the first paragraph out-loud to set the mood and context for students to continue on their own, while others assign pre-reading tasks or write pertinent questions on the board before asking their students to read.



(From left) Nur Shahidah, Brennan Kwa and Tan Yih Tyan are part of the reading committee at Edgefield Secondary School.

The way to kill (students’) love for reading is to make it seem like (the reading programme) is an extension of an English lesson.

- Brennan on why school reading programmes should be carefully planned

Reference

Gaiman, N. (2013, October). *Neil Gaiman: Reading and obligation* [Video file]. Retrieved from <https://readingagency.org.uk/news/blog/neil-gaiman-lecture-in-full.html>

Following the reading session, about 3–4 questions pertaining to the topic of the texts are tabled. “We ask them questions such as: *What would you do if you were in the shoes of this person? Would you do something different? Do you agree with the opinions of the writer? What would you like to add?*” shares Yih Tyan.

The aim is not just to improve literacy, but also promote deeper engagement with texts.

“We want students to have an idea of what is going on around the world,” Yih Tyan adds. “By asking purposeful questions, teachers can encourage reflection on issues and even develop empathy in students for the people and characters they read about.”

Brennan chimes in, “When you are reading, you can be a prince, a dragon, a 10-year-old, or anything you want to be. It makes them see things differently.”

Reading Far and Wide

This intensive reading in the classroom is further complemented by the school’s Extensive Reading Programme. Regular school library visits are scheduled for students to pick what they want to read and build a habit of reading for pleasure.

“We hope that by allowing them to choose what they want to read, they will find reading more enjoyable.” To further increase their interest, the reading committee also conducts monthly library quizzes that students can take part in and win small tokens of appreciation such as bookstore vouchers.

“We ask them simple questions that require them to pop by the library to find the answers like ‘Give the title of one book that is featured in the library this month’ and ‘Which section in the library can you find this particular book?’” Yih Tyan adds. “We hope that while they are there, they will see a title they like and borrow it.”

These library visits are not just limited to the school library. Students are also encouraged to visit the public libraries on their own and loan books that they find interesting.

Reading as a Means, Not an End

Keen to make reading an even more enriching experience for learners, the teachers are exploring creative extensions to the reading programme.

One such extension was introduced by Art and Drama teacher Ms Nur Shahidah. She runs a storytelling programme for Secondary 1 students where she trains them in Speech and Drama, and challenges them to come up with a performance based on a script written by her.

“You can see how the students interpret the script and present it differently,” says Yih Tyan. Reading is involved, but planning an entire performance goes beyond just reading and shows students how reading can lead to a meaningful task.

Besides the performance, Shahidah has other plans on how to build on her students’ learning.

“In Term 2, I taught them storytelling. During storytelling class, I introduce

a book from the children’s section of the Singapore collection,” she shares. After that, students go to the public library to borrow a book from the same section to discuss in class.

“In Term 3, students are encouraged to use the books that they borrow to do puppetry.”

Gradually Loving to Read

Brennan believes such enrichment programmes are important to inspire a love of reading in students. Instead of forcing reluctant readers to read, the teachers hope that the exposure to these reading programmes will “capture their attention or interest on a particular day so that they find themselves wanting to read”.

“When children read widely, it will naturally translate to better English results,” says Yih Tyan.

Today, their students write better and class discussions have improved. The reading programme even ties in well with other parts of the curriculum such as Social Studies where knowledge of current affairs is required.

However, Brennan cautions that teachers who are thinking of starting their own reading programmes should not do so for the sake of grades. He emphasizes, “If you start out with *I am doing this for the grades* then you are missing the point. We do this because we want to inculcate a love of reading!”

Tan Yih Tyan is Head of Department (English), **Brennan Kwa** is a Literature teacher, and **Nur Shahidah** is an Art and Drama teacher. They teach at Edgefield Secondary School.

Nurturing a Community of Avid Readers

Prior to joining the National Library Board (NLB) as an Associate Librarian, Karthik Ramasamy had an ambitious goal—to build a community of avid readers and writers. He shares with us how he founded the Book Rangers Club, a bilingual English-Tamil book club, and how he made it a success.

The Book Rangers Club was launched in 2015. Two series of eight sessions each are conducted per year, with the first half of each series focusing on English books and the other half on Tamil books. These sessions are generally conducted in Tamil to help young children, who are all Tamil-speaking, feel more comfortable.

At the beginning of the series, children aged 7–10 are introduced to different genres of literature in both languages. As they progress into the series, they are guided to write book reviews and think critically about the stories they read. A creative writing component at the end of the series allows them to recreate stories by writing new endings to them.

Q: What motivated you to start the Book Rangers Club?

Before I joined NLB in 2014, this was something I had already been thinking about. Even though students in Singapore go through bilingual education, I feel that the younger generation, in particular Generation Z, is not effectively bilingual.

They are very comfortable speaking the main language (English), but not the vernacular (Tamil). They struggle to cope with both languages. I saw a need to help them become comfortable with reading and writing in their vernacular.

Another source of motivation was wanting to build up the Tamil junior literature collection in the libraries. It's not that we are not buying books, but the Tamil literary landscape—especially the children's collection—has been shrinking over the years. The publishing rates are so low that we really need to do something about this.

That is why I created the club; first to cultivate reading interest in children, then to nurture them into aspiring authors.

Q: How would you gauge the success of this book club?

This book club runs in collaboration with the Singapore Indian Development Association (SINDA). One of their objectives is to enhance the literacy skills of participants over the 16-week course. We assessed the participants' reading and writing skills before and after the programme, and found that most of them improved. The children are now more comfortable reading in their Mother Tongue, and many have picked up a reading habit, judging by the increase in the number of books they borrow.

One success story I like to share is about this boy who hated reading. After attending the first session, he skipped the next two sessions. When his parents brought him back again, he ended up enjoying the sessions very much. He is now voluntarily turning up for all the other sessions and has since formed consistent and healthy reading habits. To me, it's a good start.

We have also expanded from a club with just 30 children to three clubs across the island with 118 Tamil children currently benefitting from this programme.

Q: How is the Book Rangers Club unique in its approach towards reading?

Children benefit through exchanges with facilitators and peers. As you read and share, you broaden your understanding and perspectives. You also critically analyse the author's writing and ask yourself questions such as "Am I comfortable with this?" or "Am I convinced by the author's choice to end the story in this particular manner?" and so on.



Karthik Ramasamy is the founder of Book Rangers Club at the National Library Board.

As you read and share, you broaden your understanding and perspectives.

*- Karthik Ramasamy,
National Library Board,
Singapore*

The main objective of this book club is to nurture avid bilingual readers and writers who will hopefully contribute to the growing literary landscape in Singapore.

- **Karthik** on his goals for *Book Rangers Club*

Karthik Ramasamy is an Associate Librarian at the National Library Board (NLB). Passionate about Tamil literature, he conducts story presentation workshops for parents, educators and children to promote reading, writing and speaking in the vernacular.

Such engagement is an effective way to deepen interest. As you ask questions about what you read, you go down the route of inquisitive-based learning which gets you to think more creatively.

In addition to reading, the club administers a range of pre- and post-reading activities such as crossword puzzles and the making of pop-up books. As children may forget stories after some time, a related object can help them remember. With a pop-up book, they can also share the stories with their family when they go home.

These engagement activities and techniques are being applied across the various book clubs in different languages now, but I'm very happy to say that this was the pioneer project.

Q: What do you hope to achieve through this book club?

The main objective of this book club is to nurture avid bilingual readers and writers who will hopefully contribute to the growing literary landscape in Singapore.

There's a reason why I designed this to be an English-Tamil book club. Singapore's Tamil junior literature collection is currently very conservative and doesn't have much variety in terms of genre. We have a lot of classic tales, thrillers, animal stories and adventure tales, but only a handful of books from other genres like science fiction.

By exposing them to the English collection, I hope these children will feel inspired to produce and contribute genres that are lacking in Tamil literature.

Q: Any advice for teachers who want to motivate their students to read?

I think teachers can try to take a less result-oriented and more qualitative approach by introducing students to different book genres and not just what is prescribed in the curriculum. Try to weave in pre- and post-reading activities as these are very important in helping students think critically about what they read.

Do this by asking students basic questions to set the context of the story before they start reading. After reading, follow up with questions pertaining to the story. For instance, if a book is about a bus, you can get them to tell a story based on what is happening in the bus as a post-reading activity. Or based on whatever they've read, they can add a twist to the ending.

At home, parents could also nurture their kids into readers by speaking the language and reading together with them.

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Cultivating Effective Reading in Bilingual Children



Nurturing Self-motivated Readers



Learning to Read and Reading to Learn



High-ability Learners are not Homogeneous



Explicit Teaching of Reading Comprehension Skills and Strategies