EXTENSIVE READING IN UZBEK HIGHER EDUCATION: BARRIERS AND A LOW-COST IMPLEMENTATION MODEL

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Abstract. Extensive reading, in which learners read large amounts of easy, self-chosen material for pleasure, is one of the best-supported practices in language education, yet reading courses in Uzbek universities remain almost entirely intensive. This thesis identifies five barriers to extensive reading in Uzbekistan (access, cost, curriculum time, assessment habits and beliefs) and proposes a low-cost model: a shared class library built from one graded reader per student, free online material, fifteen minutes of silent reading in every class, a target of one book a week, and assessment through reading logs and short book talks.

Keywords: extensive reading, graded readers, reading fluency, vocabulary acquisition, higher education.

Introduction.

In many Uzbek universities a reading lesson follows a familiar pattern: students read one or two pages, look up unknown words, translate difficult sentences, answer questions and retell the text. This intensive approach has real value, since it trains careful reading and attention to language. Its weakness is volume. A student who reads a page per lesson may read fewer than fifty pages of English in a semester, far too little to read fluently or to meet new words often enough to learn them.

Extensive reading (ER) addresses exactly this. Learners read many easy books of their own choice, usually graded readers written for language learners, for pleasure and general understanding (Day & Bamford, 1998). Meta-analyses show positive effects on reading comprehension, with larger effects in longer programmes (Nakanishi, 2015). Yet ER is rarely part of Uzbek university programmes and rarely discussed in local journals.

Aim and methods.

The aim is to show how ER can be introduced into existing reading and writing courses at minimal cost. The principles and findings of ER research were summarised and set against the conditions of local reading courses: curricula, budgets, library holdings and assessment systems. Each barrier that emerged was matched with a low-cost response, and the responses were organised into a one-semester plan.

Main part.

Easy texts are the heart of ER. Hu and Nation (2000) found that adequate unassisted comprehension of fiction requires knowing about 98% of the running words, roughly one unknown word in fifty; above that, reading becomes slow decoding with little enjoyment. Volume matters just as much. Waring and Takaki (2003) showed that words met only once or twice in a graded reader were rarely retained, while words met many times were far more likely to be learned.

Five barriers stand in the way in Uzbekistan. Graded readers are hard to find in local bookshops and libraries; imported books are expensive for students and departments; syllabuses prescribe set texts; reading is assessed through comprehension questions and retelling; and many students and teachers believe that useful reading must be difficult and that easy books are "for children".

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The model answers each barrier. At the start of the course each student buys or obtains one graded reader at an agreed level band, with titles coordinated so that no two are the same; in a group of 25, this creates a library of 25 different books at almost no cost to the department, and the books circulate weekly and can be donated to the next cohort. Free online graded readers add variety. Every class begins with fifteen minutes of silent reading, with the teacher reading too, which signals that reading matters and guarantees some reading for everyone. Students aim for one graded reader a week, roughly 10,000–20,000 words. Assessment rewards reading rather than testing it: a reading log with title, level, pages and a one-sentence reaction, and a two-minute book talk to a small group every two or three weeks. Reading speed on an easy text, measured at the start and end of the semester, gives simple evidence of progress.

Conclusion.

The barriers to extensive reading in Uzbek universities are real but can be overcome with modest means and without replacing intensive reading. A shared class library, fifteen minutes of reading per class and log-based assessment give students what intensive reading alone cannot: the experience of reading a lot of English fluently and with enjoyment. A semester-long study measuring reading speed, vocabulary size and attitudes would show whether the international findings hold in the Uzbek context.

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