

“Forced Pleasure Reading May Get You Neither”: A Reply to Jeff McQuillan

Brett Milliner | milliner@lit.tamagawa.ac.jp

Brett Milliner is an Associate Professor in the Center for English as a Lingua Franca (CELFL) at Tamagawa University (Japan). His research interests include mobile-assisted language learning (MALL), faculty development and extensive listening. He is the co-editor for The Center for ELF Journal and a copy editor for Extensive Reading in Japan.

Key Words: Extensive reading in L2, Pleasure reading, Learning how to read, Teacher intervention, Online quizzes

Abstract

In this article, I will question some of the arguments McQuillan (2019) put forward in his critique of my article (Milliner, 2017) titled, “One Year of Extensive Reading on Smartphones: A Report”. My response criticizes some of the evidence presented by McQuillan to support his claims. I contend that my application of extensive reading or ER (Milliner, 2017), and McQuillan's (2019) “pleasure reading” diverge on some points. While both approaches seek to encourage second language (L2) learners to read a substantial number of self-selected L2 texts and promote a love for reading in the L2, they deviate on how these goals can be achieved. I detail out how ER (pleasure reading) ought to be implemented in foreign language classrooms.

ER or pleasure reading in its purest form, where L2 learners are left free to read in their L2, has, as rightly shown by McQuillan, been very beneficial for some students (Krashen, 2007; Mason & Krashen, 2017). However, I feel this interpretation of ER, with its hands-off approach, no accountability and little support from the teacher would be, as Robb (2015, p. 150) stresses, "tantamount to no reading at all". In my study, the participants were Japanese university students studying a mandatory EFL course. I cited Mori (2015) to note that most Japanese students do not like to read as their busy lives prevent them from reading outside of class. This low interest, coupled with little experience in reading in the L2 permeates my teaching context (Mori, 2015; O'Sullivan, 2012; Robb, 2002, 2015; Yoshida, 2014). Reflecting on a sustained silent reading program at her Japanese University, Yoshida (2014, p. 20) notes, "the instructor must make an intensive effort to make them [students] read willingly". While I accept that McQuillan's "forced pleasure reading" label concerning my article is perhaps appropriate, the practical reality facing teachers is that most students do not pick up a book to read, no matter how inviting the library is. For L2 readers to get onto Nuttall's (2006) virtuous cycle of the strong reader, and for the virtuous cycle to actually move, most L2 readers require unflinching support from their teacher, particularly in the initial stages of reading. In over ten years of leading extensive reading programs in Japanese universities at the class and program level, I regret to argue that very few students pick up a book to engage in "free reading". Therefore, while adhering to the assessment requirements enforced by the program I teach, I try to implement a program that aims to reach a much wider group of students, many of whom would not have experienced ER before. If McQuillan's idea of an effective ER program mirrors something like Mason and Krashen (2017), ER will only ever be a boutique, out-of-class study program for a select few.

When working with inexperienced L2 readers (as I did in my study), I found that some interventions from the teacher are essential. It is also important that students read at a level that is appropriate for them and that the teacher tries to generate excitement for reading. I empathize with Robb (2015), who states that post-reading quizzes have come under somewhat undeserved scrutiny from the ER research community. Online quiz programs such as M-Reader (mreader.org) and Xreading (xreading.com) can be a valuable control for students reading at the appropriate level. Such quizzes do not turn off readers from reading (Cheetham, Harper, Elliot, & Ito, 2016; Stoeckel, Reagan, & Hann, 2012). ER programs with quiz components have proved to be effective in promoting reading fluency (Robb & Kano, 2013). Students like to receive positive reinforcement or immediate feedback on their reading. The gamified component found in these programs, such as stamp collections (Robb, 2015), word challenges (Cheetham, Harper, Elliot, & Ito, 2016), and school-wide leaderboards (Milliner & Koby, 2019) can motivate readers to read more. For teachers, quiz programs offer a wealth of analytical information, which they can use to make more effective book recommendations. For example, if a student fails a series of quizzes for Level 4 books, the teacher could suggest he/she read books from a lower level. The book reviews recorded by these systems can be used to introduce popular titles, and the reading records reflect the different genres a student likes to read. In a free reading intervention similar to what McQuillan advocates, teachers cannot offer such informed support, particularly when there are a large number of students. For students to get lost in their books while engaging in ER, I believe that in most cases, the teacher will have played a significant role.

A second criticism that I would like to level at McQuillan's article concerns some of the research he has used to

support his argument. One such example refers to the study conducted by Mason and Krashen (2017), where they looked at the self-selected reading and TOEIC performance of Japanese learners. While I admit that I have been relaying the compelling case histories described in their paper to my Japanese students, this study fails in two of the three issues I cited as requiring refinement in ER research (Milliner, 2017). Firstly, there is limited attention to how ER has been conceptualized (Waring & McLean, 2015). All we learn from the authors is that Mason (the teacher),

... helped each acquirer engage in a self-selected independent reading program, with each reader reading the books that he or she wanted to read. Readers were asked to keep a log of what was read as well as the number of pages, but were not asked to write summaries or book reports [sic] how much was read. (p. 147)

My interpretation of this intervention was that it was not a core classroom component; instead, it was an opportunity for the students to engage with ER outside of the classroom. However, it is hard to understand when and where students did the reading. Also, at which level did the participants read? Did they comprehend what they were reading? The fact is that Mason and Krashen's study reports on an extension program for a select group of motivated L2 learners. It does not reflect the practical reality of teachers trying to implement ER on a larger scale in their L2 classrooms.

Secondly, in Mason and Krashen's study, there is a lack of transparency about how much reading was done. The participants did not read under controlled conditions; they read freely and maintained logs for the number of pages and hours they read. However, there is no way to confirm the

accuracy of this data. For example, as three of the participants were Mason's students, could they have inflated their results to curry favour with their teacher? How confident could one be that the participants carefully completed their logs each time they opened a book during the extended period? Further, there is no way of gauging whether the participants comprehended each text. Similarly, Krashen's (2007) meta-analysis of younger learners engaging in ER, provides a single figure to quantify the duration of ER.

I want to extend my sincere gratitude to McQuillan for his observations on my article. I am writing a rebuttal for the first time and the process has been beneficial as it has given me an opportunity to clarify my position on how I implement ER. Finally, I would like to draw a parallel between reading and running as both skills require training. When one starts training to run, there is an initial painful stage when it is hard to breathe and the legs ache and drag; at this point it is easy to give up. After one has endured this initial phase, one gradually starts to enjoy the so-called "runners-high", in which the effort is completely forgotten. Learning how to read is very similar, especially for L2 readers; initially, the reader struggles to read battling against low levels of motivation, lack of interest and time constraints. However, as their engagement with reading increases, readers begin to enjoy reading. I believe the teacher needs to be more closely involved at this initial stage. A "forced pleasure reading" program which: regulates the level of books so that students can read more fluently; recommends appropriate titles; sets goals; allows students to feel triumphant when they pass a post-reading quiz; lets students follow their progress; and makes access to interesting books easier, will be a more successful intervention in the larger L2 classroom context.

Acknowledgement

I would like to thank Dr. Thomas Robb for his encouragement and suggestions on an earlier draft of this paper.

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