

Encouraging extensive reading

Clare Fielder sets up a swap shop in the classroom.

There are many sources explaining the concept and benefits of extensive reading in ELT. Equally, there have been many articles asking why extensive reading is used by so few ELT teachers. One of the main reasons seems to be a lack of funds to provide students with reading material. Perhaps some schools do not have libraries, or there are simply not enough books to go around. I work at a university where the library holds a large number of novels, presumably the ones that are being read on English Literature courses, and still my students were not really reading extensively. And so I came up with an idea to make extensive reading more of a class-community activity, though the actual reading is done individually.

Swap shop

I introduce the idea, without giving it a name, by simply starting a conversation in class about what we are reading/have read recently, favourite books, books we couldn't finish, etc. I know from the 'real world' that people who have this kind of conversation about books almost inevitably end up saying 'I can lend it to you if you like'. Bringing the conversation into the classroom also brings the idea of lending and borrowing into the classroom. And so I—as if it had spontaneously occurred to me!—suggest the 'swap shop' plan.

My suggestion is that each member of the class group (me included) buy just one (fiction) book. We each start by reading the book we have bought and write a brief review of it. Then we bring it to class (with our name clearly written on it) to lend to anyone else in the group who is interested in reading it. In this way, we borrow various books from each other during the course of a term, after which time they are gratefully returned to the original owner. (Note: buying a new book may be unnecessary if, for instance, the students already have a book they've read and would be happy to share with the class, making the idea even cheaper.)

I've made a poster which I attach to the 'swap shop table', where students can place the book they have finished reading and choose another one to read next. The table is set up every week, though students can take longer if they haven't yet finished the book they're reading. The only rule is that they bring the book they have currently borrowed to class with them every lesson—this is a kind of 'proof you can trust them' idea which students themselves suggested so that they can make sure they know who has their book

and that it is in good hands. (As an organisation enthusiast, I had already created tables for people to record the book they have borrowed in, just in case!) It also means that we can use some class time for extensive reading whenever it fits in as they'll always have their books with them.

The reviews are posted on an online forum so the whole class can read them and use them

to decide what else they would like to read during the term—no plot spoilers allowed! Sometimes students have started discussions in the forum, debating a point someone has made in their review, etc. It's great—they're producing language because they have a point to make and are intrinsically motivated to do so, not because I have set them any questions or tasks.

I think doing this on a class-group level rather than an institutional level is an advantage since students are generally grouped by level which means that the books they provide to the swap shop will be about the right level of difficulty for most people in the class. Also, since classes (at least in my context) tend to have more participants than the term has weeks, there should be more than enough variety for students to choose from if some books are less interesting to them than others.

Overall, I feel that this swap shop idea encourages extensive reading not only because it provides everyone with plenty to read without students or school having to buy lots of books, but also because a community feeling is generated and students feel compelled to read so that they can review and discuss the novels with others, or read the book that other members of the class have been debating, etc. I definitely recommend it for anyone wanting to offer their students the many benefits of extensive reading with minimal outlay and preparation.



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part of her CPD, she blogs at clareseltcompendium.wordpress.com.

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