

# UC Berkeley

## The CATESOL Journal

### Title

Introduction to the Theme Section

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1sv7p4jt>

### Journal

The CATESOL Journal, 29(2)

### ISSN

1535-0517

### Author

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### Publication Date

2017

### DOI

10.5070/B5.35990

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## Introduction to the Theme Section: Extensive Reading

**D**ear *CATESOL Journal* Readers,  
This theme section on extensive reading (ER) came about somewhat by chance. As we rely on our readership for submissions, we were fortunate to receive several pieces on ER in a short time. As these pieces will demonstrate, ER is an intriguing topic. It is a relatively recent field of study; the literature on ER dates only to the 1980s. ER also has clear pedagogical benefits, some of which are counterintuitive. Readers of *The CATESOL Journal* may be surprised to learn, for instance, that research has linked ER to not only improved reading comprehension and vocabulary, but also to improved listening comprehension (Robb & Kano, 2013). What is more, ER is underused, as few instructors—or programs—include ER in their respective classes and curricula. In fact, until this Fall 2017 semester, I had never tried it myself, and I did so only out of practical concerns.

I was offered the chance to teach an intensive low-intermediate reading and writing-focused ESL course in Fall 2017 at the University of San Francisco (USF), and, having worked only with proficient language learners for the last several years, I was intrigued by the change of pace. What concerned me, however, was how to create a meaningful set of reading assignments. With my advanced students, I was used to assigning lengthy reading passages, passages that they would later be expected to write about in one form or another. These reading assignments were designed to be challenging and to create opportunities for the students to develop the reading skills they would need to succeed in higher education and beyond. For my low-intermediate students, however, this approach seemed problematic. Could I reasonably expect them to handle dozens of pages of complex prose about abstract topics? Perhaps not, but the other option—simply having them read fewer pages—seemed unsatisfactory as well. I decided I needed material that would (a) allow for plenty of reading practice and (b) be accessible to the students. Thus began my interest in ER.

New to the topic of ER, I was fortunate to have Doreen Ewert,

director of the Academic English for Multilingual Students (AEM) Program at the University of San Francisco (USF), as a colleague and mentor. As her article in this issue of *The CATESOL Journal* will reveal, Doreen is well versed on the topic, and among the many resources she offers to AEM faculty is a large ER library. Her collection of 30 short texts from the Extensive Reading Foundation (ERF) seemed especially well suited to my low-intermediate students. The stories range from two to four pages—and thereby are easily accessible to low-level learners. They are also visually stimulating, with illustrations, speech bubbles, and captions not unlike those in a comic book or graphic novel. We made them available to the students through our online learning-management system so they could access them from their laptops, tablets, and smartphones, and therefore read them just about anywhere. Perhaps more important, the ERF readings are designed with language learners in mind. Syntax and vocabulary are tightly controlled, with an emphasis on authentic and natural language. As readers progress through the series, the syntax and vocabulary grow more complex. Vocabulary is also recycled at every opportunity. In this sense, the ERF offers an approach to reading and vocabulary learning similar to that in the textbook I had chosen for the class, my *Real Reading 2* (2011), whose methodology was inspired by Paul Nation's research (2006) into vocabulary acquisition. Another important benefit of the ERF readings was their thematic variety and age-appropriate content. The stories' topics varied from serious reflections on life to the truly absurd; they included police chiefs running illegal gun rings, dead cat jokes with elaborate setups, harrowing sea rescues, and more. In only the second story of the series, a man stabs his beloved pet dog, Toku, to death in a tragic case of mistaken identity. Clearly, this was not Dick and Jane seeing Spot run. I was intrigued, and I hoped my students would be as well.

This issue of the students' being intrigued was important, given the nature of the AEM program at USF. Per university policy, students who are placed into the AEM curriculum must complete it before they can begin course work that satisfies the requirements for their academic major. Though AEM courses are designed with student success in mind (and, per our internal research, they create that success), many AEM students view the courses as a sort of academic prison from which they must escape, perhaps through any means necessary. I knew that to create buy-in, the ER project would have to have more than pedagogical appeal.

When it came time to introduce the ER project in class, I stressed the potential for the ERF readings to provide enjoyment, but I also tied them to the students' ultimate goal: leaving the AEM program

and beginning course work to earn their degrees. I began by pointing out how the greatest gap between students in our class, the lowest AEM level of reading and writing, and students in the highest level was not so much reading and writing skill as it was vocabulary control. We looked at charts of how many English words students at various levels tend to know, according to research, as well as studies that demonstrate a clear link between the size of one's vocabulary and the amount of fiction he or she reads. We noted that the 3,000 most frequent words in English, though they account for 80% of spoken and written language (Nation, 2006), are often absent from classroom communication. For the students to acquire these frequent words and catch up with their higher-level AEM counterparts, academic reading and writing would not be enough—they also needed a steady diet of fiction. I stressed that the purpose of these readings was not to prepare for a quiz, essay, or class discussion, but for more personal goals—enjoyment, language acquisition, and a quicker time to degree.

Now halfway through the Fall 2017 semester, and thereby our ER project, I am pleased to say that it has exceeded all our expectations.

An immediate and ongoing benefit has been the students' exposure to high-frequency, and therefore useful, vocabulary. The first two stories included the words *wolf* and *storm*; one student thereafter remarked on a statue of wolves in front of USF's Gleeson Library, another on the powerful storm that had pounded the Bay Area in early September. Numerous words from the ERF stories began appearing on the word cards I had assigned the students to make for self-study on Quizlet.com. The students were able to apply vocabulary strategies we studied in class to these frequently used words, identifying common collocations, word roots, prefixes and suffixes, word forms, and more. What's more, the students clearly understood the stories they were reading. They completed critical-thinking tasks such as summary and evaluation. Asked to provide the message or moral of each story, they came up with a variety of insightful answers. Asked to evaluate, they demonstrated strong opinions. The aforementioned story about Toku the stabbed dog, for instance, was funny, sad, or powerful, depending on which student you asked.

What's more, the students have been able to use the stories as springboards for further critical-thinking and class activities. Able to successfully reflect on an ERF story, they feel better equipped for the challenge of responding to more complex academic texts. The stories have also allowed for meaningful communicative activities in class. In one instance, I asked them to act out a story of their choice in small groups. Heading into that day's class, I was dreading my choice of activity—would my sleepy students who longed to escape to the greener

pastures of their major classes be willing to perform? To my surprise, and perhaps theirs, this activity produced the greatest joys of the semester. They reworked the stories in ways that can arise only from mastery of the original subject matter; Toku, for instance, had his revenge.

As a novice to ER, I know that I am not doing certain things quite right. With the ERF stories being somewhat short, unless my students read several at a time they are not engaging in the 30-minute or longer reading sessions that most ER experts advise. I am also not allowing the students to choose the stories that they like to read, though that might change as we progress through the semester. And though I am keeping to my promise of not quizzing the students on the stories, I am doing class activities based on them, which creates an extrinsic motivation for the students to read. I know that with time, and more exploration of the literature on ER, I will improve, just as my students will.

I hope *CATESOL Journal* readers find this theme section as enjoyable and insightful as I do, and that they consider taking the same plunge into ER that I did. I believe they will find the proverbial waters to be refreshing, revitalizing, and thoroughly beneficial to them and their students.

### **Author**

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