A Broad Conceptualization of Assessing Extensive Reading

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Abstract
A perusal of the extensive reading literature shows that assessment has played a minor role that has been confined to the presentation of lower-order factual questions. In this paper I propose a broader role for assessment in extensive reading classrooms that is designed to bring extensive reading closer to the center of the foreign language curriculum. This requires that teachers conceptualize the role of extensive reading in foreign language curricula more broadly by viewing it as an important opportunity to work on cognitive, affective, and social goals and objectives. In this conceptualization, extensive reading is combined with the Revised Bloom’s taxonomy to yield a richer form of pedagogy that gives extensive reading a more important role in the foreign language curriculum, allows for the teaching of the six levels of cognizing that make up the taxonomy, and thereby yields a firm foundation for assessing extensive reading, particularly when the assessment follows a particular set of general classroom assessment principles. The result is a rich set of assessment practices that go well beyond the mere assessment of factual recall; they have the potential to enhance the extensive reading experience, lead students to engage in higher-order thinking, and make important contributions to student learning.

1. Introduction
Our conception of the role of extensive reading in foreign language curricula and how to assess extensive reading should be broad in two ways. First, extensive reading should be viewed as playing an important role in promoting second language acquisition generally, and not simply as only playing a limited role in the acquisition of reading skills. Second, extensive reading should be seen as an approach to foreign language instruction that can be combined with other ideas from the field of education to produce a more effective form of pedagogy that brings extensive reading to a more central position in foreign language curricula. This broader conceptualization of extensive reading also means that learners involved in extensive reading programs can be assessed in a multitude of ways that include the use of the four major language
skills and that serve cognitive goals and objectives that go well beyond achieving a simple understanding of the facts in a text.

In this paper, I first consider the role of extensive reading in educational curricula and make an argument that the role has been too narrowly defined in much of the extensive reading literature. I provide one way to broaden the role of extensive reading by discussing how it can be combined fruitfully with the Revised Bloom’s taxonomy (cognitive domain) (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2000). This combination increases the educational value of extensive reading and lays a firm foundation for its assessment, as it is based in part on a time-tested educational taxonomy that has received empirical support in a variety of educational contexts. I then consider the current limited role of assessment in the extensive reading literature and argue for a greatly expanded role for assessment in extensive reading classrooms provided that it is based on certain principles. Finally, I provide two examples of assessment tasks that can be used in this broader view of extensive reading assessment.

2. Expanding the Role of Extensive Reading in Foreign Language Curricula

Classroom assessment is based on curricular goals and objectives, and for that reason, those in charge of assessment must first consider the types of goals and objectives in which extensive reading can play a role. Three types of goals and objectives that can be used with extensive reading are cognitive, affective, and social goals and objectives. In terms of cognitive goals, we might hope that students engaged in extensive reading will increase the amount of meaningful, contextualized written input they process, become increasingly skilled readers, increase and consolidate their reading vocabulary size, increase and consolidate their morpho-syntactic knowledge, and increase their reading fluency. We might also hope that they become more skilled at interpreting, analyzing, and synthesizing the information they read when engaged in extensive reading. Possible affective goals include increasing students’ reading motivation, developing greater reading self-efficacy, decreasing debilitating reading anxiety, and developing greater task perseverance, all of which have been shown to lead to better academic achievement. Finally, possible social goals include students interacting frequently with each other and the teacher in meaningful, authentic ways; negotiating meaning and linguistic form with other students and the teacher, and; working cooperatively on tasks, team presentations, and projects related to books they are reading. The point of adopting social goals is to move extensive reading away from its characterization as a solitary activity. Learners can gain numerous educational benefits by interacting with others, including learning new facts, being exposed to interpretations that differ from their own, and encountering challenges to their own conceptualizations of a topic.
In sum, goals and objectives provide the underlying framework for classroom assessment because one of the key purposes of classroom assessment is to provide information about the degree to which goals and objectives are being achieved. I have suggested that at least three types of goals and objectives—cognitive, affective, and social—be a part of the foreign language curriculum, including the extensive reading component of that curriculum. The goals and objectives formulated at this stage should be chosen carefully because they have a direct and powerful impact on the types of pedagogical materials that are selected, the teaching approach that is adopted, and the types of assessment that are used (Brown, 1996).

3. Bloom’s Taxonomy (Cognitive Domain) and Extensive Reading

In the field of curriculum studies, it is widely acknowledged that teaching factual knowledge should not be the sole or even the primary focus of an educational curriculum because we live in an age when the knowledge base in virtually every field is changing so rapidly that it is out of date within months or a few years at best. This means that the two crucial skills students need to acquire in school are the ability to think about issues in various higher-order ways (e.g., make inferences, analyze information, and synthesize information) and the ability to be effective independent learners. When armed with these two skills, students can continue to acquire new knowledge on their own long after they have graduated from school. However, this begs the question of how to help students acquire these two skills. The approach adopted in this paper is to use the Revised Bloom’s taxonomy (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2000), which describes six levels of cognizing. The revised taxonomy is based on Bloom’s (1956) original taxonomy, which is the most well known and most widely used taxonomy in the field of education. The six levels of the Revised Bloom’s Taxonomy are as follows:

• Remembering: Students retrieve relevant knowledge from long-term memory by recalling facts, terminology, and concepts.
• Understanding: Students demonstrate an understanding of facts and ideas by organizing, comparing, translating, giving descriptions, and stating main ideas.
• Applying: Students use information, techniques, or procedures in a new way or in a new situation.
• Analyzing: Students break material into constituent parts and detect how the parts relate to one another and to an overall structure or purpose.
• Evaluating: Students make judgments based on criteria and standards.
• Creating: Students compile elements to form a coherent novel whole or make an original product.
The taxonomy provides curriculum designers and teachers with several advantages. First, the taxonomy itself is well established, has received empirical support (e.g., Näström, 2009) and has stood the test of time, so it is a strong foundation upon which to build a curriculum. Second, the taxonomy forces curriculum designers and teachers to move away from an approach that favors lower-order thinking, such as the mere assessment of factual information, and move toward developing students’ ability to engage in higher-order thinking. Third, the taxonomy provides the basis for developing standards (i.e., descriptions of what students should know and be able to do by the end of a course of study), which are crucial to the development of educational curricula and classroom assessment. Fifth, in my experience, students quickly come to enjoy working with the higher levels of Bloom’s taxonomy because they find that tasks at those levels are far more engaging and enjoyable than the more rote, factual tasks at the bottom of the taxonomy.

The use of the revised taxonomy goes a long way toward solving a long-standing problem with extensive reading: Extensive reading has been conceptualized too narrowly and as a result, it has been seen as an aspect of the curriculum that is confined to reading development and is therefore largely separate from other aspects of the curriculum. I believe that there is value in broadening the conceptualization of extensive reading and recognizing that it is an excellent site for working on a multitude of curricular goals and objectives. One way to accomplish this is to combine extensive reading with the Revised Bloom’s taxonomy. This creates three benefits. First, it connects extensive reading with other aspects of the foreign language curriculum by adding non-reading goals concerning student cognizing (i.e., higher-order thinking skills) to the extensive reading component. These higher-order thinking goals, which are operationalized in the Revised Bloom’s taxonomy, apply across the curriculum to all four language skills and therefore act as a bridge between extensive reading and the major language skills of listening, speaking, and writing. Second, it takes advantage of the fact that extensive reading is an ideal place to help students learn to think in more complex ways and to become more independent learners. This notion is based on the idea that there is arguably no better way to approach the task of engaging in higher-order thinking than by reading literature. Third, it provides meaningful standards that can be used for assessing extensive reading. Extensive reading has great educational potential, but that potential can only be realized by viewing it in broader, more complex ways.

4. The Current Role of Assessment in Extensive Reading

In the previous sections of this paper, I have outlined a foundation for the assessment of extensive reading based on combining it with the Revised Bloom’s taxonomy. However, before
fleshing out the types of assessment that can be built on that foundation, it is important to recognize the role of assessment in the extensive reading literature that has been published to date. A review of the literature suggests the existence of three main views of assessment. I call the first category the no assessment position. Two proponents of this position are Day and Bamford (1998), who wrote, “Ideally, therefore, no postreading work should be required, the act of reading being its own reward....These include the need to monitor and evaluate students’ reading” (p. 140). This view was more recently expressed by Steven Krashen (2009), who, in reference to guidelines for conducting sustained silent reading, wrote, “...don’t test students on what is read...” (p. 3). The no assessment position is based on the notion that assessment harms student motivation to read and makes extensive reading an unpleasant experience.

The second category, which I call assessment of factual information, is based on the notion that even though assessment is fundamentally undesirable, learners engaged in extensive reading should sometimes be assessed if the teacher wishes to ensure that the students are comprehending the materials and/or that they are actually reading. An example of this view can be seen at the Extensive Reading Central website (http://er-central.com/teachers/assessing-er/):

Teachers often feel they should check learners’ understanding through tests and quizzes. In Extensive Reading, as long as learners are reading a book at their level there is then no need to test them....Extensive Reading is not about testing. It is about helping learners to build their reading speed and fluency—and become more confident readers in English.

This approach to assessment is characterized by a strong, or in many cases, a complete reliance on factual questions to assess comprehension of the extensive reading texts. While this approach has certain advantages, such as the ability to use computerized assessment methods via software such as Moodle Reader, it is not optimal for two reasons. First, it arguably does inflict some of the affective damage feared by Day and Bamford and Krashen in the above quotes, and it primarily communicates the message to students that reading is about understanding facts and not about interpreting or thinking about texts and then communicating those interpretations to others.

The third category is what I call the silent majority. By this I mean that assessment is not mentioned in most of the extensive reading literature; thus, it is not possible to know how most extensive reading researchers and practitioners conceptualize and implement assessment when using extensive reading. This category is problematic because it means that an important part of all educational curricula, assessment, is ignored. This silence can also be interpreted as a lack of knowledge regarding the benefits of classroom assessment as laid out by numerous experts (e.g., Linn & Gronlund, 2000).
The three categories described above lead to the conclusion that assessment is viewed as an unwanted, unnecessary, or unimportant aspect of extensive reading in much of the extensive reading literature; however, such characterizations beg the question of whether assessment is viewed in the same way outside of the extensive reading community and what contributions assessment might plausibly make to the pedagogical outcomes of an extensive reading program. I turn my attention to those issues in the following section.

5. Assessment’s Contributions to Positive Educational Outcomes

Assessment can make a number of important contributions to the teaching and learning process. First, scholars who have focused on the design of educational curricula are nearly unanimous that assessment is an integral part of educational curricula, and this holds true in both in the field of general education (e.g., Gagné, Wager, Golas, & Keller [2005]; Ornstein & Hunkins [2009]) and in the field of second/foreign language education (e.g., Brown [1996]; Richards [2001]). Scholars in both fields state that assessment is crucial because it provides feedback to administrators, teachers, and the learners themselves about aspects of the curriculum that are and are not working effectively as well as information about each student’s strengths and weaknesses. Without this type of information, administrators and faculty will likely have difficulty accurately understanding the current state of the students’ knowledge and skills, and what aspects of the curriculum are in need of change. Assessment is also necessary for teachers wishing to use any form of reactive teaching in which instructional decisions are partly or wholly made based on student performance (See Ellis [2001] and Mitchell [2011] for brief introductions to reactive grammar instruction). The logic of this approach to pedagogy is that teachers should observe and assess the performance of individual learners and then react to their individual strengths and weaknesses when conducting pedagogical interventions (hence it is called reactive teaching). This approach results in a curriculum that is potentially more effective than non-reactive curricula because instruction is tailored to the needs of each individual student.

A second reason why classroom assessment is important concerns empirical findings in the field of educational psychology indicating that assessments can make important direct contributions to learning. This is particularly true of assessment tasks that require students to retrieve (i.e., produce) information (Karpicke, 2012). Such assessment tasks have also been found to result in the creation of a type of knowledge that transfers well to other contexts (Carpenter, 2012), and transfer of knowledge and skills to new contexts is arguably the ultimate goal of most education. Retrieving information probably results in greater learning because it is characterized by desirable difficulties, which means that effortful (i.e., productive) forms of learning and study
have stronger effects on long-term memory than more passive (i.e., receptive) forms, and to explanation effects, which is the idea that students benefit more from deep coherent explanations of phenomena than from memorizing isolated facts (Winne & Nesbit, 2010).

While the use of classroom assessment tasks requiring retrieval is a starting point for thinking about the assessment of extensive reading, numerous other principles have been discussed in the assessment literature than can increase the value of classroom assessment tasks. A few examples are as follows:

Classroom assessment will...
• be closely aligned with course goals and objectives;
• often involve authentic communication with one or more persons;
• often be similar to or indistinguishable from pedagogical tasks;
• take a variety of forms and occur frequently;
• usually be based on explicit assessment criteria that have been clearly communicated to the students;
• usually provide students with feedback so that they can perform better in the future;
• often involve the use of enjoyable tasks;
• often involve the use of challenging tasks;
• often require interaction with the teacher and/or other students; and
• often involve higher-order thinking.

These principles highlight two important issues. First, they appear to describe pedagogical tasks rather than forms of assessment. This raises the point that classroom assessment need not be made up of tasks that students find boring, rote, or anxiety provoking; On the contrary, classroom assessment tasks should be engaging, meaningful, and motivating. Second, and related to the first point, it is easy to see that a complete reliance on assessing extensive reading by using only factual questions is not aligned with the above principles. Factual questions, while arguably necessary, should be a minor aspect of the assessment of extensive reading and the main purpose for asking factual questions should be to ensure that the students agree on the facts of the text before moving on to higher-order questions.

With this list of principles, we now have the components we need to consider specific ways to assess extensive reading. Those components are (a) extensive reading texts, (b) the Revised Bloom’s taxonomy, (c) the understanding that certain types of assessment can be educationally valuable, and (d) principles for conducting classroom assessment. In the next section, I provide
two examples of classroom assessment tasks for extensive reading that incorporate all four of these components.

6. Two Sample Assessment Tasks for Extensive Reading

6.1 Assessment Task 1: Small Group Interviews

After reading different graded readers, students are placed into groups of four when they arrive to class. The students take turns talking about their books in the following manner. First, one student in the group provides a brief 2-3 minute summary of the book he or she read [Note that summarizing is Level II of the Revised Bloom’s taxonomy] and then the student answers questions about the book from the group members. The teacher should provide some of the questions to ensure that all levels of Bloom’s taxonomy are covered, while students provide other questions, though it would be best if the students are instructed to write their questions using different levels of the taxonomy. Each student should ask the speaker at least three questions, so in a group of four, the speaker would answer at least nine questions (i.e., three questions from each of the three listeners in the group). This would create a considerable amount of interaction and all four students would be actively involved in the interaction. This activity continues until all four group members have spoken about the book they read and answered questions. Example questions for each of the six levels of the Revised Bloom’s taxonomy are as follows:

- **Remembering:** When did X happen? How would you describe [character’s] personality? What did [character X] do that made you think she/he is a good/bad person?
- **Understanding:** What was the main message of the story? Was this a happy or sad story and why do you think so? How are [character X] and [character Y] similar and how are they different?
- **Applying:** What would you change about this story to make it more similar to a Japanese story? What questions would you most like to ask [character X] and [character Y]? What would happen if [suggest a change to the story]?
- **Analyzing:** Why do you think [character X] did that? Is the relationship between [character X] and [character Y] good or bad and why do you think so? What did you infer when [character X] did that?
- **Evaluating:** What is your opinion about [character X] and why do you have that opinion? Is this book better or worse than the book you read last week and why do you think so? Would you recommend that I read this book—why or why not?
• Creating: How would you change the plot and why would you make that change? How would you change [character X] and what impact would that have on the story? How could this study be made [more interesting, funnier, etc.]?

In this task, students can only answer the questions when they have read and understood their book quite well. Students realize this the first time they do the task, so this approach generally ensures that they do the readings they are assigned to do. In addition, this type of task meets most of the criteria for classroom assessment listed above. For instance, this task is closely aligned with the goal of having students read books for meaning and engage in higher-order thinking, it requires a considerable amount of retrieval (i.e., production in the form of speaking), it involves authentic communication and verbal interaction among groups of students, and students often perceive discussions such as this as both challenging and enjoyable. If teachers wish to grade the students, they can give them a holistic grade based on their performance in the group discussion, and/or listeners in the group can be required to take notes on the answers provided by one or more of their group members and submit those notes to the teacher. Students can also be asked to engage in self- and peer-assessment after completing the activity.

6.2 Assessment Task 2: Poster Presentations

After reading a book of their choice, the students create a poster about the book using A3 size paper. On the poster they write a short summary of the story (approximately 100 words) and draw one or more important scenes from the story and/or one or more main characters. Students should be shown posters from previous classes so that they understand what they are expected to produce. When the students come to the next class, pairs are created by having half of the students attach their posters to the classroom walls with tape (i.e., they are speakers) while the other half act as listeners. Each pair of students is together for five minutes, during which time, the speakers use their posters to make a 2-3 minute oral summary of the book they read, and when they finish, the listeners ask a combination of teacher-selected questions and original questions covering the six levels of the Revised Bloom’s taxonomy. When five minutes has elapsed, the listeners move one poster to the left so that each presenter has a new partner. The process begins again, and when the second presentation finishes after five minutes, the listeners move to the left once again. The speakers make their third and final presentation to their newest partner. When the three rounds have been completed, the students who presented their book become listeners, and the students who had been listeners attach their posters to the walls and become speakers.
This task shares many of the characteristics of Assessment Task 1. Students can only create the poster, summarize the story, and answer the questions from the listeners if they have read and understood their book well. In addition, this task demands a considerable amount of retrieval, and it is closely aligned with goal of having students read books for meaning, engage in higher-order thinking, engage in authentic communication and verbal interaction, and in my experience, it is perceived as being both challenging and enjoyable by most learners. Teachers wishing to grade students on their performance can collect and grade the posters, and they have ample opportunity to observe and assess students in their roles as speakers and listeners.

7. Conclusion

Extensive reading has the potential to play a more important role in foreign language curricula than it has to date. This role can extend well beyond the development of reading skills and positively impact other linguistic objectives concerning listening, speaking, and writing. When extensive reading is combined with an taxonomy designed for developing educational standards, such as the Revised Bloom’s Taxonomy, it can then serve as a strong basis for helping students develop higher-order thinking skills and become more independent learners. In the approach to classroom assessment described in this paper, assessment is viewed positively. It is seen as a further learning opportunity and one that can be engaging and enjoyable for learners. Just as we enjoying thinking about and discussing good books with our friends and family members, so do our students. Classroom assessment—when done properly—can enhance the extensive reading experience, lead to deeper forms of thinking, and result in more learning.

References


