Problems with Book- and Page-based Targets for Mixed-level Extensive Reading Groups: Suggestions for an Alternative System

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Abstract

Many institutions require targets be set for extensive reading (ER) classes. As a result, many practitioners of ER require students to read a certain number of books or pages in a semester. While this system is very successful for small, homogenous groups of students, variety in reading speeds and graded reader titles mean that 10 books or 1000 pages means something very different for different learners. This literature review and response paper discusses reasons why book- and page-based targets have problems in mixed-level groups. In the response, an alternative system is summarized based on assigning credits per book, adjusted to take into account students' reading level.

Keywords: extensive reading, grade, target, pages, words, books, motivation

There are a number of fundamental concepts in extensive reading (ER). Learners must read a large number of books which they can easily understand, with no more than one word in fifty unknown (Nation & Wang, 1999; Nation, 2001). They should enjoy reading the books, and continue reading after the course has finished (Waring, n.d.; Waring & Takahashi, n.d.). Many authors in the field also recommend learners read a book a week (Nation & Wang, 1999; Waring, 2003), and some experts recommending much more (Day, n.d.). However, all language programs operate under constraints. These may include the necessity of assessing students and giving grades. Frequently, ER programs cannot be set up unless clear targets are set for teachers, such as the number of books learners are required to read. Furthermore, classes are often comprised of students of very different reading levels.

In the course of setting up and running an ER program (Wilkinson, 2009; Bankier, 2011b), it was necessary for the author to come to terms with several important issues. First was what targets to set. In small groups, it is possible to assign targets based on the overall level of the group or class. However, this becomes much more problematic when classes are of mixed levels, or when institutional constraints require targets to be set across the whole department. In the first pilot semester, targets were set low, with each student asked to read 10 books in a 14-week semester for an A grade. However, it became evident that some students had put much more effort into reading than others, yet with targets set this low there was little to differentiate them in terms of assessment.

In considering how to give students grades, a second important issue came to the fore. While the general target of a book a week is motivating and sufficient for most learners, it was found much harder to justify when used for grading. In the second semester of the full ER program, targets were increased. Students read 12 books a semester for an A grade, 10 books for a B and 7 for a C. This had some unexpected results. Instead of the grades given for ER being consistent across levels and achievement in general, students in the highest level class generally received lower grades for ER. Few students managed to meet the target of a book a week, despite being well-motivated. Class feedback revealed that many learners thought targets unrealistic, and felt that their enjoyment of ER was being affected. In a related development, it was observed that most students across the school had kept within one or two reading levels throughout the whole year, in contrast to the first semester in which many students progressed through the levels as recommended by Nation and Wang (1999). In particular, in the lowest level class many second year students had not graduated from Cambridge Readers or Oxford Bookworms level 1. Similarly, very few students were reading level 6 books, particularly those from Cambridge which were longer. In short, asking the students to read more books had not resulted in more reading. The conclusion that was drawn was that the target of a book week, while appropriate for many students, did not represent a helpful generalization for a language program in which it is necessary to evaluate students based on achievement.

This paper will first review the common methods used for setting targets in ER classes. These methods are then considered in terms of the resulting potential disadvantages in mixed level groups Finally, an alternative system will be summarized based on students accruing credits for what they read.

Targets in Extensive Reading

In their research on how many times vocabulary is encountered while reading extensively, Nation and Wang (1999) conclude that learners need to be reading a book a week at appropriate coverage (98% or more words known) in order for words to come up again and increase the chance of their being learned. For higher level learners, they recommend two books a week.

Schmidt (2007; n.d.) interviewed eight practitioners of extensive or graded reading. The results revealed a wide variety of approaches to setting targets. Some practitioners assigned a book or two books a week as a requirement for the course. Others assigned "500-1000 pages or 15-30 books per semester" (2007). Some teachers did not assign extensive reading, but instead focused on *graded* reading, with students reading five graded readers a semester.

Jarrell (2003) summarizes a similar variety of targets. Welch (1997, cited in Jarrell) recommends 75 pages per week. Helgesen (1997, cited in Jarrell) recommends 500 pages per semester. Mason and Pendergast (1997, cited in Jarrell) set double this, at 1000 pages per semester.

Book-based Targets

The advantages of setting books-per-semester targets include ease and egalitarianism (Bankier, 2012): it is simple to count how many books a learner has read. Furthermore, setting a target of a book a week can be viewed as egalitarian: all students appear to be reading "the same" regardless of level. However, a target such as "X-number of books" may have a number of drawbacks.

Firstly, as graded reader series have considerable differences in the number of words per book in each level, students of different levels will not be reading anything like a comparable amount. As Table 1a shows, the difference between a level 1 book and a level 5 book is between 47 and 68 pages.

When word counts are considered, the difference is even more apparent. As Table 1b illustrates, a student who read a level 5 book will have read between 4 and 11 times the amount of the student who read a level 1 book.

From a vocabulary learning perspective, these figures are very acceptable. Learners who are reading level 5 books will need to read more to encounter vocabulary items of an appropriate frequency (Nation & Wang, 1999), whereas learners who are reading level 1 books will focus on more frequent words.

Many practitioners may argue that this difference will compensated by the

Table 1a Sample of Average Page Counts of Popular Graded Reader Series

Penguin 6	(3000hw)	**98**	Oxford 6	(2500hw)	**102**	Cambridge 6	(3800hw)	**109**
Penguin 5	(2300hw)	**88**	Oxford 5	(1800hw)	**87**	Cambridge 5	(2800hw)	**94**
Penguin 4	(1700hw)	**59**	Oxford 4	(1400hw)	**72**	Cambridge 4	(1900hw)	**79**
Penguin 3	(1200hw)	**45**	Oxford 3	(1000hw)	**56**	Cambridge 3	(1300hw)	**64**
Penguin 2	(600hw)	**38**	Oxford 2	(700hw)	**40**	Cambridge 2	(800hw)	**47**
Penguin 1	(300hw)	**20**	Oxford 1	(400hw)	**40**	Cambridge 1	(400hw)	**30**
Penguin S	(200hw)	**15**	Oxford S	(250hw)	**24**	Cambridge S	(250hw)	**32**

Note: hw = headwords. Series are Penguin Readers, Oxford Bookworms and Cambridge Readers. Some data adapted from
http://www.davidnicholson.it/resources/advice/getting_more_english/_gradedreaders.html

Table 1b Average Word Counts from Popular Graded Reader Series

Penguin 6	(3000hw)	**29,943**	Oxford 6	(2500hw)	**29,456**	Cambridge 6	(3800hw)	**28,499**
Penguin 5	(2300hw)	**27,250**	Oxford 5	(1800hw)	**23,976**	Cambridge 5	(2800hw)	**23,337**
Penguin 4	(1700hw)	**16,277**	Oxford 4	(1400hw)	**15,933**	Cambridge 4	(1900hw)	**19,339**
Penguin 3	(1200hw)	**11,030**	Oxford 3	(1000hw)	**9,745**	Cambridge 3	(1300hw)	**14,392**
Penguin 2	(600hw)	**6,958**	Oxford 2	(700hw)	**5,892**	Cambridge 2	(800hw)	**9,088**
Penguin 1	(300hw)	**2,337**	Oxford 1	(400hw)	**5,349**	Cambridge 1	(400hw)	**4,189**
Penguin S	(200hw)	**928**	Oxford S	(250hw)	**1329**	Cambridge S	(250hw)	**2,178**

Note: Based on figures given in the Combined Graded Reader List, 2011, retrieved from
http://erfoundation.org/Combined_Reader_List-2011.09.11.xls

increased reading speed. This is a difficult question to answer: do learners who read higher level books read considerably faster? Mason (1992) suggests that most of her learners read elementary-level graded readers at a rate of 100-150 words per minute. However, in their feedback, my students frequently described spending several times longer to read level 5 books than they spent reading level 2 or 3 books. Mangubhai and Elley's seminal "Book Flood" study (1981) demonstrated impressive improvements in reading comprehension, but speed of reading was not measured. While reading speed certainly *does* increase as reading progress, it seems unlikely that it can increase to match the increase in the number of words in higher level books.

In an environment in which learners do not have to reach targets, or teachers can assign targets based on individual or class reading level, this issue is irrelevant: learners whose vocabulary and comprehension are sufficient to read more complex books can do so, but will read less books. As mentioned above, the issue arises when

targets need to be set across the board, and when grades need to be given. If learners who are of a higher level are asked to read books which may be five times as long as those other learners are reading, two results are likely to occur: demotivation, and underachieving. Learners will be demotivated by the knowledge that they must work harder and spend more of their time to achieve the same grade as other students. Learners, if given the opportunity, will then underachieve and read books considerably below their level, thus reducing the language and vocabulary gains of ER. Table 2 below illustrates the number of words a student could be expected to read at three different levels of graded reader, assuming one book a week is read over a typical 14-week semester.

Table 2　Number of Words Potentially Read at Different Levels of Graded Reader

	Penguin		Oxford		Cambridge		All	
14 books read	6	419,202	6	412,384	6	398,986	6	410,191
	5	381,500	5	335,664	5	326,718	5	347,961
	4	227,878	4	223,062	4	270,746	4	240,562
	3	154,420	3	136,430	3	201,488	3	164,113
	2	97,412	2	82,488	2	127,232	2	102,377
	1	32,718	1	74,886	1	58,646	1	55,417
	S	12,992	S	18,606	S	30,492	S	20,697

Note: Based on figures given in the Combined Graded Reader List, 2011, retrieved from http://erfoundation.org/Combined_Reader_List-2011.09.11.xls

The table clearly shows that there is a significant difference in levels. As could be expected, series for true beginner learners are much lower. However, the increases between levels are exponential, with the student at level 4 reading more than twice as much as level 2. Reading speed certainly does increase, but I would argue that it does not increase to the extent to justify a difference of 180,000 words (the difference between level 4 and level 2). There is a huge jump between certain levels. Learners who progress from level 4 to 5 will be expected to read another 100,000 words a semester, not much more than all the books they might have read at level 3 put together.

Table 3 shows an adjusted levels scale which takes into account some of the variation between publishers. Despite this adjustment, however, there remains substantial variation. For students at high levels, 20 pages do not make much of a difference. However, for students reading level 4 books (level E on the scale below),

Table 3 Example Level Scale Adjusted for Headwords

School Level	Publisher's level / average number of pages (p)							
	Oxford		Cambridge		Penguin		Ladder	
G	–	–	6	109 p	6	98 p	5	large variation in page counts
F	6	102 p	5	94 p	5	88 p	4	
E	4, 5	72, 87 p	4	79 p	4	59 p	3	
D	3	56 p	3	64 p	3	45 p	2	
C	2	40 p	2	47 p	2	38 p	1	
B	1	40 p	1	30 p	1	20 p	–	
A	Starter	24 p	S	32 p	Easystart	15 p	–	

Note: Based on number of headwords per publisher's level.

20 pages certainly do make a difference, particularly if students have been encouraged to move up from level 3. For students reading level C books, the 11 page average difference between Penguin and Cambridge can be a significant barrier, especially if it is accompanied by another 200 headwords. The biggest difference is between Penguin and Oxford level 1 books: Oxford have on average double the number of pages, but only another 100 headwords. These differences cannot be "smoothed out" by adjusting the school level based on number of pages, as the key factor should be *headwords*. If a book which is shorter is placed in a lower headword level (such as Penguin level 3 moved to level C on the above chart), learners will find it much harder to read, as it has far more headwords than other books in the level.

In summary, using book-based targets is simple and provides a clear target for students. However, when students are of different reading levels, and when grades and targets need to be set, the rapid and exponential increase in the number of words or pages in different levels of graded readers means that some students are likely to be discouraged from moving up the levels. Students are also rewarded for staying in lower levels and reading books which are as short as possible, with some students reading a vastly smaller number of pages per semester. In addition, there will be unfairness in grading, as higher level learners will be required to spend a lot more of their time reading to achieve the same grade. Finally, even when an adjusted scale is produced based on number of headwords per series level, there is some noticeable and at times substantial variation in the length of books.

Page-based Targets

The above demonstrates that there are some clear problems with setting book-

based targets. An alternative used by many ER teachers is page-based targets. Learners are expected to read 500, 700 or 1000 pages per semester, regardless of level. As mentioned above, it is certainly appropriate to set page targets for a class of similar level, or in situations when all students need to reach a certain standardized level (Bankier, 2012). Indeed, as with book-based targets, there are some clear advantages. The problem of students reading books which are too easy for them is negated: most students would not see much difference between reading 10 100-page books or 40 25-page books, and are therefore more likely to pick the level which they find most readable. Differences in variation of page counts between publishers are irrelevant, and students may in fact be more motivated to read the longer books to boost their number of pages read. Despite this, there are some important issues regarding using the same page-based targets across a group of mixed level learners.

Firstly, setting page-based targets may have the opposite effect of book-based targets. Students may gravitate towards longer books with more pages. This is a benefit, but many longer books have more headwords (Table 1a) and may not be appropriate for the particular student. This can lead to intensive reading, including less comprehension and less enjoyment. Students will not be able to connect with these books in an authentic manner, which may lead to some students becoming demotivated (Nation & Deweerdt, 2001; Waring & Takahashi, n.d.). Setting a goal of pages may encourage learners to move too quickly through levels.

Secondly, setting page-based targets for all learners implies that learners will spend roughly the same amount of time reading. Whereas book-based target mean higher level learners reading much more, and spending much more of their time for the same grade, page-based targets mean lower level learners will spend much more time instead. As a result, grades derived from page-based targets do not fairly represent how much effort and time students are putting in to ER.

Many practitioners now use word-based targets, as these tend to be more accurate than pages. However, such targets have the same drawbacks as page-based targets, as learners of different reading levels will struggle to read the same number of words.

To sum up, page-based targets help to ameliorate many of the issues surrounding book-based targets. However, they penalize lower level students and may encourage students to read books which are too difficult for them. I would argue that, in groups of learners of a similar level, page-based targets are preferable, as all learners will read an appropriate amount. However, both systems have

potential drawbacks in many contexts.

An Alternative System: Credits

As has been shown above, the two commonly-used systems have a number of problems, particularly when used with mixed-level groupings. Book-based targets do not accurately reflect how much students have actually read, and can lead to students reading much less for the same grade. Page-based targets encourage students to read more, but in most contexts learners of different levels cannot be expected to read the same number of pages per semester. One possible alternative is to use a credit-based system.

Bankier (2011a; 2012) describes the process of setting up a credit-based system. The central problem of both book- and page-based targets is that a book or a page does not mean the same thing for all students. For an advanced student, a page may be read relatively quickly. However, higher level books are considerably longer. Similarly, though a page will take a beginner student much longer to read, the books at this level are much shorter. Therefore, a system must give more credit per page for lower level books, but less credit per page for higher level books. A beginner student will read less, but will get more credit for each page. An advanced student will read more, and will get less credit for each page. This is the existing intention of graded reader publishers, as higher level books are much longer. However, as mentioned above, the discrepancy between levels is too high.

An obvious solution to this would be to set targets depending on level. For instance, students who read level 1 books should read 500 pages, and those reading level 6 should read 1000. This can rapidly become very confusing, however, if students progress through levels. If a student begins the semester reading level 1 and ends it reading level 3, how many pages should he or she read? The answer is not clear. Using words rather than pages does not solve the problem, but a credit-based system can.

Instead of targets based on pages or words, students are given a target of *X-number of credits*. These credits are calculated by dividing the overall semester credit target by the word target of the level. The overall semester target can be any arbitrary number; in this example, 100 was chosen. The word target is the number of words the student should read *of that particular level*. In the example (see Appendix), students were expected to advance between 20,000 and 50,000 word per level. This estimate was based on the amount students had read in previous semesters,

conversation with learners, and intuition. The number represented around 100 more pages read per level. Further research is necessary to determine a more accurate figure.

The result of dividing the semester credit target by the word target is the amount of credits per word. As the word target changes depending on level, this figure will be different for each level of book. For a level A book, each word was worth 0.0025 credits, with a book of 1000 words worth 2.5 credits. For a level F book, each word was worth 0.00045 credits, with a book of 20,000 words worth 9 credits.

100 ÷ word target × number of words in this book = number of credits for this book

It is important to note that, in the example given here, school levels were adjusted from publisher levels. Numbers of headwords are not consistent across publishers; a level 6 book from Oxford is closer to a level 5 book from Cambridge, for instance, than to a Cambridge level 6.

Students keep a record of how many credits they have read. Crucially, they are free to read books of a slightly higher or lower level. Higher level books are longer, so worth more credits; however, as the credit-per-page ratio is lower, there is less of an incentive to immediately read longer books from the start.

A Comparison with Book- and Page-based Targets

The most important aspect of credit-based targets is that it "smooths out" the differences between levels. Table 4 shows a comparison between the three systems

Table 4　A Comparison of The three Systems Using Cambridge Readers

Cambridge	Book based		Page-based (1000pp.)		Credit-based	
Level	words read	books read	words read	books read	words read	books read
6	398,986	14	261,459	9.2	273,486	9.6
5	326,718	14	248,266	10.6	221,702	9.5
4	270,746	14	244,797	12.7	208,812	10.8
3	201,488	14	224,875	15.6	182,823	12.7
2	127,232	14	193,362	21.3	129,939	14.3
1	58,646	14	139,633	33.3	69,956	16.7
S	30,492	14	68,063	31.3	40,974	18.8

Note: Adapted from J. Bankier, 2011, November, Dealing with Mixed Levels, Motivations and Goals. Presentation delivered as part of *Growing Extensive Readers* at the 37th annual JALT conference, Tokyo, Japan.

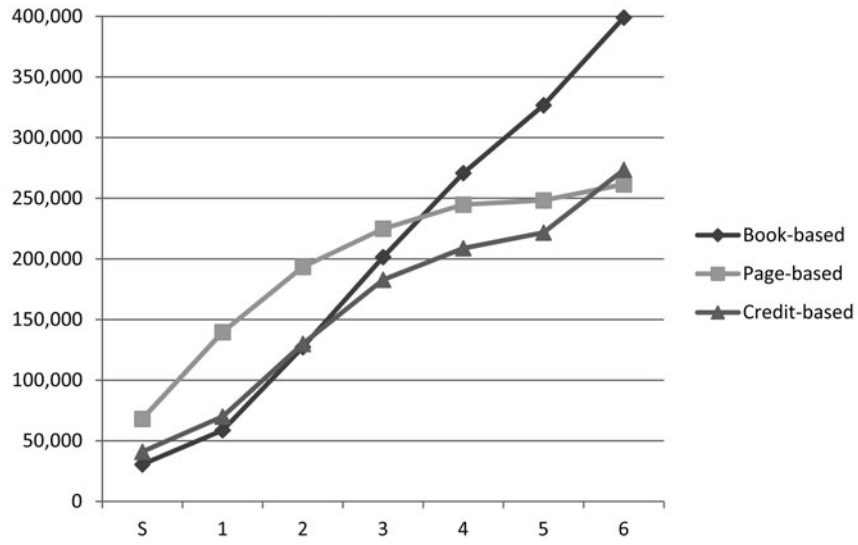

Figure 1　A comparison of the three systems. Horizontal axis shows Cambridge Reader level. Vertical axis shows number of words read. "Book-based" assumes 14 books read. "Page-based" assumes 1000 pages read.

based on Cambridge Readers level S-6. Here, it is assumed that learners will read 14 books per semester (a book a week), or 1000 pages per semester. The credit-based system used a target of 70 credits (see Bankier, 2012).

It is important to compare the number of words read between levels *of each system*, rather than individual levels between systems. The credit-based system is similar to the book-based at lower levels, but sets much lower targets for the especially longer books. In addition, the credit-based system is similar to the page-based at higher levels, but sets considerably lower targets for beginner students, particularly at the lowest levels (S, 1, 2).

This difference can be seen more clearly in the form of a line chart (Figure 1). Using targets of books, the amount students read increases quite dramatically. In contrast, page-based targets tend to be significantly higher for lower levels, but underestimate the amount those students who read longer books should read.

It is also hoped that this system will encourage appropriate movement between levels. Students need to be discouraged from gravitating towards the longest and most lexically complex books; as credits are proportionally less for these books, the motivation to read them is more likely to be enjoyment or the challenge, rather than accruing credits. However, the decrease in credits-per-word is not dramatic; this means that it is worthwhile for a student to gradually move up levels as he or she

feels more comfortable and fluent when reading longer books. If students remain at low levels, however, they will need to read several books for the same credit as one or two longer books. It is hoped that this will discourage the kind of underachieving sometimes seen when students are asked to read a certain number of books.

Using Credits to Give Grades

As mentioned above, some extensive reading programs require letter grades be given to students. It is often preferable to set fixed targets ("All students must achieve 50 credits"), but equally many teachers and administrators prefer to differentiate between very motivated and less motivated students. The amount of books or pages particular students have read, however, are not comparable when levels are disparate. It is not implausible to have a student reading at Level 3 and Level 6 in the same class, yet 14 books of each are not equivalent. Table 4 above demonstrates that these particular students could well have read half (or twice) as much as each other. When credits are used it is a simple matter to assign letter grades to credits reached: 50 credits is an A, 40 credits is a B, 30 credits is a C and so on, depending on the institutional expectations and goals.

Conclusion

It could be argued that ER should exist without any grades or targets being given. Though in the long term, grades cannot be a motivation for ER, extrinsic motivation of this type can be very effective, particularly in academic contexts. Furthermore, considering the amount of investment in time and effort required to read extensively, it seems fair that learners also be rewarded for their effort with the grades that they deserve, rather than grades being given solely based on TOEIC gains, grammar tests or other tests not directly related to ER. Targets can also be motivating for students, and also provide teachers who are new to ER a way to motivate students, particularly when said teachers may not be proficient in explaining the rationale behind extensive reading.

As this paper has shown, the existing systems which are widely used in setting targets and giving grades may create problems, specifically when used with moderately mixed-level groupings. When it is necessary for targets to be assigned and grades given, I would strongly recommend that teachers adopt a credit-based system.

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School	Book level					No. of words	Credits	Words per semester target	Target credits/semester	Credits per word
level	Oxford	Cambridge	Penguin	Ladder	Ungraded		0	320000	100	0.000313
					YA		0	300000		0.000333
G		6	6	5			0	270000		0.00037
F	6	5	5	4			0	220000	* change this	0.000455
E	4, 5	4	4	3			0	200000	section to	0.0005
D	3	3	3	2			0	180000	alter the	0.000556
C	2	2	2	1			0	130000	credit	0.000769
B	1	1	1				0	70000	weighting	0.001429
A	Starter	S	Easystart				0	40000		0.0025

Notes:

"Young adults" means books written for young native-speakers, not ESL learners

Ungraded books have a maximum of 20 credits per book

End goal: A≥100 B≥80 C≥70

Students keep reading until they reach the goal, round up to the nearest whole no.

Therefore 99=B, 99.5=A

I've include half credits to avoid a big jump between books

http://www.daydreamnation.co.uk/teaching/Credit%20calculator%20words.xls