
Studies on Extensive Reading: Beliefs and Practices

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Introduction

Extensive Reading is considered as an indispensable tool for the development of reading ability of students and enriches their knowledge of the language around the world. The purpose of extensive reading is to train the students to read directly and fluently in the target language for enjoyment without the aid of the teacher. The quantity of reading is emphasized in extensive reading. This paper reviews various studies on extensive reading in order to find out the beliefs and practices of ER in the language classroom.

Key words: extensive reading, beliefs, practices.

Extensive Reading

Extensive reading is an approach in teaching and learning language works on the reading of graded readers that is written as a book by making things easier the language (Hill and Thomas 1988). They are used as a means of reading or as reading materials aiming to enhance students' language ability and reading skills in an extensive reading program. Extensive reading may be done in and out of the classroom. Outside the classroom, extensive reading is encouraged by allowing students to borrow books to take home and read. In the classroom, it requires a period of time, at least 15 minutes or so to be set aside for *sustained silent reading* that is for students – and perhaps the teacher as well – to read individually anything they wish to. (Day and Bamford 7)

Extensive reading is the only way in which learners can get access to language at their own comfort zone, read something they want to read, at the pace they feel comfortable with, which will allow them to meet the language enough time to pick up a sense of how the language fits together and to consolidate what they know (Bell, 2001).

Beliefs

According to Richards and Schmidt (2002), Extensive Reading means reading in quantity in order to gain a general understanding of what is read. It is intended to develop good reading habits, to build knowledge of vocabulary and structure and to encourage a liking for reading.

Recent research has consistently provided evidence for the effects of extensive reading on language learning at different ages and in many ESL/EFL settings. Bamford and Day (2005) assert that extensive reading is reading large amounts of material to get an overall understanding while focusing on the meaning of the text than the meaning of individual words or sentences.

Jeanette Grundy (2004) explores the language learning opportunities provided by Extensive Reading (ER) for ESOL students. It includes a literature review which is very positive about the role such an approach can play in both improving reading skills and developing learner language. It explores how extensive reading contributes to language proficiency particularly in the areas of vocabulary growth, knowledge of grammar and text structures, and writing. In addition, it reports on an investigation into student attitudes to ER and explores some of the implications this has for teachers in implementing effective programmes for ESOL students.

Grabe and Stoller (2012) state that extensive reading is reading that involves long texts and that exposes learners to “large quantities of material within their linguistic competence” (259). Day and Bamford (1998) mention that Palmer (1921/1964), who contributed with L2 terminology, selected the term “extensive” to refer to it as “abundant reading.” Palmer explained that extensive reading is a quick form to read “book after book” in his own words. He said that language is not the goal of the text, but its meaning. Consequently with this issue he defined intensive reading. He pointed out that in intensive reading the goal is the meaning. For instance, students use their dictionaries constantly as a way to learn new vocabulary and focus on grammar. Moreover, there is an emphasis on developing strategies such as analyzing and translating among others, whereas in extensive reading, learners focus on the content, and not on the language.

Saragi et al. (as cited in Robb & Susser, 1989) found out that extensive reading was an important method to learn new words. Robb (2001) reports on an exploratory study with Japanese freshmen. He observed some benefits such as their increase in reading comprehension level, speed, reading vocabulary, and grammatical structure. These students also obtained better reading habits and reduced their consultation in dictionaries. There was also an improvement in writing as a result of written ER activities.

Green (2005) argues that unsatisfactory results in the Hong Kong Extensive Reading Scheme were found because it was not appropriately incorporated in the language curriculum; instead, it was seen as not being a part of the curriculum. There was an important obstacle to implement this approach: it was the teachers’ resistance. First, teachers were tired of implementing several government programs during the previous five years and secondly, lack of training in ER methodology. Thus, these reasons led to conceptualize reading as a “stand-alone” component which originated a lack of success in implementing this ER program.

Williams (2007) mentions that in an evaluation carried out in a Malawian primary school the deficiencies of implementing an ER program were discovered. These deficiencies were about the socio-economic status of the country, the lack of training for teachers in the ER approach and the lack of using the books.

According to Carrell and Carson (1997), extensive reading generally involves rapid reading of large quantities of material or longer readings (e.g. whole books) for general understanding, with the focus generally on the meaning of what is being read than on the language. Grundy (2004) conducted two surveys about extensive reading to investigate students’ attitudes toward reading and to evaluate the benefits of extensive reading programs.

Extensive reading can not only improve students’ motivation in learning a second language, but it can also encourage students to acquire new vocabulary through reading and thus building their vocabulary recognition naturally. Day, Omura and Hiramatsu (1991) went on to the report that students could learn vocabulary incidentally through extensive reading..

One case study is reported by Cohen (1997) who attended a secondary school in Turkey at

the age of 12. Turkish is the main language used in school and in the wider community in Turkey. English is taught as a foreign language. Cohen started to read extensively after only two months of study and by the end of the first year in secondary school she became an avid reader. She would read all kinds of books that she could get hold of. She got into a bit of 'trouble' in her writing class when she submitted two written compositions which her teacher refused to mark. Her teacher suspected that someone must have helped her write the essay, as the quality was way beyond the level of the class.

The past two decades have also seen a substantial number of experimental studies on extensive reading in second and foreign language learning contexts. One of the first pioneering studies was conducted in the late studies. In 1970s in Niue, a small island in the South Pacific, Death (2001) used the Shared Book or Shared Reading Method to introduce 50 high interesting, short, illustrated story books to Grade 3 pupils. After one year, children in the book-based classrooms outperformed those in the traditional audio-lingual method in all three measures that were used, that is, reading comprehension, word recognition and oral sentence repetition.

Studies conducted in EFL settings have largely confirmed the language learning benefits of extensive reading. Some researchers (Mason & Krashen, 1997; Robb & Susser, 1989) investigated the effects of extensive reading with EFL college students in Japan. In both studies, students who did extensive reading performed significantly better on reading comprehension posttest scores than those who were taught in the traditional way (skills building or intensive reading method).

Reading is one of the learning tasks in acquiring a second or foreign language, and it has become a major task especially for Chinese EFL learners who, for lack of opportunity to be involved in oral communication, rely more on reading for the gaining of information. Chinese researchers and teachers have gone to great lengths on the studies of helping students become good EFL readers. As one of the many reading approaches, ER was borrowed from western countries into Chinese university curriculum in late 1980s. Most efforts were made to develop reading materials and the related reading comprehension exercises for college students and so almost no experimental researches have focused on the theory or the specific language benefits of ER, let alone ER studies in secondary schools. As one of the many reading approaches, ER is beneficial to almost every aspects of language acquisition, which was proved to be true in China as well. Sheu (2003) conducted a study in junior high school students who were at the beginning level of English proficiency in Taiwan. And the results all indicated that all the groups increased reading rate significantly and the extent of improvement was ranked as treatment group two is better than the treatment of group one and better than control group.

However, Lai (1993) tested Krashen's Input Hypothesis and showed rather different consequences to his findings. Based on what Lai found, we can see that reading a quantity of books, as Lai (1993) described, is "for global understanding didn't seem to enhance reading comprehensive effectively". It seems that extensive reading is not an effective way to improve reading comprehension.

ER was borrowed from western countries into Chinese university curriculum in the late 1980s. Since then many scholars have fixed their eyes on ER, but most of them devoted to finding efficient reading strategies with less consideration on the selection of authentic materials (Ruan, 2004; Su, 2002), let alone adopting English language newspaper as reading materials in English teaching. Zhong (2007) from Eastern China Normal University assessed the rationality of adopting

English language newspaper as high school reading materials from three aspects of applicability, feasibility and effectiveness and found that English language newspaper could be used as reading materials of high school students for the purpose of improving their reading ability.

What's more, Gao (2004) also demonstrated that there is no evidence that extensive reading really helps students to improve their reading comprehension. To sum up, extensive reading does not lead to significant improvement in reading comprehension. However, though extensive reading does not appear to have obvious effects on the improvement of reading comprehension, it promotes students' learning motivation.

Extensive reading inspires students to read widely with a special emphasis on students choosing the materials based on their own interest. Therefore, students will be more willing to read in English. There is a shortage of research on choosing English newspapers as the extensive reading materials in China, and there is even less as to Internet-based ER teaching. Li (2007) from Northeast Normal University carried out a study in senior high school to examine the effects of teaching extensive reading through the Internet. The analyzed results showed that the scores of the class with modern teaching method via Internet significantly improved over the control class.

Practices

Sheu (2004) has reported two studies on the effect of an extensive reading program (ERP) on the reading development of Taiwanese 2nd-year junior high school students. In each study, two ERP groups using graded readers (GR) and books for native English speaking children respectively, and one control group receiving grammar-based instruction, were involved. The results showed that when the reading time was limited and only reading was involved in the experiment, the reading speed of the three groups was improved, but they performed differently in the language tests after the experiment, and also their attitudes became negative to English learning and reading. When the time was doubled and collaborative activities were included, the two ERP groups came out as clearly better to the control group in all aspects of language development, and also developed positive attitudes. This suggested that the longer the learners are immersed in a pleasurable and meaningful environment, the bigger the benefits they will receive.

Rashidi & Piran (2011) have investigated the effect of Extensive and Intensive Reading on Iranians' EFL learners' vocabulary size and depth. 120 participants studying English as a foreign language at Omid English Language Centre have been chosen based on their Oxford Quick Placement Test (2004) scores. They are divided into two groups, intermediate and advanced and they are further divided randomly into two, one receiving Intensive Reading treatment, while the other Extensive Reading treatment. Two types of vocabulary test—Schmidt's Vocabulary Levels Test (2001) and Read's Word Associates Test (1998) have been administered. Each has been run twice, once before the treatment (IR/ER) as a pretest and once after the treatment as a post-test to check the effects of the two treatments on vocabulary size and depth of the participants. Two-way ANOVA has been used to analyze the data. It is shown in the results that both IR and ER have an impact on learners' vocabulary size and depth significantly and that the students' vocabulary knowledge in terms of size and depth had increased. Finally the study has demonstrated that reading both intensively and extensively can lead to vocabulary development in a way that the number of vocabulary which each learner knows in terms of each word's synonym, antonym and collocation will be improved significantly.

According to Abdolreza Pazhakh & Rahmatollah Soltani (2010), Extensive reading can be considered as a good learning technique to improve learners' vocabulary knowledge. ER is a type of reading instruction program used in ESL or EFL settings, as an effective means of vocabulary development. The subjects participated in this study included are 40 upper-intermediate and 40 lower intermediate learners drawn from a population through a proficiency test to see if ER helps them improve their vocabulary knowledge at the above-stated levels. At each level an experimental and a control group (EG and CG) are formed each of which comprised 20 subjects randomly selected and assigned. All the conditions especially teaching materials have been kept equal and fixed at each level, except for the EG the subjects were given five extra short stories to read outside for ten weeks. The results have shown that EG at both levels indicated improvement in their vocabulary learning after the experiment.

Otsuki & Takase (2012) explain that extensive reading (ER) is an effective method for learners with low proficiency and poor motivation to learn English, provided that Start with Simple Stories (SSS) and Sustained Silent Reading (SSR) methods are guaranteed (Takase 2008). SSS requires learners to read books written in easily comprehensible English, and SSR secures learners certain amount of time to read in class under the guidance of instructors. The paper shows the improvement of ER students' English ability after three-months of ER courses, where SSS and SSR were employed, and how they started to be motivated to read extensively during the courses. The participants of the study are eighty-one Japanese EFL students, who had failed to pass an English course in the previous year mainly due to their low English proficiency. They kept reading relatively easy books extensively for eighty minutes once a week over one academic semester. Statistical analysis of the results of pre- and post-tests demonstrates that their English proficiency significantly improved.

In an experiment reported by Lituana, Jacobs, and Renandya (as cited in Renandya, Sundara Rajan, & Jacobs, 1999), it was shown how a group of secondary school students in the Philippines improved their reading skills after a six-month extensive reading program in a remedial reading course. This group significantly improved their reading skills compared to another group which used the traditional way of teaching reading.

Renandya et al. (1999) in an ER study also not only discovered the improvement that a group of Vietnamese adult students experienced in their English knowledge, but also discovered an effect on motivational factors.

Arnold (2007) also carried out an experimental study about an online ER program where a group of students worked with online materials instead of using printed materials. She discovered a variety of linguistic and affective benefits in her study.

Krashen (2004) reports a well-known study in ER implemented by Mason and Krashen. In this study, there were two groups of Japanese students who had failed an English course. In one semester, the experimental group started to read graded readers in class and at home. This group had to report their readings by keeping a diary, writing summaries, reporting their feelings, opinions, and advancement. The other group continued with the traditional way of reading using translation and grammar. It was found that the extensive reading group experienced more progress than the traditional group did. Moreover, the significant finding of this study was the gain in their attitude. Those students who had rejected reading became avid readers. This was a significant study in this field.

In another school-based research study, Elley and Mangubhai (1983) showed the dramatic

effect of extensive reading on second language learners' language development in Fiji. Nine to eleven-year old children at Grade four and five from a number of schools took part in the experiment. The control group followed their regular audio-lingual programme. The students in the experimental conditions, however, were literally flooded with 250 high interest books and were divided into two groups: the read only group and the shared reading experience group.

Lituanas, Jacobs and Renandya (2001) showed the striking effect of extensive reading despite the rather limited quality and quantity of the reading materials used in the extensive reading programme. The participants were 60 Grade 7 remedial students who attended their normal 40 minutes of English instruction plus a remedial class. In their remedial class, the students from the control group studied via a traditional approach that emphasized intensive reading and phonics. The students in the extensive reading group, on the other hand, were provided with reading materials and were encouraged to do self-selected reading and a variety of post-reading activities. Two standardized tests on reading comprehension were used to assess the impact of extensive reading—the Informal Reading Inventory (IRI) and the Gray Standardized Oral Reading Test (GSORT). After six months, the students from the extensive reading group gained a more profound understanding of the content than the traditional group on both measures.

Conclusion

Some of the studies are taken into account in this paper to serve as background for the study on the impact of Extensive reading materials in developing the reading skill. This paper explores the studies conducted on Extensive Reading materials across the globe on various levels. The beliefs of the researchers on ER help to study the impact in developing the reading skills. So many experimental research works have also been reviewed here guides the researchers in working out action research plans and projects on Extensive Reading.

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