HOW DOES EXTENSIVE READING PROMOTE LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT?

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Abstract

It is an undeniable fact that reading is of great importance in language teaching and learning process. One effective strategy to build up reading skill is extensive reading (ER), which has recently attracted much attention. Considering this, the current paper aimed at helping to gain insights into the role of extensive reading in promoting language development. First, various definitions of extensive reading were presented. Second, the paper looked at the notion of extensive reading from theoretical perspectives. Following this, the benefits of extensive reading were discussed based on empirical supports in foreign and second language teaching. Finally, some pedagogical implications and suggestions to apply extensive reading in language learning environment were provided.

Keywords: Extensive reading, Reading skill, Language development, Teaching reading.

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1.   **INTRODUCTION**

Reading has always been accepted as one of the most crucial skills in language development (Carrell, Devine, & Eskey, 1988). This skill is described as comprehending a written material by identifying the letters and examining these letters visually (Afflerbach, Pearson, & Paris, 2008). Reading, which is "a fluent process of readers joining information from a text and their own background knowledge to fabricate meaning" (Nunan,2003:68), is viewed as an essential component to enhance their language ability" (Chiang,2015).

The primary objective of reading is to help students understand what they are reading, derive meaning from words, make an interpretation of what is written in the text and build and expand their vocabulary knowledge. Reading also "provides the opportunity for the acquisition and review of a variety of lexical items and grammatical structures" (Wilkinson, 2012:252).

According to Krashen and Terrell (1983:131), "reading may . . . contribute significantly to competence in a second language. There is good reason, in fact, to hypothesize that reading makes a contribution to overall competence, to all four skills". Williams (1984: 13) also provides certain benefits of reading as follows:

- "Learners can have further practice in the language that they have learnt,
- Learners can practice language in order to reuse it in other skills such as speaking and writing,
- Learners can learn how to get benefit from the texts to extract the information they need,
- Learners can find enjoyment or interest through reading".

Since reading is considered as an important process which provides students with necessary input, it has always received growing attention in language teaching and learning field. It is generally known that large amount of time and energy is devoted to reading lessons in order for learners to gain such competence. However, in spite of the years spent on instruction and practice in reading, language learners can still have difficulty in comprehending the texts that they are reading, appear to read quite slowly, and consequently may lose their confidence about reading in the target language.

One effective way to solve this problem can be extensive reading. Extensive reading is believed to play a crucial role in developing language skills and to be a fruitful activity through which learners perform in order to keep contact with English outside the classroom. There is also a general belief in the related literature that learners should be subjected to extensive input for enhancing their language proficiency. In other words, as well as receiving input in the classroom, they need to be engaged in reading resources outside the class.

1.1. What is Extensive Reading?

What is exactly meant by the term "extensive reading" has been a significant issue of language studies. Still, there exists no agreement on the definition of this term among language teachers and researchers. Some language teachers regard extensive reading as skimming and scanning activities, whereas some researchers see a relation between extensive reading and quantity of materials which are read (Carrell & Carson, 1997; Renandya, 2007).

Krashen (1982) relates extensive reading to time spent on reading, and Hedge (1985:94) specifies as "individual silent periods". Waring (2000:6) describes ER with "done out of class", "well within ability", where "readers choose their own book", "focus on general comprehension and on developing reading fluency" as key definitive expressions. Nuttall (2005:127) defines extensive reading as "the easiest and most effective way to improve students' skills". According to Kirchhoff (2013:192), ER can be defined as "…an approach to teaching and learning reading that uses reading materials that are understandable and meaningful to the learner in order for learners to be able to read large amounts"

Carrell and Carson (1997:49-50) states, "extensive reading …generally involves rapid reading of large quantities of material or longer readings for general understanding, with the focus generally on the meaning of what is being read than on the language". Another comprehensive definition of ER is provided by Davis (1995:329):

"An extensive reading program is a supplementary class library scheme, attached to an English course, in which pupils are given the time, encouragement, and materials to read pleasurably, at their own level, as many books as they can, without the pressures of testing or marks. Thus, pupils are competing only against themselves, and it is up to the teacher to provide the motivation and monitoring to ensure that the maximum number of books is being read in the time available …."

Clearly, no precise definition of extensive reading exists, but Hedge (2000:202) offers some ideal features of extensive reading in his book as in the following:

- "reading large quantities of material, whether short stories and novels, newspaper and magazine articles, or professional reading.
- reading consistently over time on a frequent and regular basis
- reading longer texts of the types listed in the first point above
- reading for general meaning, primarily for pleasure, curiosity, or professional interest
- reading longer texts during class time but also engaging in individual, independent reading at home, ideally of self-selected material"

On the other hand, Hafız and Tudor (1989:5) explained the purpose of extensive reading as follows:

"…to 'flood' learners with large quantities of L2 input with few or possibly no specific tasks to perform on this material. The pedagogical value attributed to extensive reading is based on the assumption that exposing learners to large quantities of meaningful and interesting L2 material will, in the long run, produce a beneficial effect on the learners' command of the L2".

Through extensive reading, students can have an opportunity to come across a huge amount of linguistic input within their linguistic level. In this respect, Day and Bamford stated (2002: 139), "for extensive reading to be possible and for it to have the desired results, texts must be well within the learners' reading competence in the foreign language". Some other scholars such as Waring (1997), Bell (1998), Nation (1997), Renandya and Jacobs (2002) elaborated that a big amount of material within students' linguistic level has to be read on a regular basis. Grabe (1991:396) focused on certain positive impacts of extensive reading as: "Longer concentrated periods of silent reading build vocabulary and structural awareness, develop automaticity, enhance background knowledge, improve comprehension skills, and promote confidence and motivation".

It is of significance to note that the term "extensive reading" also differs from the term "intensive reading". Brown (2007:373) remarks that intensive reading is usually "a classroom-oriented activity in which students focus on the linguistic or semantic details . . . grammatical forms, discourse markers, and other surface structure details for the purpose of understanding". Thus, intensive reading is closely related to the detailed analysis of a text in which teacher has the responsibility to provide all the instructions, answers, clues during the reading activity. As Hedge (2000) emphasizes, intensive reading includes close study of texts and makes students familiar with the features of various genres. It also aims to teach learners how to use reading strategies for a good comprehension in decoding. Additionally, in intensive reading, students are supposed to comprehend the main points of the text by focusing on the details and practicing language forms in the text.

However, only with the help of extensive reading, learners can gain experience to employ strategies in a more independent way on a different material (Hedge, 2000). Through extensive reading, learners read a "huge amount of very simple text that they can read smoothly, confidently, and pleasurably" (Waring & Takahashi, 2000:6). Extensive reading, which is practiced individually, focuses on meaning. The topic is decided by the individual himself/herself for motivational reasons. It aims to improve reading habits. Therefore, in addition to intensive reading, which is often practiced in language classrooms and is surely a necessary strategy, extensive reading also appears to be another beneficial strategy to use outside the class for the purpose of cultivating language development.

1.2. Theoretical Framework of Extensive Reading

The theoretical framework behind extensive reading includes Krashen's Input Hypothesis. Krashen (1985), one of the most prominent language theorists, asserts that learners can acquire language if they are exposed to comprehensible input in a relaxing, stress-free environment. Extensive reading realizes these conditions by exposing learners to large amount of reading material at home, with little or no follow-up

exercise in order for them to acquire the target language. Krashen (1985) further argues that unconscious language acquisition, which takes place when reading is done for pleasure, is more effective and permanent than conscious learning.

Extensive reading may also have connection with "Bootstrap Hypothesis". This hypothesis was taken from engineering field and put into practice in language learning. It refers to "a process in which the results of an action are fed back to achieve greater results more quickly with less effort" (Bamford & Day, 1997:30). When the students have a positive experience with extensive reading at the very beginning, this will make them more confident and help them gain better results in other language learning processes. With the help of a feeling of success, learners will be triggered to read more; and therefore, their general language competence will be fostered.

The other theory defines a condition which is based on the idea that if the material is interesting enough for learners, they will do the reading more attentively and pertinently. Through this procedure, learners have a chance to enjoy developing the meaning naturally and they begin to benefit from their background knowledge in order to derive meanings from the text rather than decoding the meanings by means of vocabulary items and grammatical constructions (Waring, 1997).

2. THE BENEFITS OF EXTENSIVE READING

Many researchers and scholars have been closely concerned about extensive reading. For example, Day and Bamford (1998) and Hunter (2009) have recognized an influential effect of reading on academic success. Similarly, Nuttall (1982:65) says "an extensive reading program … is the single most effective way of improving both vocabulary and reading skills in general". Thus, extensive reading is believed to contribute to enhancing vocabulary knowledge and developing students' overall language abilities.

Nation (1997) puts forward that language students highly take advantage of extensive reading. First, large amount of reading materials leads them to pick up new vocabulary and revise their existing vocabulary knowledge. High frequency lexical items are read regularly through extensive reading, and learners are able to master these items. Second, extensive reading activities enable learners to develop attitude towards reading and language learning. They may find reading enjoyable, start to like literary texts, and develop reading habits. Third, extensive reading also makes learners both fluent readers and writers.

Davis (1995:335) argues that "any classroom will be the poorer for lack of an extensive reading program and will be unable to promote its pupils' language development in all aspects as effectively as if such a program were present". He further suggests that an extensive reading program is most likely to get the learners to gain positive attitude towards reading, improve their comprehension skills, and provide them with broader passive and active vocabulary items. In the same line with Davis's argument, Day and Bamford (1998) claims that ER enables learners to face increasing amount of words outside the class. Therefore; extensive reading can be accepted as one of the best ways for language learners to recognize the words automatically when they see them.

By the same token, Hedge (2000) points out that ER presents the benefit of subjecting students to a huge quantity of English materials, which is especially important where the class time is insufficient. Hedge further claims that the chance of reading at home or reading silently makes the possibility of carrying on learning by themselves stronger. In other words, extensive reading offers learners a good number of ways of working independently. Furthermore, according to Hedge (2000), providing children with books stimulates critical thinking and leads to developing attitudes towards creative experiences.

Wilkins (1972) highlights another outstanding benefit of extensive reading that learners can easily understand which words are appropriate in certain contexts with the help of reading. He further notes 1972:132):

"Through reading, the learner …. is exposed to the lexical items embedded in natural linguistic contexts, and as a result they begin slowly to have the same meaningfulness …that they have for the native speaker".

Robb and Susser (1989) also bring forward the idea that letting students choose reading materials that they like will enhance students' motivation to learn more. This will end up with their final acquisition of the

target language. When they see that they are able to read successfully in the target language, they are more motivated to do more extensive reading. Robb and Susser (1989) also underline the skill-building side of extensive reading such as comprehending important facts, predicting vocabulary from the context.

Another important issue of extensive reading to be taken into consideration is that extensive reading can also have positive impact on students' writing skill. Particularly upper-intermediate and advanced-level students are frequently supposed to write essays during their L2 classes. As they gain a good amount of vocabulary through extensive reading, they can become fluent writers with well-written essays. Hoey (2005) suggests that when learners are exposed to more language more often through extensive reading, their production in writing and speech will be a lot more impressive.

3. PREVIOUS STUDIES ON EXTENSIVE READING

Throughout the years, an increasing number of studies supporting extensive reading as a means of developing students' language learning ability have emerged. When literature was reviewed, it was seen that a comprehensive body of research mainly investigated the contribution of extensive reading to overall language development, vocabulary gain, or specifically reading or writing skill.

To start with, Saragi, Nation, Meister (1978) carried out a study in order to find out whether there is a relationship between extensive reading and vocabulary learning, and to see how learners pick up vocabulary items. The study yielded the outcome that extensive reading led to a great amount of vocabulary gains.

Elley and Mangubhai (1983) investigated one of the important studies to explore the impact of extensive reading on second language learners' language development in Fiji. Fijian school children in the experimental group were provided with many interesting English story books, whereas the control group followed regular audio-lingual teaching program. At the end of two year-experiment, they found that learners in experimental group outperformed the ones in control group, and improved their general reading comprehension skills. The reading groups were found to be a lot more superior to the traditional group. Therefore; the Fiji book flood program turned out to be beneficial in second language development.

In the UK, Hafız and Tudor (1989) indicated significant results after three-month extensive reading program employing graded readers with Pakistani learners. The experimental group read the books that they chose for pleasure for 60 minutes every day during 12 weeks. The other two groups who pursued their regular program were accepted as control groups. The results demonstrated that the reading group showed significant gains on the tests, especially in their writing skills, while the control groups made no significant gains.

Robb and Susser (1989) carried out a study with EFL Japanese college students in order to examine the effects of extensive reading. They revealed that learners who received extensive reading program significantly outperformed those who had instruction in traditional program on the posttest scores.

Day and Bamford (1998) provided a summary of the findings of studies into twelve extensive reading programs across various countries and all levels of proficiency. They found that extensive reading had overwhelmingly positive impact on all language skills, in particular reading and writing ability. This showed another noteworthy benefit of extensive reading in promoting overall language ability.

Greenberg, Rodrigo, Berry, Brink and Joseph (2006) also explored the effectiveness of an extensive reading program for students who experience difficulties in reading. At the end of the program, the learners were found to show improvement in reading fluency and vocabulary.

Two other studies were also conducted to investigate the impact of extensive reading. Kweon and Kim (2008) showed that there was a statistically significant difference between vocabulary pretest and protest in terms of vocabulary enhancement. Yamashita (2008) attempted to investigate the effects of ER on various aspects of second language ability. Findings confirmed that extensive reading positively affected learners' general reading ability.

Another study carried out by Al-Homoud and Schmidt (2009:398) revealed that "the extensive group participants held more positive views about their reading development in terms of all of the following: reading skills, reading comprehension, and reading fluency". Al-Homoud and Schmidt (2009) further claims that these

positive views are of great significance since it encourages learners to read more outside the classroom, which brings about language development.

Guo's (2012) study showed an attempt to explore the impact of authentic materials as the main source of extensive reading. On the basis of the results, there was a strong relationship between extensive reading and vocabulary development. Students in the study also considered that ER developed their general language competence and enhanced their knowledge.

In a different study, Yamashita (2013) examined the impacts of extensive reading on reading attitude in foreign language. Although most of the studies aimed to identify the effect of extensive reading on L2 improvement, this study focused on the affective domain of language learning. The data was obtained through a questionnaire including such categories as comfort, anxiety, intellectual value, practical value, and linguistic value. Findings showed "increases in comfort and intellectual value and a decrease in anxiety, with no effect on practical value" (Yamashitoa,2013:248).

A more recent study was conducted by Suk (2016). This study, which was designed as quasi-experimental research, aimed to investigate the impacts of extensive reading on reading comprehension, reading rate and vocabulary acquisition. At the end of the application of extensive reading approach throughout a 15-week school terms in experimental group, the research concluded that the class which received extensive reading approach as well as intensive reading in the class significantly outperformed the control group which only did intensive reading. Thus, the study confirmed the favorable influence of extensive reading on such three areas as reading comprehension, reading rate and vocabulary gain.

Celik (2017) examined whether extensive reading has an effect on vocabulary and sentence structure. After the application of extensive reading approach to students, the study arrived at the conclusion that students gained some collocations naturally. Furthermore, they raised awareness of different meanings of vocabulary items and various kinds of sentence structures. Thus, it is understood that the readers developed an ability to recognize flexibility of language and not to make a generalization about the rules of a language.

Alsaif ve Masrai (2019) aimed at examining the relationship between extensive reading and vocabulary acquisition. One participant was asked to do extensive reading for a total of eight weeks outside the classroom. The student's vocabulary development was evaluated before and after the extensive reading activity. Findings demonstrated that extensive reading made a significant contribution to vocabulary enrichment when compared to the vocabulary gain through the reading input through classroom activities.

As understood, extensive reading has been largely investigated in ESL/EFL environments, and aforementioned studies confirmed its positive impact on overall language development including reading skill, reading rate, reading attitude, vocabulary enrichment, writing, etc. By drawing on such favorable research findings, the following implications can be provided.

4. IMPLICATIONS FOR EXTENSIVE READING IN LANGUAGE TEACHING

Based on the benefits of extensive reading put forward by many scholars and researchers, the current paper attempted to help gain insights into how important extensive reading is in language learning and how it can be applied effectively in promoting language development. Considering this, some fruitful suggestions and implications to use extensive reading strategy in language teaching and learning can be given.

First of all, extensive reading provides a significant learning opportunity although it necessitates much commitment, energy, and resourcing. Bearing this in mind, teachers should make time for extensive reading within a reading program where the major focus is on reading skill as an effective reading program as Grabe (1986:43) states "A major way to round out a reading program is to introduce extensive reading material into the curriculum". Learners should be offered an extensive reading program including suitable materials, tasks and support. One of the most influential ways for a successful extensive reading program is setting up a library full of suitable books. In spite of the fact that it may seem quite costly, learners will make a high profit out of this library if the schools and institutions are persuaded to provide sufficient funds. Also, learners will have the chance to reach a big variety of books, stories, and authentic texts according to their proficiency levels and interests (Harmer, 2007).

Additionally, taking the findings of previous research into consideration, teachers should be quite aware of the strong relation between the amount of reading and students' language gains, and get the students to realize that they can considerably benefit from extensive reading if they show enthusiasm and make an effort to read outside the classroom. When learners recognize the value of extensive reading for their language improvement, their motivation will enhance to do more reading; and therefore learn more about the language. Moreover, for students to become more eager for extensive reading, teachers should ensure that there exist plenty of attractive, interesting, relevant materials available for each and every language learner.

Here, the significant point is finding appropriate materials for learners at different proficiency levels, which could be a challenging task for teachers. Specially- written materials for extensive reading that are frequently referred to as *graded readers* or *simplified readers* could be one of the most suitable materials for extensive reading (Harmer, 2007). Through these materials, learners at the right level are able to read with ease and confidence, which helps them to develop positive attitude towards reading. Choosing invaluable materials would be a worthwhile support for learners since it is more likely to lead to vocabulary development, building background knowledge, and knowledge of different genres. Otherwise, students can easily get discouraged when they see that they cannot understand what they are reading, and they stop at each word in the texts. In addition, students should be allowed to pick up their own reading texts following their likes and interests, which will aid learners to keep reading. It is also important to note that when individuals are given the opportunity to make a choice of what to read, they may need guidance from teachers to find some that are at a suitable level for them. To be a helpful guide, it is of great importance that teachers should attempt to get to know their students' likes, dislikes, expectations, interests better, and accordingly make helpful suggestions about genres that they can enjoy and comprehend easily (Powell, 2005).

As well as being a guide, teachers should also assume other roles in the classroom. Teachers should be a facilitator, motivator and enthusiast in order for learners to take responsibility of their own learning (Yu, 1993). Unlike the usual classroom practice in which teachers have control of the activities, in this way, students will work independently at their own pace by interacting with the text. Teachers should monitor students' progress by checking their reading records, and making discussion about the books they have read in a teacher-student conference, which is a rewarding opportunity to keep track of the students' reading development through extensive reading (Yu,1993). Besides, as concluded from Nuttall's (1982:192) statement "Readers are made by readers", teachers should be a good role model by having a reading habit because teachers who do not read much cannot recommend books and persuade learners that reading is of importance for their language development.

Another implication could be that reading strategy training should be incorporated into the curriculum; and teachers should give instruction about how to employ strategies so as to have a better understanding of the texts. By doing so, learners get familiar with various kinds of strategies, enabling them to learn how to deduce meaning from the context, how to utilize linguistic clues, discourse markers, etc., and how to be a fluent and critical reader.

5. CONCLUSION

Along the history of language learning and acquisition, the role of extensive reading has been an important issue in foreign and second language learning. It is worth mentioning that extensive reading continues to play a significant role in developing overall language skills. This paper aimed to demonstrate the valuable role of extensive reading in language learning and emphasized numerous benefits by drawing on theoretical framework and empirical support. It is better understood that there exists plenty of evidence revealing that extensive reading gives rise to improving general language abilities. Suggestions and implications to apply extensive reading in stimulating language development are also provided in this paper.

In the light of aforementioned research findings, it is obviously seen that extensive reading contributes to language development in such aspects as vocabulary development, overall language skills development, particularly reading, motivation enhancement, and building background knowledge. Therefore; extensive reading can be accepted as one of effective ways of promoting the target language development. It can also be concluded from the paper that doing as much reading as possible outside the classroom can be a worthwhile means to develop positive attitude towards literary texts, and various genres, develop reading habit in learners, and broaden students' world knowledge of different cultures, people, places, etc. As mentioned in the current

paper, there are many ways to apply extensive reading in the classrooms such as setting up a library, finding appropriate reading materials like graded readers, being a good model, facilitator, and guide. Among these, maybe the most important thing is that learners should also be provided with a wide variety of interesting, engaging, appropriate materials for their age, proficiency level, and interest. Thus, they can enjoy reading and continue reading for pleasure and information in their daily life. Also, it is of great significance that students need to be persuaded about the profitable role of extensive reading. If so, they will recognize the value of reading, make time and create opportunities to read extensively. Another outstanding point is that teachers should get to know their students more closely to be able to make meaningful and enjoyable recommendations for them.

To sum up, extensive reading is one of the most fundamental ways to be given much importance in teaching and learning a second/ foreign language; and based on study findings, it is an indisputable fact that extensive reading has a momentous role in improving language skills, building vocabulary knowledge, increasing motivation, developing automaticity, and exposing learners to works in print and authentic texts.

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