BUCHAREST UNIVERSITY OF ECONOMIC STUDIES
The Faculty of International Business and Economics
The Department of Modern Languages and Business Communication of ASE
11th International Conference: **Synergies in Communication (SiC)**
Bucharest, Romania, 26 - 27 October 2023

BENEFITS OF INTEGRATING EXTENSIVE READING IN TEACHING/LEARNING FOREIGN LANGUAGES AT TERTIARY LEVEL

Anca PECICAN[1]

Abstract

Extensive reading (ER) is a widely used practice in teaching foreign languages to learners ranging from primary school pupils to adults. Full immersion in second language input through reading compelling texts has been proved to generate multiple positive effects on L2 learning such as: reading fluency development; increase in motivation and attitude improvement; writing skill development; learner autonomy enhancement; and the list could go on. The present study is an investigation into practical cases of L2 ER programmes at the tertiary level as published in academic literature with the aim of highlighting their documented benefits for university students. Research studies using a pre- and post-test design identified significant improvement in the case of students undergoing an ER treatment as compared to students who took part in a skill-based instruction. Data collection procedures relying on questionnaires pinpointed positive attitudes such as comfort, reduced anxiety, perceived linguistic and intellectual gains. In addition, the freedom of selecting the reading materials, as well as participation in interactive reading-based tasks count among valuable motivational factors that support reading.

1. Introduction

Extensive reading (ER) as it is understood today is a method of foreign language teaching and learning which involves reading large amounts of texts for a long time for reasons such as pleasure, personal interest, curiosity, etc. As the process of learning a second language (L2) unfolds, students can rely on a wide range of ER materials created according to their L2 level of competence, age and even cultural background. Multiple collections of graded readers including fiction and non-fiction have been published over the last two decades mainly in English, French, Spanish, Italian, German and Japanese as foreign languages. According to Day and Bamford (1998), in order to develop reading fluency in L2, students must read at *i-1* level, where *i* stands for their current input level in the studied foreign language. Besides their simplified language and plot development, graded readers also include exciting stories (adaptations of classic novels, romance, science fiction, mystery) or features on a variety of interesting topics (nature, culture, historical events, biographies).

The main theoretical assumption underlying ER is rooted in S. Krashen (1988)'s Input Hypothesis, according to which continuous exposure to L2 input generates improvement in L2 knowledge.

---

[1] The Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Romania, Bucharest, anca.pecican@rei.ase.ro

However, what kind of input could maintain student's interest for a long time? This question is especially reasonable since many L2 students take language classes in other environments than the foreign language-speaking country and therefore lack exposure to L2 input other than regular classes. The mentioned theory provides a possible answer stating that "language acquisition and literacy development are most efficient when input is compelling" (Krashen, Lee and Lao, 2018, 1) or so engaging that the reader moves attention away from language towards the overall message and unconsciously develops language skills. Additionally, Day and Bamford (1998) make a strong case of students' reading texts that they highly understand, without the help of dictionary, ignoring the unknown words, which ideally should be very few[2]. Readers will also make sure they keep enjoying the text. If the interest or joy is lost, then the reader should feel comfortable to put the book aside and try a different one.

While development of L2 skills solely on account of ER is debatable according to published experimental studies (Yamashita, 2008, Waring and Takaki, 2003), carefully conducted experiments provide solid proof of ER's benefits in certain areas of second language acquisition (SLA). Reading comprehension and speed (Bui and Macalister, 2021, Beglar and Hunt, 2014, Huffman, 2014, Robb and Kano, 2013, Yamashita, 2008, Robb and Susser, 1989), writing (Park, 2016, Mermelstein, 2015, Lee and Hsu, 2009, Mason and Krashen, 1997) and students' attitude and motivation (Iwata, 2022, Chen, 2018, Hagley, 2017) are reported as the most frequently improved L2 aspects. Moreover, such elements as students' own choice of the reading materials according to personal interest, their freedom to keep or stop reading, tasks involving personal opinion and critical thinking (Park, 2016), as well as the reading activity itself, make ER a learner-centred teaching method enhancing learner autonomy.

Over the last twenty-five years, numerous research studies on ER have been carried out in varied educational settings worldwide. The present study is concerned with researching published academic literature reporting on ER programmes involving university or college students. The aim is twofold: on the one hand, to highlight the documented benefits of ER and, on the other hand, to identify practical ways of including ER into the university L2 course design. Therefore, the main research questions are:

(a) Why would ER be used in higher educational settings?
(b) What benefits would L2 students have as a result of an ER programme?

2. ER programmes and their benefits

2.1. Reading comprehension and speed

Robb and Kano (2013) report on the effects of ER integrated into the English L2 course syllabus for about 2,200 non-English majors during their first year at a Japanese university. The ER treatment lasted for one academic year and students were required to read 5 graded readers only outside of the classroom. In-class activities are not described in detail but students elected to enroll in a Reading Skills course or an Oral Communication course or in both of them. Students registering in both courses had to read 10 GR's. Achieving the reading target or not was taken into account in their final grade for each course. The teachers monitored students' reading with the help of the Moodle course management system that included timed quizzes relating to the books. The students had to take the quizzes to prove that they had read.

Most students had a similar experience in studying English before the university and the pre-test revealed similar L2 levels between the experimental group (1st year students in 2009-2010 academic year) and the control group, who lacked ER (1st year students but in 2008-2009 academic year). The post-tests applied to both groups were identical and included 32 reading items and 34 listening items.

---

[2] Many research studies which identified positive outcomes of ER on SLA used a battery of tests and procedures to ensure students' understanding of at least 95% of the available graded readers' vocabulary (Mermelstein, 2015, Brown *et al*., 2008, 141).

The resulting data provided sound evidence that the ER group improved more than the control group who received only regular instruction. However, the authors admit that "it does not demonstrate that it was the extensive reading *per se* that caused the improvement" (Robb and Kano, 2013, 244), rather than the additional time of exposure to L2 input. Nevertheless, as regards the quantitative data on whether the ER requirement was completed, namely the Moodle quizzes, the authors mention that only about 70% of the students took them on one or more books. This means that for at least 30% of the population out-of-class reading was not attractive.

Bui and Macalister (2021) also used only out-of-class ER with 17 students majoring in English L2. A website including digital GR's was created and students had to read online at least 1,000 words each week. There were no follow-up activities or quizzes, but when they finished reading they had to report the number of the read words and the time spent on readings, which were provided by the mentioned website. They read for 10 weeks and at the end, the researchers noted that on average, participants increased their reading speeds. Most of them met the course requirement of reading at least 1,000 words per week, having read about 23,400 words, amounting to 21 texts.

A different use of ER was reported in Beglar and Hunt (2014)'s empirical study. In a 90-minute elective reading course per week, students engaged only in pleasure reading both in and out of class. The reading minimum target was one book every two weeks. They had the option to choose among both simplified and non-simplified books. The completion of the task was regularly monitored by the written reports students had to submit for each book they read. The findings pinpointed an increase in the reading speed correlated with the total amount of words read. Moreover, the highest reading speed gains occurred in the case of students who read simplified texts as compared with those who read a combination of both simplified and non-simplified texts.

Other studies report on improvements in both reading speed or rate and reading comprehension. For instance, Huffman (2014) designed an experiment that involved reading for 30 minutes in class, a 30-minute journal activity and for the remaining 30 minutes other book familiarization activities (e. g. a poster contest). Reading was done both in and out of class. On an end-of-course questionnaire, students reported an average of 3.59 hours per week spent on reading. They were evaluated primarily according to the number of read pages and on a book report relating to each reading. This treatment was paralleled by an intensive reading one involving in-class reading, translation of the read texts and vocabulary quizzes. The students undertaking this course stated that they had spent an average of 2.44 hours per week on reading. The comparison between the administered pre- and post-test revealed significant improvement in reading comprehension and speed in the case of the students who practiced ER. Their gains were higher than the advance registered by the intensive reading group.

2.2. Writing and EAP programmes

Several research studies report on ER incorporated in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) programmes (Park, 2016, Mermelstein, 2015, Lee and Hsu, 2009, Macalister, 2010). Three such studies (Park, 2016, Mermelstein, 2015, Lee and Hsu, 2009) used ER with the aim of improving students' writing ability in English as a foreign language. Students involved in these programmes read only self-chosen GR's made available by the department/university/college's library. It is worth mentioning Mermelstein (2015)'s initial assessment of each student's reading level by means of a placement test. Based on their scores, students were guided on what GR's to choose for the reading, as most publishing houses mention the level of the texts on transparent scales. This first step was taken in order to avoid potential delays and motivation loss due to possible wrong choices of too difficult texts.

In these educational settings, students majored in subjects other than English namely, social sciences (Park, 2016), accounting, information management, journalism, statistics (Mermelstein, 2015) and vocational education (Lee and Hsu, 2009). They were having at least 2 English classes per week. The courses were organised in more or less similar ways and lead to comparable results. For instance, in Lee and Hsu (2009)'s experiment, subjects had 4 classes per week: 2 of them (a 100-minute meeting

+ a 50-minute meeting) were devoted to instruction and practice in writing and the other 2 (a 100-minute meeting + a 50-minute meeting) included general English instruction in reading comprehension, grammar, vocabulary and speaking activities. This was the college 'traditional' curricula undergone by the control group (CG). In the treatment applied to the experimental group (EG) the 50-minute general English class was entirely dedicated to sustained silent reading (SSR). This meant that students read the chosen text individually, in silence, for about 50 minutes in the classroom. No mention of out-of-class reading is provided in the description of the intervention, but the recommended target was one book per week. The experiment lasted for one academic year and at the end of the second semester, the post-essay revealed significant improvement in the EG's writing in terms of fluency, content and organisation, language use and spelling. As compared to the CG, the EG's gains were higher.

Mermelstein (2015, 184) considers the length of 50 minutes silent reading in the classroom is not practical and can be quite challenging for the learner. Instead, he introduced ER as a 15-20 minutes SSR during class time and asked his students to keep reading out of class, too. The recommended target was 3 pages per day. In this educational context, there were 2 English classes per week, lasting 50 minutes each. One of these classes focused on writing instruction and the other one on the development of the rest of the skills. ER was introduced at the beginning of the latter only with the EG. To keep the balance between the requirements for out-of-class activities, the CG was assigned 1-hour homework focusing on reading comprehension exercises, writing, grammar and vocabulary. At the end of the academic year, the comparison between students' initial and final writings revealed that both the EG and the CG achieved substantial gains in terms of organization, content, vocabulary, language use, spelling and fluency. The statistical treatment of the data revealed that students who practiced ER "significantly outperformed the CG on five of the six subscales" (Mermelstein, 2015, 192), the only exception being organization. The researcher considers this to be the effect of deliberate in-class instruction focusing more on pre-writing and text organization.

Park (2016)'s experiment replicates Mermelstein (2015)'s and reaches similar findings. The main differences lie in the length of the ER treatment, which in Park's study is 16 weeks (1 semester), and in the post-reading tasks. The course included 2 weekly classes of 75 minutes each dedicated to writing instruction. All students followed the same course syllabus and used the same textbook. The EG practiced ER for 15 minutes at the beginning of one of the classes followed by 5 minutes of pair discussions on the readings. As homework, besides reading, they were assigned follow-up writing tasks involving practice of specific academic subskills as follows: summarizing, describing, analyzing content, reacting, etc. The researcher states that these tasks provided opportunities for customized writing practice enhancing students' engagement with both reading and writing (Park, 2016, 292). Integrating reading and writing in the EAP course proved beneficial as the ER group outperformed the CG in all of the assessed aspects. The highest gains were achieved in content and organization and gains for vocabulary and language use were slightly lower than the former. Since both the CG (writing instruction) and the EG (writing instruction + ER) received identical training, the higher scores achieved by the latter are likely to be the result of ER. According to Park (2016, 292), ER may have helped students learn the new words and expressions appropriately and use them in the right context, which lead to more natural-sounding, unambiguous sentences.

2.3. Effects on attitudes and motivation

Macalister (2008) reports on introducing ER into a 12-week EAP programme as daily SSR in class for 20 minutes, at the end of a three-hour daily meeting at a university in New Zealand. No reference to out-of-class reading is mentioned. Six GR's including fiction (a mystery, a love story, a memoir) and non-fiction were provided for reading and students had to choose from among them[3]. A range of

---

[3] Drawing on academic literature reporting on the benefits of ER on SLA, the researcher introduced ER as a pilot project, aiming at experimenting with this method in order to test students' reactions. Since there was no GR available at the university's library, these 6 GR's were chosen following the ER Foundation's award-

follow-up writing activities was designed and integrated in the class list of activities (for/against theme in the book, book review, argument essay, personal reaction, etc.). In the first and then in the last week of the course, the researcher elicited and analysed students' reactions towards the inclusion of the ER component into the EAP programme. Despite a sceptical initial attitude towards reading stories in the EAP class, at the end of the 12 weeks students admitted that they had enjoyed the books and perceived improvement in their second language skills. Some students confessed that ER encouraged them to carry on reading other stories, thus developing a reading habit in the second language. Among the perceived linguistic benefits they mentioned vocabulary growth, awareness of writing styles and grammar. Learning about other cultures and increase in the reading speed were also perceived.

Besides improving reading rate, Bui and Macalister (2021)'s experiment also aimed at examining students' self-assessment and perceptions towards the ER online programme they had taken part in during 10 weeks. In line with the information, they regularly reported on the number of the read pages[4], students also perceived the highest improvement in their reading speed. Vocabulary growth was also considered an important achievement and, to a lesser extent, reading comprehension and pragmatic use of the target language ("natural writing and storytelling skills", Bui and Macalister, 2021, 15). A moderately similar pattern of perceived linguistic benefits of ER was reported by Lee and Hsu (2009). At the end of a one-year ER programme, students felt that their vocabulary (37.2%), reading comprehension and speed (15%) as well as the development of strategies for guessing word meaning (27.9%) improved the most.

The perceived increases in reading comprehension and reading speed (Boakye, 2017, Tien, 2015, Lee and Hsu, 2009) and in vocabulary size (Tien, 2015; Kweon and Kim, 2008; Macalister, 2008; Crawford-Camiciottoli, 2001) as a result of ER are also mentioned in several action research studies. With regard to the former aspect, research using a pre- and post-test design (Beglar and Hunt, 2014, Huffman, 2014, Robb and Kano, 2013, Yamashita, 2008) largely confirms students' perceptions. However, vocabulary expansion as a direct consequence of ER is partly supported. While gains in learners' vocabulary were clearly identified in certain studies (Suk, 2016, Brown *et al.* 2008, Mason & Krashen, 1991), according to others, readers do not seem to learn a lot of new words from graded reading, but they rather consolidate knowledge about known words (Waring and Takaki, 2003). In addition, it seems that recognition of meaning is better enhanced by ER than production of meaning (Brown *et al.*, 2008). Therefore, caution should be taken when expecting ER to improve students' vocabulary[5].

Among the non-linguistic mentioned benefits of an online ER programme, Bui and Macalister (2021)'s participants also mentioned convenience and ease of access, the frequent exposure to reading and the interesting content of the texts. The use of internet in online ER programmes involving advanced L2 students was appreciated for its wide variety of available texts that could be attractive to university students (Pecican, 2020, Arnold, 2009).

Yamashita (2013) carried out a study on the perceived effects of a 15-week English FL course that included ER as a major component. The focus was students' attitudes towards ER. The participants were 61 second-year undergraduates majoring in economics, agricultural studies and informatics at a university in Japan. Half of the weekly 90-minute seminar was used for class-activities such as

---

winning titles in the category *Adults & adolescents/advanced* for 2004 and 2005. It had been assumed that they matched both the maturity and the estimated language proficiency of the learners (Macalister, 2008, 26).

[4] A detailed description of this experiment is provided in Section 2.1.

[5] Another case of mismatch between subjects' perceptions on the one hand, and factual evidence on the other hand, is Lee and Hsu (2009)'s experiment. The tests applied by the researchers acknowledged students' gains in writing in EFL, as it has been shown in Section 2.2. However, in an open-ended questionnaire meant to elicit students' own reflections about their self-improvement as a result of ER, writing is not even mentioned. Instead, vocabulary, reading abilities, meaning-guessing strategies, grammar, thinking and listening in English and pronunciation are mentioned in this order. Midway through the programme, in a similar questionnaire writing came five, after reading ability, reading rate, vocabulary and grammar.

reading short texts, informal practice in groups or short lectures, while the other half was devoted to individual silent reading of self-chosen graded readers and they were recommended to keep reading outside of class, too. Students' final grade took account of their participation in class, of the amount of reading, as well as of book reports they were required to submit. The same reading attitude questionnaire was administered in the first and in the last week of the course. The findings revealed that ER raised participants' feelings of comfort in reading in a foreign language and reduced their anxiety towards this activity. Moreover, students attached an intellectual value to ER, considering that this method helped them find out about new cultures or different values, expand their general knowledge or "become more sophisticated" (Yamashita, 2013, 263).

ER's enhancing intrinsic motivation has been pinpointed by numerous research studies. A sense of improvement in second language abilities, specifically in reading, generates self-confidence and a feeling of personal achievement, which in turn leads to permanence and even increase in reading (Iwata, 2022, McLean and Poulshock, 2018, Arnold, 2009).

Despite reading being an individual process which involves personal experience with the text, several research studies reported positive attitudes towards ER engendered by interactive in-class post-reading activities (Iwata, 2022, Pecican, 2020, Chen, 2018, Kirchhoff, 2015). According to these studies, sharing reading experience with peers proved to be a valuable motivational factor that supported reading, decreased anxiety and promoted confidence in reading and communicative abilities in the studied foreign language.

A motivational factor of no less importance is the opportunity students have to self-select the reading materials matching their own interests, pleasure or needs (Tien, 2015, Yamashita, 2013, Arnold, 2009). Besides enhancing learner autonomy, this practice is a way of generating engagement and a positive attitude towards foreign language learning. For instance, as it has been mentioned in section 2.2., Park (2016) took advantage of ER to design writing tasks tailored to each student's own reading. He considered this as being a factor generating students' higher gains in their writing ability as compared to the control group who had textbook-based homework. Additionally, Robb and Susser (1989)'s research revealed students' preference for reading out of class over doing 'traditional' homework based on exercises.

3. Conclusions

The present study analyses practical cases of ER inclusion in the university second language curriculum, focusing on its benefits to learners. Despite sometimes being considered a light form of reading (Day and Bamford, 1998) or a frivolous task (Park, 2016, 292), ER has been proven effective in developing students' reading comprehension and speed, their writing skills, as well as in generating positive attitudes towards second language learning. With regard to learners' improvement in linguistic abilities, the experimental findings of the reviewed studies suggest that ER is likely to lead to higher gains as opposed to skill-based 'traditional' instruction. Researchers explain these findings on account of subjects' immersion in L2 input for additional time. Moreover, such feelings as pleasure, comfort and reduced anxiety experienced in the course of reading generate engagement and support immersion. According to Iwata (2022), employing the ER approach can greatly fulfill students' psychological needs for autonomy. This occurs when students select books based on personal interest and competence, fostering a sense of success and growth, along with relatedness through interactive reading tasks.

Considering the cases described in this study, several conclusions can be drawn with regard to certain key aspects that successful ER programmes share. Firstly, the self-selection principle is possible provided that a wide range of reading materials is available. Secondly, regardless of whether students read in or out of class, there is a clear system of holding them accountable or monitoring their participation in the programme. ER practitioners and researchers argue that students' performance of ER should be taken into account in their final grade (Robb, 2022). This extrinsic type of motivation would count among the first steps that will lead to further developments. Thirdly, among other factors

that contribute to the effectiveness of ER are target-setting in terms of number of books, pages or words and competent teacher guiding.

References and bibliography

Arnold, N. (2009). Online Extensive Reading for Advanced Foreign Language Learners: An Evaluation Study. Foreign Language Annals, 42(2), 340 – 365.

Beglar, D. & Hunt, A. (2014). Pleasure reading and reading rate gains. Reading in a Foreign Language, 26(1), 29–48.

Boakye, N. A. (2017). Extensive reading in a tertiary reading programme: Students' accounts of affective and cognitive benefits. Reading & Writing, 8(1), 1–9. https://doi.org/10.4102/rw.v8i1.153

Brown, R., Waring, R. & Donkaewbua, S. (2008). Vocabulary acquisition from reading, reading-while-listening, and listening to stories. Reading in a Foreign Language, 20(2), 136-163.

Bui, T. N. & Macalister, J. (2021). Online Extensive Reading in an EFL Context: Investigating Reading Fluency and Perceptions. Reading in a Foreign Language, 33(1), 1–29.

Chen, I. C. (2018). Incorporating task-based learning in an extensive reading programme. ELT Journal, 72 (4), 405-414

Crawford-Camiciottoli, B. C. (2001). Extensive reading in English: Habits and attitudes of a group of Italian university students. Journal of Research in Reading, 24, 135–153.

Day, R. & Bamford, J. (1998). Extensive Reading in the Second Language Classroom, New York: Cambridge University Press

Hagley, E. (2017). Extensive graded reading with engineering students: Effects and outcomes. Reading in a Foreign Language, 29(2), 203–207.

Huffman, J. (2014). Reading rate gains during a one-semester extensive reading course. Reading in a Foreign Language, 26(2), 17-33.

Iwata, A. (2022). An Extensive Reading Program as an Educational Intervention in an EFL Classroom. Reading in a Foreign Language, 34 (2), 208-231.

Kirchhoff, C. (2015). Extensive Reading in the EFL Classroom: Benefits of a Face-to-FaceCollaboration Activity. The Reading Matrix: An International Online Journal, 15 (1), 54-65.

Krashen, S. (1988). Do we learn to read by reading? The relationship between free reading and reading ability. Tannen D. (ed.) Linguistics in context: Connecting observation and understanding. Norwood NJ: Ablex, 269-298

Krashen S., Lee, S. & Lao, C. (2018). Comprehensible and compelling: The causes and effects of free voluntary reading. Santa Barbara, CA: Libraries Unlimited

Kweon, S. O. & Kim, H. R. (2008). Beyond raw frequency: Incidental vocabulary acquisition in extensive reading, Reading in a Foreign Language, 20(2), 191–215.

Lee, S. Y. & Hsu, Y. (2009). Determining the crucial characteristics of extensive reading programs: The impact of extensive reading on EFL writing. The International Journal of Foreign Language Teaching, Summer 2009, 12–20

Macalister, J. (2008). Integrating extensive reading into an English for Academic Purposes program. The Reading Matrix, 8(1), 23-33.

Mason, B. & Krashen, S. (1997). Extensive reading in English as a foreign language. System, 25, 91 102.

McLean, S. & Poulshock, J. (2018). Increasing reading self-efficacy and reading amount in EFL learners with word-targets. Reading in a Foreign Language, 30(1), 76-91.

Mermelstein, A. D. (2015). Improving EFL learners' writing through enhanced extensive reading. Reading in a Foreign Language, 27(2), 182-198.

Park, J. (2016). Integrating reading and writing through extensive reading. ELT Journal, 70(3), 287-295.

Pecican, A. (2020). What would students read about?: Involving L2 learners in compiling a business English reading portfolio. Synergy, 16 (2), 157-174.

Robb, T. (2022) Encouraging Schools to Adopt Extensive Reading: How Do We Get There? Reading in a Foreign Language, 34 (1), 184-194.

Robb, T & Kano, M. (2013). Effective Extensive Reading outside the classroom: A large-scale experiment. Reading in a Foreign Language, 25 (2), 234-247.

Robb, T. & Susser, B. (1989). Extensive Reading vs Skills Building in an EFL Context. Reading in a Foreign Language, 5(2), 239-251.

Suk, N. (2016). The effects of extensive reading on reading comprehension, reading rate, and vocabulary acquisition. Reading Research Quarterly, 52(1), 73-89.

Tien, C. Y. (2015). A large-Scale Study on Extensive Reading Program for Non-English Majors: Factors and Attitudes. International Journal of Applied Linguistics & English Literature, 4 (4), 46-54.

Waring, R. & Takaki, M. (2003). At what rate do learners learn and retain new vocabulary from reading a graded reader? Reading in a Foreign Language, 15(2), 130–163.

Yamashita, J. (2008). Extensive reading and development of different aspects of L2 proficiency. System, 36, 661-672.

Yamashita, J. (2013). Effects of extensive reading on reading attitudes in a foreign language. Reading in a Foreign Language, 25(2), 248–263.

The author
Anca Pecican is a PhD university lecturer at the Bucharest University of Economic Studies, where she teaches Spanish and English as foreign languages. At present her main area of research is the teaching of foreign languages with a focus on extensive reading, collaborative learning and computer-assisted second language learning.