

TO READ OR NOT TO READ: A CRITICAL EVALUATION OF THE EFFECTIVENESS OF EXTENSIVE READING IN ESL/EFL CONTEXTS

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Abstract

Reading is considered to be an important language skill in teaching and learning, and there has been a great deal of interest in extensive reading (ER) in English as a second language (ESL) and English as a foreign language (EFL) contexts over the past few decades. While numerous researchers have generally advocated for the benefits of ER, it has not been widely implemented, and teachers sometimes encounter various obstacles and hindrances to successfully and consistently implementing it. This paper aims to evaluate the effectiveness of ER from three aspects: (1) motivation towards reading in a second or foreign language, (2) improvement of reading skills and (3) development of second or foreign language proficiency with reference to both conceptual literature and empirical research. After providing a critical review of the previous literature, this paper will make suggestions on what factors should be considered and how ER can be implemented effectively.

Keywords: *EFL; ESL; extensive reading; language proficiency; motivation; reading skills*

Introduction

Reading is considered to be an important skill in second language (L2) and foreign language (FL) teaching and learning, and there has been a great deal of interest in extensive reading (ER) over the past few decades. ER has generally been defined as reading a wide range of easy texts in large quantities that are within students' linguistic competence (Grabe & Stoller, 2002; Hafiz & Tudo, 1989). It implies that students should be given autonomy and a wide range of materials that they are interested in to read independently for the purpose of pleasure (Bamford & Day, 2004). It is also called 'free voluntary reading', 'pleasure reading' and 'sustained silent reading'. The effectiveness of ER in English as a second language (ESL) and English as a foreign language (EFL) contexts has been examined by numerous studies. In general, empirical research has indicated that ER is more effective for increasing student's motivation to read, improving reading skills and developing general L2 language proficiency than other approaches, such as intensive reading (IR) and traditional translation procedures (Al-Homoud & Schmitt, 2009; Beglar, Hunt, & Kite, 2012; Miliner, 2019; Robb & Susser, 1989). However, from the practical side, it appears that ER has not been widely implemented (Grabe, 2009), and teachers sometimes have trouble implementing this approach successfully and consistently (Lituanas, Jacobs, & Renandya, 1999; Shen, 2008; Susser & Robb, 1990). There are also some doubts about its effectiveness because ER is influenced by various mediating factors (e.g. students' needs and institutional constraints) that L2 reading teachers should take into consideration. This paper aims to evaluate the impact of ER from three aspects: (1) motivation for reading in a second or foreign language, (2) improvement of reading skills and (3) development of second or foreign language proficiency with reference to both conceptual literature and empirical research. After providing a critical review of the previous

literature, this paper will make suggestions on the factors that teachers should consider and how they can implement ER effectively

Impact on reading motivation

Motivation broadly refers to frequent pleasure reading, while positive attitudes are general perceptions that reading is good. Briggs and Walter (2016) analysed 30 evidence-based studies of ER and young L2 students' motivation and attitudes and found that ER made a positive difference in the motivation to read and attitudes of 11–18-year-old learners. A positive impact on L2 reading motivation has been reported in various geographical and pedagogical contexts, such as Japan (Leung, 2002; Powell, 2005; Tanaka & Stapleton, 2007), Korea (Lee, Schallert, & Kim, 2015), Malaysia (Sani & Zain, 2011), Germany (Kreft & Viebrock, 2014), the United States of America (Pilgreen & Krashen, 1993) and the United Arab Emirates (Alsheik & Elhoweris, 2011). This increase in reading motivation might, in turn, lead to an increase in general language learning motivation because reading motivation closely resembles general motivational constructs (Mori, 2002; Nishono, 2005). Nevertheless, some studies have shown no significant differences or even a negative impact on motivation toward L2 reading (Sheu, 2003; 2004). Schon, Hopkins, and Vojir's (1985) research, for instance, indicated that there was no significant difference in motivation between ER and non-ER bilingual learners.

These inconsistent results may be due to a number of mediating factors. Various influencing factors may affect the impacts of ER on L2 reading motivation, such as one's general level of proficiency, the difficulty of the texts, L2 reading proficiency and pre-programme motivation (Briggs & Walter, 2016). First, empirical evidence has suggested that higher proficiency L2 readers tend to benefit more from ER in terms of positive changes in motivation in comparison to students with low-level L2 reading abilities (Fujita & Noro, 2009; Sani & Zain, 2011). Advanced students' intrinsic reading motivation increases more significantly than learners with a lower proficiency who are less likely to prefer

teacher-independent ER. In addition, the reading materials that are used for ER activities may affect the efficacy. Some studies have demonstrated that reading motivation interplays with the difficulty of the text and the students' L2 reading proficiency (Briggs & Walter, 2016). Sheu (2003; 2004), for example, postulated that students might be less motivated to read because there could be a lack of proper reading strategies or activities to encourage reading. These results highlight the importance of teachers' pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) and their selection of texts that align with the students' L2 reading proficiency. Furthermore, some researchers (e.g. Alsheik & Elhoweris, 2011; Takase, 2003; 2007) argued that students' pre-programme motivations might be a strong influential predictor that determined their engagement in L2 reading, in-programme behaviours and post-programme motivations.

Among the various mediating factors that are mentioned above, the reading material is regarded as the most significant factor that makes a difference on L2 reading motivation. A wealth of evidence (Judge, 2011; Mante-Estacio, 2012; Nishono, 2007; Takase, 2003) has found that a wide range of easy and interesting reading materials, as well as self-selected texts, are more preferred by L2 readers. It is also observed that students' preferences for reading materials vary according to different variables, such as race, discipline and gender (Kreft & Viebrock, 2014). Moreover, autonomy is another important factor that positively contributes to L2 reading motivation (Takase, 2003). Lee, Schallert, and Kim (2015) stated that L2 readers preferred teacher-independent ER and an autonomous approach. Aside from students' perspectives, Wilson, Carroll and Werno (2014) investigated teachers' beliefs and found that teachers perceived that autonomy over the selection of reading materials were positively related to students' reading motivation.

In general, ER is gaining credibility as an effective way of boosting students' L2 reading motivation. In fact, various mediating factors may influence its efficacy. However, it is worth noticing that some factors may lead to negative

impacts and demotivate students, such as external pressures of homework, assignments, exams, time constraints, extracurricular study and activities (Haider & Akhter, 2012; Huang, 2015; Powell, 2005). For example, the washback effects of exam-driven education may hinder the implementation of ER. Other crucial and practical factors include the availability of resources and students' socioeconomic status – especially for students from developing countries. Schools in rural areas have a lack of resources, and poor students have to work to support their families. Hence, a well-equipped library, easy access to books or e-books, encouragement and time to read are key factors for increasing students' reading motivation and satisfaction (Ro, 2013; Rodrigo, Greenberg & Segal, 2014). In order to properly implement ER, it is important for teachers to help students develop effective reading strategies by providing activities that encourage reading and giving them materials that are relevant to their reading levels and interests.

Impact on reading skills

Reading skills generally refer to reading fluency/rate/speed, comprehension, ability and/or proficiency. Numerous researchers have supported the idea that ER contributes to the development and improvement of reading skills (e.g. Beglar, Hunt, & Kite, 2012; Camiciottoli, 2001; Huffman, 2014; Krashen, 2004; Lituanas, Jacobs, & Renandy, 1999; Robb & Kano, 2013; Tanaka & Stapleton, 2007; Yamashita, 2004; 2008). Krashen's (2007) meta-analysis revealed that ER had a strong impact on adolescents' reading comprehension. Similarly, Nakanishi's (2015) meta-analysis of 34 studies indicated that ER had a positive effect on reading rates ($d = 0.98$) and a medium effect on reading comprehension ($d = 0.63$). However, a meta-analysis that was conducted by Jeon (2016), which was based on 40 primary studies that were published from 1980 to 2014, showed that ER only had a small-to-medium effect on reading proficiency, in which a greater effect was found in adults than in children and adolescents. It was also

found that ER had a greater impact in EFL than in ESL contexts, and web-based stories had a greater impact than paper books.

In EFL settings, numerous studies have been conducted with Japanese students. In general, this empirical evidence has demonstrated that ER significantly improves students' reading rates and reading comprehension. For example, Robb and Susser (1989) compared the effectiveness of ER and skills building with 125 EFL university students in Japan. The ER group read an average of 641 pages over two semesters. The pre-test and post-test showed that the ER group's reading rate increased from 79.21 to 86.56 words in the first minute. In a study that used a student self-reporting assessment, Manson and Krashen (1997) also found that there was a significant gain in reading speed. Iwahori (2008) examined the impact of ER on reading speed of a seven-week ER programme, in which 33 EFL Japanese high school students read graded readers or comic books. The findings of the pre- and post-tests revealed that the students' reading rates improved significantly from a mean of 84.18 to 112.82 words per minute (wpm). Taguchi, Takayasu-Maass, and Gorsuch (2004) compared ER and assisted repeated reading with 20 university freshmen in Japan and showed that both approaches were equally effective for developing reading fluency.

Similar positive impacts were also reported in empirical studies that were conducted in other contexts. Bell (2001) compared the effects of ER and IR with 26 students from the Yemen Arab Republic at the beginner's level of English proficiency. The findings indicated that the ER group's mean difference of their reading rate increased from 68.10 to 127.53 wpm. The ER group achieved significantly higher reading comprehension scores and faster reading rates than the IR group. Similarly, Al-Homoud and Schmitt (2009) compared the impacts of ER and IR on Arabic young adult learners' reading abilities, vocabulary development and attitudes with 70 male EFL university students. The pre- and post-tests demonstrated that the ER group had significantly larger improvements

in their reading speed, while there were not any significant differences between both groups in terms of improved reading. In the context of a vocational high school in Korea, Cha (2009) indicated that ER led to statistically significant growth in L2 reading rates without impairing text comprehension. In line with these studies, Sheu (2003) conducted a study with 98 Taiwanese EFL high school students and found that the ER group's reading rate increased from 57.7 to 95.8 wpm, which was significantly higher than the IR group. Similarly, Chang and Millett (2015) also reported that audio-assisted ER improved Taiwanese secondary students' reading rates and comprehension levels.

Thanks to the advancement of technologies, online or mobile ER is increasingly gaining currency. There is growing research on technology-assisted ER (Pino-Silva, 2005). Arnold (2009), for instance, reported that online ER increased advanced EFL students' reading abilities and strategies, motivation to read and self-confidence. Chen, Chen, Chen, & Wey (2013) conducted an experimental study and investigated the effects of the ER of e-books on EFL undergraduate students in China. The findings indicated that the experimental group showed significantly better reading comprehension, reading attitudes and vocabulary than the control group. Milliner (2019) compared ER to extensive reading-while-listening (RWL) on smartphones and found that RWL contributed to significant improvements in reading, vocabulary and listening. Similarly, Hendriwanto and Kurniati (2019) found that mobile-assisted ER outperformed learners' reading fluency. Ni'mah and Umamah (2020) recently found that the practicality, portability, flexibility, accessibility and affordability of e-books helped learners to apply digital reading and ER successfully, and ER allowed Indonesian learners to not only develop their reading abilities and habits but also other skills in English.

However, some research has shown that ER does not have a significant impact on reading comprehension. de Morgado (2009), for example, found that reading comprehension performance was essentially the same with or without

adopting ER. Nakanishi and Ueda (2011) observed that ER improved learners' reading comprehension; however, there was no difference between the ER and control groups. Additionally, it is worth noticing that although empirical evidence shows positive effects of ER on both reading rates and reading comprehension, ER's benefits appear to be more significant on reading rates than on reading comprehension. Moreover, while prior studies have generally demonstrated that ER improves L2 reading skills, some of the research designs and methodological issues raise questions about these asserted benefits (Suk, 2016), such as insufficient information on the exact amount of reading that was done in Bell's (2001) research, the lack of an objective measurement in Manson and Krashen's (1997) study and the lack of a control group in Iwahori's (2008) research. Furthermore, it is observed that despite its advantages of developing learners' reading skills, ER has not been commonly used because fluent reading is not always regarded as a crucial curriculum objective, and the power of implicit learning is often overlooked (Suk, 2017). In the view of different perceptions and expectations of various stakeholders (e.g. teachers, students, school administrators and parents), to conduct effective reading instruction, it is important to consider the needs of L2 readers and how to balance the benefits and constraints.

Impact on general language proficiency

Numerous researchers (e.g. Maxim, 2000) have acknowledged that ER benefits not only students' reading skills but also their general L2 proficiency and linguistic competence, which involves writing, listening and speaking skills, as well as their acquisition of vocabulary knowledge and grammar accuracy. For example, Elley and Mangbuhai (1983) conducted a two-year 'Book Flood' project with about 400 L2 primary students in Fiji and found that the students had gains in reading and general proficiency, including listening, writing and vocabulary. Nevertheless, Yamashita (2008) reported that the positive impact of ER might

be manifested more quickly in general reading skills than in micro-level linguistic abilities, such as morphosyntax, vocabulary and spelling.

In terms of writing, listening and speaking skills, Hafiz and Tudor (1989) demonstrated that ER enhanced the reading and writing skills of male secondary ESL students in Pakistan. Elley (1991) found that ER improved primary students' reading and listening comprehension. Moreover, Lai (1993) also showed that an ER summer programme helped ESL students in Hong Kong develop writing skills, as well as reading comprehension and speed. Similar results were reported in Mason and Krashen's (1997) study, in which ER improved both writing and reading speeds of EFL learners in Japan. Fujimori (2007) also indicated that Japanese high school students improved both listening and reading comprehension through the ER programme. Among the few studies on the impact of ER on speaking, Cho and Krashen (1994) observed that ER improved learners' oral and aural skills over time. Recently, Hamrayevna and Rashidovna (2019) argued that ER contributed to students' speaking skills via vocabulary development.

Vocabulary acquisition is important for developing various language skills. A growing body of research has demonstrated the positive impacts of ER on vocabulary acquisition (Chun, Choi, & Kim, 2012; Grabe & Stoller, 1997; Hafiz & Tudor, 1989; Horst, 2005; Kweon & Kim, 2008; Lee, 2007; Webb & Chang, 2015; Yamamoto, 2011). For instance, Horst's (2005) measurement study with 21 Japanese EFL students revealed that ER helped students develop a more rapid recognition of frequent words and increased the speed of lexical access. In a similar context, Leung (2002) found that ER improved Japanese students' vocabulary development, attitudes and reading comprehension. Similar findings of the positive effects on vocabulary acquisition, reading comprehension and reading rates were also reported in Suk's (2017) quasi-experimental research with Korean university students. Highlighting the influence of student proficiency, Park, Isaacs, and Woodfield (2018) reported that students' improvements in

vocabulary knowledge was significantly higher in ER than in IR – especially for advanced and intermediate-level learners. With respect to students of French, Pigada and Schmitt's (2006) case study indicated that ER improved vocabulary knowledge in terms of word meaning, spelling and grammatical knowledge. Recently, Boutorwick, Macalister and Elgort (2019) also supported ER's facilitative effects on L2 vocabulary development via incidental learning. Conversely, Nakanishi's (2015) meta-analysis found that the impact on vocabulary acquisition for pre–post contrasts was small. Regarding technology-assisted ER, Brooke et al. (2018) showed that students' vocabulary grew significantly with the help of an online library (graded readers). Milliner (2019) compared ER with RWL on smartphones and found that RWL contributed to significant improvements in vocabulary, listening and reading.

ER's impact on grammar knowledge has received relatively less attention. Among the limited studies, Sheu (2003) found that ER contributed to significant improvements in Taiwanese EFL students' grammar knowledge. Yang's (2001) study with EFL students in Hong Kong also revealed that ER benefited their grammar acquisition. Positive gains in grammar knowledge were also found in Lee Schallert, and Kim 's (2015) research. In contrast, Rodrigo, Krashen, and Gribbons (2004) showed that there were no significant differences among the groups in grammar knowledge, while Yamashita (2008) found that ER was not always positively linked to improving learners' grammar knowledge.

While most empirical studies have suggested that ER has a positive impact on L2 language proficiency, some reviews of the research on ER (e.g. Mori, 2015; Nakanishi, 2015; Waring & McLean 2015) have argued for more refinement in research methodology and design, so that ER research can be more accurately interpreted. Thus, it is suggested that researchers and teachers should pay attention to some areas of disconnect, such as how ER should be implemented and how reading skills are interrelated to other English skills and general L2 proficiency.

Factors to consider

The potential positive effects of ER on L2 reading motivation, reading skills and general L2 proficiency are only conditional. Due to the various constraints that were mentioned above, it appears that ER has not been widely adopted (Grabe, 2009). Its success largely depends on whether teachers and schools can overcome the difficulties (especially in underdeveloped or poor areas), such as a scarcity of reading materials, inadequate skills and teacher training, pressures to cover the entire syllabus and textbooks (leaving no time for programmes such as ER), exam pressure, the inflexibility of compulsory assessment activities and the fact that part-to-whole instruction is still a broadly held belief as the means to attain literacy and lifelong skills (de Morgado, 2009).

In fact, as stated by Cha (2009), it is not a problem of ER itself, but it is rather how ER is implemented. Prior literature has generally suggested that ER shows a greater effect when it is a part of the curriculum and is accompanied by interactive classroom activities, such as discussion and interactive vocabulary instruction. Several researchers have also made some pedagogical suggestions. Day and Bamford (2002), for instance, proposed the top ten principles for teaching ER. In brief, reading should be easy, interesting, fast, silent, pleasurable, extensive, individual and self-selected. Elley (1991) suggested that the success of ER attributes to five factors: 1) extensive input of meaningful texts, 2) incidental learning, 3) integration of oral and written activities, 4) focus on meaning rather than form and 5) high intrinsic motivation.

ER may not be a panacea for all reading difficulties and appropriate for all students in every context. Hence, teachers should adopt proper ER instruction depending on various students' backgrounds, needs, proficiency and perceptions. Besides student variables, teachers should consider a number of interrelated factors that were found in empirical studies, such as material selection, text difficulty, autonomy, peer cooperation, teacher's roles, implementation and classroom activities. Depending on the students and contextual factors, Day

(2015) suggested that ER can be implemented flexibly within a continuum from pure ER to fringe ER and in various forms, such as: (1) supervised (or instructed) ER (i.e. ER is the main focus of a reading course combined with a variety of follow-up activities), (2) blended ER and IR (i.e. ER is an addition to an ongoing reading course where students read books that they select for homework) and (3) independent (non-instructed) ER (ER is an extracurricular activity where the teacher guides and encourages students whose fondness of reading has been developed and who regularly meet to discuss them). Other researchers (e.g. Day & Bamford, 2002; Macalister, 2015; Yulia, 2018) have also proposed a number of principles for teaching, which cover the nature of reading, the nature of the reading materials, what the teachers do and what the learners do. As there is no one-size-fits-all reading pedagogy, it is important to facilitate teachers' understanding of the nature of ER and the conditions and practices that are necessary for its success. Teachers should develop professional PCK in order to implement the best practices of L2 reading by choosing appropriate texts and teaching methodologies according to various contextual factors and needs of the students.

Conclusion

In summary, empirical evidence has generally suggested that ER improves motivation toward reading in a second or foreign language, improves reading skills and helps develop language proficiency in general. Although the three aspects of motivation, reading skills and general language proficiency are discussed separately in this paper, they are highly interrelated. Vocabulary acquisition, for example, enhances reading comprehension and reading rates (Tozcu & Coady, 2004). Nevertheless, it is worth noticing that due to limitations in methodologies or curricula, ER's effectiveness needs to be given careful (Suk, 2017). Moreover, the limitations of prior studies (e.g., short time span, small sample size, lack of replication studies and a control group, etc.) cannot be

ignored. It is hard to assess the effects because intervening factors might have played a role. Thus, more large-scale replication and longitudinal studies are needed to evaluate the effectiveness across different educational contexts.

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