



Identifying the Benefits of Extensive Reading and Strategies That Help Learners Become Effective Readers

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Abstract

Reading plays an important role in foreign language learning, particularly in EFL contexts where many learners attempt to develop their reading proficiency. Previous studies have demonstrated the significant benefits of reading, not only for improving reading skills but also for enhancing vocabulary, grammar, and writing skill. This paper reviews the literature on the benefits of reading and explores strategies that help learners become effective readers. It also examines the pedagogical implications of Krashen's claim that reading is the primary source of language acquisition, investigates why teachers continue to rely heavily on comprehension questions and extension activities rather than allowing students to read extensively, and discusses the reasons why Extensive Reading has not been widely adopted. Finally, the paper proposes a brief action plan for integrating the findings into classroom teaching practices to promote students' reading development and overall language proficiency.

Key words: extensive reading, English foreign language, language proficiency.

INTRODUCTION

According to Richards and Renandya (2002), in most EFL situations, all that students ever want to acquire is the ability to read in a foreign language. Helping students to improve their reading is the responsibility of language teacher. To fulfill this vital part of the teacher's job, it's necessary for the teacher to understand what reading can bring in as well as what the

teacher can do to help students become good readers. Renandya and Jacobs (2002) stated that "Beyond powerful gains in language proficiency, reading offers more." Krashen (1993:23) claimed that:

"Reading is good for you. The research supports a stronger conclusion, however. Reading is the only way, the only way we become good readers, develop a good

writing style, an adequate vocabulary, advanced grammar, and the only way we become good spellers".

Although the view that one becomes a good reader through reading is accepted universally, "reading lessons where most time is spent on reading are relatively rare" (Moran and Williams, 1993: 66).

In this paper, we will figure out the benefits of reading from the literature and suggest ways to become good readers. After that, we will describe a brief action plan for applying what we have discovered to our own teaching.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Definition of *extensive reading* (ER)

"ER generally involves rapid reading of large quantities of material or longer readings" (Carrell and Carson, 1997). In addition, Lewis and Hill (1985) pointed out that "ER means students have a general understanding of the text without necessarily understanding every word". Pilgreen (2000) also added that ER is done mostly in a conducive environment, outside of the classroom and at a student's own pace and level.

One more concise definition by Gebhard (2006) is: "Extensive reading means reading widely, in high quantities, and with pleasure. The purpose of ER is to improve reading skills by processing a quantity of materials that can be comprehended and pleasurable".

In short, ER is reading large quantities of text at an appropriate level of difficulty, and with pleasure. To deeply understand about ER, in the next part, we will deliberate some characteristics of this type of reading.

Characteristics of ER

In his article "Extensive Reading: Maid in waiting", Maley (2007) synthesizes and revises from Day (2002) and Prowse (2002) characteristics for successful ER.

(1) *Students read a lot and read often.* Students read as much as possible, perhaps in and definitely out of the classroom. Besides, students should read a small amount of reading and read everyday rather than read a big amount of reading per week.

(2) *There is a wide variety of text types and topics to choose from.* These available text types and topics encourage students to read for different reasons and in different ways. Different text types and topics also help students keeping their interest in reading.

(3) *The texts are not just interesting; they are engaging/compelling.* These texts are also called "the home run book" (Sprecken, Kim and Krashen, 2000). In other words, students find it interesting and cannot stop reading it.

(4) *Students choose what to read* and have the freedom to stop reading material that fails to interest them. It is advised that teacher should guide students to choose the books which are suitable for their students' interests, abilities and ages.

(5) *Reading purposes focus on: pleasure, information and general understanding.* The purposes are determined by the nature of the material and the interests of the student. This encourages students to have not only the knowledge of their own subjects at school but also the general knowledge of other fields such as science, society, culture...

(6) *Reading is its own reward.* Students should be aware of reading is not for the purpose of getting good marks or other valuable rewards... To be a good reader means students have an enormous knowledge and become successful people in the near future, which is a major reward of reading.

(7) *There are no test, no exercises, no questions and no dictionaries.* Students read with no stress about tests or exercises but pleasure. Also, looking up words in dictionaries makes fluent reading difficult; therefore, dictionaries are advised not to be used in ER.

(8) *Materials are within the language competence of the students* in terms of vocabulary, grammar and students knowledge.

(9) *Reading is individual and silent* at the student's own pace, and, outside class, done when and where the student chooses. The right thing to do is to create favorable condition (time, space, materials...) for students to have interest in reading and read as often as possible.

(10) *Speed is faster, not deliberate and slow.* Students are recommended to read faster and faster.

(11) *The teacher explains the goals and procedures clearly, then monitors and guides the students.* Teacher should explain the methodology, keep track of what each student reads, and guide students.

(12) *The teacher is a role model... a reader, who participates along with the students.* The teacher should be an active member of the classroom reading community, demonstrating what it means to be a reader and the rewards of being a reader.

In conclusion, once teachers have awareness of these factors for successful ER, they should follow these guides to help students become effective and efficient readers.

Advantages of ER in language teaching and learning.

If teachers and students can carry out the requirement of successful ER, the advantages which ER brings about is considerable. These are some main advantages of ER in language teaching and learning.

(1) It can provide 'comprehensible input'

It is admitted that adequate exposure to the language, interesting material, and a relaxed, tension-free learning environment (which are mentioned above) are favorable conditions for students to learn a language. As a result, ER will soon lead to language acquisition if certain conditions are met (Krashen, 1982).

(2) It can enhance learners' general language competence and improve other skills

It is agreed with the idea that ER plays an important role in providing learners with practice in automaticity of word recognition and decoding the symbols on the printed page (Grabe, 1991).

The four skills (Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing) assist one another during the learning process. As a result, if students are good at reading, other skills will be improved noticeably. For example, students' writing will be much easier and better if students have a good vocabulary and well-organized structures and ideas which are gained from reading. Thus, ER is considered as an effective means of fostering improvements in students writing.

The result is the same for oral skills. Elley (1991) pointed out that there is a "spread of effect from reading competence to other language skills - writing, speaking and control over syntax".

(3) It can increase knowledge of vocabulary and grammar

It is the fact that with the traditional methods to the teaching of vocabulary, in which the number of new words taught in each class was carefully controlled (words often being presented in related sets), is much less effective in promoting vocabulary growth than simply getting students to spend time on silent reading of interesting books (Nagy & Herman, 1985). It is clear that when students are interested in reading their favorite books, it is very easy for them to remember vocabulary. Therefore, the number of students' vocabulary is due to the acquisition of words from reading. Moreover, students' knowledge of grammar is also improved if students pay attention to good expression, good structures... when they are reading.

(4) It can increase students motivation:

Mason and Krashen (1997) investigated whether "bad students" or poor students in EFL

could improve with the help of ER. Subjects of their investigation were the students at a woman's university in Osaka in Japan. After the experiment, the scores of the students who had failed EFL classes improve amazingly.

Mason and Krashen stated that the most important and impressive find of this study was that the attitude of the second group improve. Many of them became eager readers. Several wrote in their diaries that their improvement surprised them. From the study, we can see that ER can have positive impact on students or help unmotivated students improve. Meng (2009) also concluded that with the application of ER, the students read what they choose and enjoy their reading so their motivation to read will increase and this will benefit the students' acquisition of the target language.

(5) *It can improve writing quality*

In Salemn's research (2010), he explored the influence of ER in English language on EFL writing quality in terms of content knowledge, critical thinking, and language use. The following findings are from his study. Firstly, the students' exposure to the ER materials enrich the content knowledge which includes concepts, vocabulary, facts, opinions, relationships and context assumptions. Secondly, the contribution of ER enhances critical thinking. Salemn stated that the students' development in critical thinking is indicated through the improved use of evidence, information, and negotiating of meaning in support of their arguments. Finally, students' language competence improved through ER when the students encounter structure and style from the text they read. The participants' in Salemn study have the ability to communicate effectively, appropriate style and format, and well structured writing.

Strategies for reading comprehension

We learn to read since the first days of language learning process. However, not all language learners can be successful in reading, many of them even find reading a challenged

skill. In this paper, we will review some strategies that can be applied to become a good reader. In the book *Teaching by Principles: An Interactive Approach to Language Pedagogy*, Brown (1994) provided ten strategies for reading comprehension but in this paper, I will present six of his strategies Brown's reasons why these strategies should be applied.

(1) *Identify the purpose in reading* - Before reading, the readers need to identify the purpose in reading because this helps them to know what they are looking for and can distract unnecessary information.

(2) *Skimming* - According to Brown (1994), skimming and scanning are perhaps the two most reading strategies. When the readers skim, they quickly run their eyes across the whole text to get the gist. It helps the readers to predict the purpose of the passage, the main topic, etc.

(3) *Scanning* - Scanning means quickly search for some particular pieces of information in a text. This helps to extract certain specific information without reading through the whole text.

(4) *Guessing* - While reading, the readers can guess the meaning of a word, a grammatical relationship, a discourse relationship, etc.

(5) *Vocabulary analysis* - The readers can analyze vocabulary in terms of what they know about it by using techniques such as look for prefixes, look for suffixes, look for roots that are familiar, etc.

(6) *Capitalize on discourse markers to process relationships* - In English, relationships among ideas can be signaled by many discourse markers such as enumerative (firstly, secondly, thirdly,...), additive (moreover, in addition, again...), contrastive (anyway, however, on the other hand..) and so on. When the readers are thoroughly familiar with discourse markers, they can enhance their reading efficiency.

IMPLICATIONS

There are some major factors pulling Vietnamese students into trouble when they want to read extensively in the target language, such as the students' understanding about ER, the students' insufficient time, the problems of the current reading materials, the students' low motivation and the old teaching methodology with irrelevant activities or tasks.

First, the students have mistaken conception about ER and its importance, so when reading they pay more attention to the decoding of word meaning rather than context or other global approaches to reading. This practice of reading makes students passive and makes them have a habit to rely much on the teacher in learning.

Second, it is the fact that Vietnamese students have had to study in a strained environment and that they usually find themselves under pressure, which negatively influences their learning qualities. The English reading courses are usually pressed in a very short span of time. This neither increases the interest in reading any English materials extensively nor allows enough time for the learners to consume what is explicitly read in class. Besides, the students even have almost no time to practice ER out of class because of the inappropriate time distribution for another courses and poor motivation in learning EFL.

Third, the current materials used in teaching English in Vietnam now display some problems that can cause the students' difficulties in developing the language skills. Although many of these materials clearly focus on the integration of four language skills, most of the activities are designed mainly to develop listening and speaking skills. There are not any typical reading texts and activities to develop reading and writing skills. Taking into consideration of the big disadvantage that Vietnamese students have to face, that of learning English in an environment where the language is not spoken in everyday

communication, teachers have to made a lot of effort to improve students speaking and listening skills, reading and writing are often left to learner individual effort or self-study in the belief that writing or reading practice must be made by the learners themselves rather than under control of the teacher. Many teachers believe that all they can do to help the students improve reading skill is providing with the new vocabulary and grammar structures. Nothing has been done to help students develop strategies for effective reading and ER, therefore, in the teacher's belief, can be reduced to the decoding of word meaning. This reveals the fact that students think they can learn by themselves provided that they can have a rich vocabulary, a good dictionary and good reference materials and teachers only play the role of a guide, showing students what to do to be independent readers. However, in reality, many students still rely much on teachers for the meaning of new words and for a translation into the mother tongue in order to understand the text.

Moreover, with reading materials that imported or got from Internet, many students are not able to understand syntactic structures that do not occur in Vietnamese. This problem causes a practical difficulty when students handle the job with structural differences between L1 and L2. In reality, there are some sentences structures which never occur in Vietnamese. Commonly, students find it difficult to understand the sentences while they are handling with the target language.

The most important factor in selecting a reading material is interest. Williams (1986:42) claimed that "in absence of interesting text, very little is possible." Carrell (1984:339) stated, "reading teachers should use materials that interest the students to read, and self-selected by the students". Interest and motivation have their real relation. Without interest, students are not keen to read anything, and the motivation is lessened. But in reality in Vietnam, many of students have learnt English because it is

compulsory at school and they have to master it. Commonly, they have no basic need to learn English other than to gain the knowledge of grammar, vocabulary for the final examinations. In fact, they have learnt English with no clear intention.

It is often that Vietnamese students over-relied on the bottom-up processing. In other words, they were text-bound readers. They had not yet established the habit of activating their existing knowledge and relating it to the information they were taking in from texts. The Pearson correlation analysis shows that heavy noun phrases and multi-meaning words and multi-syllable words were positively related to the frequency of the bottom-up processing. Notably, heavy noun phrases and multi-meaning words came as the significant predictors of their unidirectional processing - bottom-up processing.

Last but not least, among three approaches which have been greatly popular in Vietnam: the Grammar Translation, the Audio-Lingual, and the Communicative Approach, it seems many teachers of English in Vietnam have accepted that the Communicative Approach is effective and communication in language teaching and learning is the expected outcome (Martyn Brogan and Nguyen Thi Thai Ha, 2005). However, in the reading classes in Vietnam, especially with ER activities, Pham Phu Quynh Na (2000, p.105) found out that the Grammar Translation Method still prevails although the use of this method is strongly opposed by most educators and should be limited as much as possible for the sake of a better language acquisition of students. She continued that compared to the speaking classes, in the reading classes, the role of teachers as the managers still dominates more often than the role as facilitators and there is much less communicativeness (2000, p.106). Vietnamese teachers argue that the conventional, well-based language teaching method has been in use in Vietnam for decades and they themselves were taught to follow the

old path. Therefore, during a reading period teachers only supply students with new words grammar structures; then they explain the meaning of sentences or paragraphs; and finally they even ask students to translate the reading passage into the mother language. Those teachers also presume that learner taught communicatively actually learn nothing. However, grammar-translation method, particularly the use of native language (here in our case, Vietnamese) is not an effective way of teaching reading. Many English native-speaking teachers teach English to non-native speakers by using English since they do not know the students' first language, and yet they are successful. This indicates that English can still be used as a medium of instruction provided that it is appropriately modified by reading strategies according to the nature of the reading text as well as the level of the students.

Action Plan

From the implications noticed, there are some action plans to make applying ER in Vietnam more enjoyable and effective.

(1) As defined in the Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics (Richard and Platt, 1992), "extensive reading means reading in quantity and in order to gain a general understanding of what is read. It is intended to develop good reading habits, to build up knowledge of vocabulary and structure, and to encourage a liking for reading" (p.133). These benefits and pleasures of reading can be seen when the teacher tell the students the rewards of ER. They will then encourage the students to read on their own, according to their interests and for enjoyment and keep a record of this reading. Students need to understand that extra reading is optional and not a formal part of the course. At the same time, teachers can consider giving extra points that may influence a student's final grade. This process can begin with just "light reading". Many a research has supported the idea that lighter reading, as a bridge, can prepare readers for heavier reading.

(2) Second, it is suggested that the teacher should supplement other suitable and relevant additional materials that can be used in accordance with the current textbooks. Although this job seems to take the teacher much time and efforts, because of his or her investment in searching for the interesting, suitable and relevant reading texts, it brings some significant benefits to students and the teacher... So what can be called suitable and relevant reading texts? The suitability of the additional reading materials may be expressed through interesting topics, length of the texts, suitable and relevant tasks/activities, lexical items, grammatical constructions, organization of the texts.

(3) Third, tasks and activities should be taken into consideration when the teacher selects supplementary materials to teach. The tasks and activities should be flexible, varied and relevant for a full of understanding. Moreover, as Grellet's suggestions (1981:6-9), the teacher has to defined clearly of which reading tasks or activities, teaching or testing, can be used to satisfy the purposes of the course before the lessons. Concerning to this job, it would be more effective if the teachers select suitable and relevant reading tasks or activities as well as they could redesign, reorganize some by themselves to suit their students' levels. For more development of skill integration and further discussion over the topics, reading tasks can be combined with writing, speaking and listening. Also, the collection of tasks and activities should be graded from the easy level to the more difficult ones so that all students can make collective contribution to group work activities.

(4) The teachers as readers

In his book, *Teaching reading Skills in a Foreign Language*, Nuttall says that "the best teachers of reading are also reading teachers, in the sense that they are teachers who read". And "Readers are made by readers... Students follow the example of people they respect, and above

all that of their teacher. If the teacher is seen to read with concentration, to enjoy reading and to make use of books, newspapers and so on, the students are more likely to take notice of him when he urges them to do the same" (1996 : 229).

This gives teachers of reading a clear sign that if they want to improve their teaching and create a good image for themselves, then they have to get more and more involved in reading. This not only gives them better prospects but also sets a good example for their students. Moreover, by reading widely teachers can give advice to students on what kinds of books they can read. Teachers should make a plan to read and arrange useful books in levels of difficulty in a notebook or card index so that they can refer to it when students need their advice.

One more thing, by reading a lot themselves and urging their students to do the same, teachers can develop a love of reading that can help them to be excellent reading teachers and at the same time develop a love of books in their students. This may bring them the profit and pleasure that last throughout their life.

(5) **Freeing students from dictionaries while reading:** This is because students who keep looking up new words read less effectively. Every time they break off to consult a dictionary, they slow down their reading and interrupt their thinking. Therefore, how to free them from using dictionaries is one of the most essential matters to be solved. A good solution is that teachers guide them to master *necessary techniques*, so that they can "stand on their feet", e.g. figure out the meaning of unfamiliar words without using dictionaries or asking other people for help.

When reading, it is not necessary to understand every word in the passage. Usually, however, readers must know over 50% of the words if they want to understand the main points of the passage. Therefore, teachers should ask students to begin a program of vocabulary

development immediately. Students can do this by reading as much as possible. They should choose articles that they find interesting in newspapers, magazines, encyclopedias and textbooks. Expanding vocabulary is important not only for reading, but also for writing speaking and listening.

Teachers should provide more tasks for students to train themselves in figuring out the meaning of a new word in its context, ignoring a word if it is not important to the understanding of a text... They should help students to get used to the fact that they will always see new words in the materials they are going to read. Therefore, they should develop a good strategy to deal with new words.

(6) Grammar: Although grammar does help in the understanding of a text, too much concentration on grammar teaching alone may have counter-effects. This may distract students from concentrating on the content of the text. Responses from students show that grammar does not cause much difficulty to students. Therefore, teachers should try to guide students to the ideas of a reading passage more than to grammar. Moreover, by reading a lot, students can unconsciously develop their knowledge of grammar. When our students read, they engage actively with the new language and culture. The more our students read, the more they become familiar with the vocabulary, idioms, grammar, sentence patterns, organization flow, and cultural assumptions of native speakers of the language.

(7) Cooperation: the teachers should pay more attention to the cooperation among students. They should create activities that require the collaboration of other class members such as pair or group work. From these activities, teachers can help develop students' skills of sharing knowledge, of gaining knowledge from friends and classmates, and of working with others. These essential skills are not only necessary for students to enlarge their knowledge but they also help to build self-

confidence in students in preparation for their future career.

(8) Encouraging the students' active role: The traditional notion of readers puts them in a fairly passive role as a *receiver of information*. Modern trends in teaching and learning ER require readers more. They must take a much more active role, the role of *information seeker*. They come to texts with experience, prior knowledge and abilities in critical thinking. These factors will color how they make sense of what they read.

Michael Hoey (1991:221-222) argues that before processed by readers, "a written text lacks both the interaction and phonology levels." Only when the text is activated by an actual reader, there can be said to be an interaction between the reader and the writer. This means the reader's role is to activate a large resource of potential semantic connection at both word and clause levels. Therefore, the reader cannot be passive.

CONCLUSION

The Vietnamese education system, including English language teaching, is currently facing a period of inevitable change, reflecting the changes Vietnamese society as a whole is now embarking on. It is therefore an ideal moment for schools to start introducing ER programmes, not as a substitute for teaching communicative competence but as an invaluable ally on the road to that goal. As Colin David (1995: 335) stated, "Any ESL, EFL, or L1 classroom will be poorer for the lack of an ER programme of some kind, and will be unable to promote its pupils' language development in all aspects as effectively as if such a programme were present." Thus, teachers' role in developing readers is very important. Their attitudes can make a fundamental difference. They may open up the world to their students through instilling in them a love of books and help them become the next generation of readers in Vietnamese society.

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