The Effect of Extensive Reading Strategies on EFL Students

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Abstract
Reading skills form a major element of traditional foreign language teaching, and are emphasized in EFL classes. It is often assumed that reading extensively will promote a student’s motivation in learning a second/foreign language, enhance their vocabulary and increase reading speed; though it may not enhance reading comprehension. In this research paper, 11 EFL students were involved. Purposeful sampling strategy and a semi-standardized interviewing technique were used in the methodology. The findings indicate that students can not increase their reading speed through extensive reading, but extensive reading can promote students’ motivation in learning English, enhance vocabulary, and improve their reading comprehension. Based on these findings, the results of the study ought to be useful to both EFL students and teachers alike.

Introduction
In Taiwan, English is ‘the’ foreign language, yet we can hardly claim to have a good ‘reading-culture’ in which students might more effectively develop their English language skills. Students do not like to read English texts, and therefore teachers seldom use extensive reading strategies knowing that such methods positively endorse the use of large, easy to read texts. Since teachers know that there will be a negative reaction to prescribed reading, from prospective learners, there has developed a process of mutual avoidance, where student and teacher deserve equal blame for creating a learning environment where texts are playing an ever smaller part. Consequently there is tacit acceptance of a perspective upon language learning, where texts play an ever smaller part, beyond simplistic grammar and language text-books. This leads to a resultant decrease in higher language skills. Extensive reading strategies are used elsewhere however, and their success, in terms of language ability, where such practices are employed, does not augur well for those students who have assiduously avoided involvement with text-based learning in Taiwan and have consequently limited their own language ability.

The characteristics of extensive reading in clude the fast reading of a large amount of longer, easy-to-understand materials, and little or no written work or testing (Powell, 2005). Each element of the extensive reading programme contrasts with skills-based methodologies. In the on-going process of extensive reading, students can choose articles that are within their own range or capability. Therefore, students are less likely to get frustrated and their learning attitude will be positive and beneficial. In addition, extensive
reading can build students’ vocabulary recognition, especially where students have more reading input. Thirdly, extensive reading can help in the development of personal reading strategies, thus increasing reading speed, and involvement with the text. However, extensive reading can not guarantee to enhance students’ reading comprehension, where the aim of extensive reading leans upon its multicultural agenda of increasing ‘global’ understanding. To summarize the ‘established’ perspective; extensive reading can promote students motivation in learning English, it can enhance their vocabulary, and increase reading speed. However, extensive reading will not enhance students’ reading comprehension.

The purpose of this paper was to analyze whether extensive reading constitutes an efficient and effective method for EFL students or not. The hypotheses are that extensive reading can promote students motivation in learning English, enhance their vocabulary, increase students’ reading speed, but it can not enhance students’ reading comprehension.

**Literature Review**

Whether extensive reading can help students to develop their reading comprehension or not is still the focus for numerous doubts. According to Krashen’s (1985) theory of Input Hypothesis for second language acquisition, increasing the quantity of reading input can improve different language skills, such as reading comprehension, vocabulary recognition, sentence writing, listening comprehension and reading speed. However, Lai (1993) tested Krashen’s theory of Input Hypothesis and showed rather different consequences to his findings. The subjects were taken from eight secondary schools and the selected students were between the ages of 11 to 13. There were 338 students in the control group which withheld from the practice of extensive reading, and 345 students who joined the extensive reading programme composing the experimental group. Both groups had equal standards of English test scores prior to the experiment. In addition, the students were taught by the same English teachers and were given standard tests in English at the end of the school year. The differences were that the control group had two lessons a week for reading 4 to 6 set books and the experimental group had only one lesson. Also, the experimental group had another lesson, which was specifically focused upon extensive reading. The students of the experimental group needed to borrow/employ books the levels of which were equal to the individual results of the test which has given at the beginning of the experiment, and then received a comprehension question card to answer and complete after each week.

The study shows that only one experimental group achieved any significant improvement in reading comprehension amongst the five schools taking part. From these results, it shows that reading a quantity of books, as Lai (1993) described the process; “for global understanding didn’t seem to enhance reading comprehensive effectively” (p.29). It seems from this that extensive reading is not an efficient way to improve reading comprehension. Moreover, there is the implication that the procedure of skill building, a traditional method which is practiced in most of EFL situations, is more effective in language development than extensive reading. Robb and Susser (1989) compared the benefit of the two procedures “extensive reading and skills-based” in terms of the
improvement in reading comprehension. The experiment group with the extensive reading procedure was subject to a large volume of reading, composed of 641 pages of text, whilst the skills group read from a textbook with 269 pages. It was hypothesized that the extensive group would be equal or superior to the skills group in the areas of skills which were ‘getting the main idea’, understanding the most important facts, guessing vocabulary from context and making inferences. The Extensive group was superior to the Skills group in the aspect of reading speed however. Secondly, the experimental design was given the Placement Tests first. Thirdly, the treatments were given to two groups with different reading materials for class and at home.

The final results show that there were no significant differences in ‘getting the main idea’ and making inferences, between these two groups. In other words, extensive reading does not lead to significant improvements in reading comprehension compared to the skills-building group. Gao’s (2004) study also shows that there is no evidence which can demonstrate that extensive reading really helps students to improve their reading comprehension. The purpose of Gao’s (2004) study was to test whether there was a conspicuous effect upon Taiwanese students’ reading comprehension, reading speed, the motivation to read English texts and learning attitude, by giving them extra extensive reading. The participants were two classes of female senior high school students. The procedure was to give the experiment group extra extensive reading. In addition, both the experiment group and the control group needed to read books and write down a short report. The conclusions of this study were that; “the current study was not able to demonstrate the extensive reading program on students reading comprehension gains” (Gao, 2004, p.106). To summarize, it seems that extensive reading does not lead to obvious or measurable improvements in reading comprehension.

Although extensive reading does not appear to have obvious effects upon the improvement in reading comprehension, it can still promote students’ learning motivation. Extensive reading encourages students to read a wide variety of texts with an emphasis on students choosing the materials based on their own interests. Therefore, students will be more willing to read English materials. This aspect of extensive reading was described by Robb and Susser (1989) as “effective as skills-building with the important advantage that is more interesting for the learners” (p.1). In Robb and Susser’ (1989) study, the Attitude Questionnaire between the Extensive group and Skills group shows that the Extensive group felt that their homework was more interesting, and students could enjoy studying in English when having chose the materials which were of particular interest to them. To sum up, extensive reading will increase students’ motivation to learn English when students enjoy their studying and it will also be beneficial for their acquisition of language. Another survey, of Japanese high school students, who studied 12 hours of English per week and majored in courses within the English program and extensive reading program by Powell (2005) found that the number of books read increased from 153, in the first year to 261, in the second year. In addition, there were more students from 3 to 25 who thought that reading in English was more interesting and enjoyable from the course beginning to the end.
Furthermore, 32 out of 35 students said that they would like to continue reading in English. It seems that “once students develop their reading habit, they voluntarily go on to engage in reading tasks of their own choice, according to their interests” (p.22). In addition, Gao (2004) also did research about whether extensive reading can increase motivation to learn English or not. The experiment had two groups, whose subjects were female senior high school students, all of which were from Taiwan. One was the experiment group, which had one more period of English course each week, and practiced extensive reading, and the other was the control group. Both of the groups had the same English teachers and the same lessons of English courses. After one year, the results finally showed that the experiment group, with practice in extensive reading, gained noticeably higher motivation in language learning, and greater confidence in their English.

Another study was carried out by a teacher in New Zealand who did two surveys (Grundy, 2004) about extensive reading. The purpose of these two surveys was to investigate students’ attitudes toward reading and to evaluate the benefits of extensive reading programmes. The reading programme consisted of 10 weeks and encouraged students to read outside class during this period of time. The materials for reading were available in the classroom, including learning media, newspapers, and other resources, such as magazines. In addition, the students were also encouraged to select their own reading materials from outside the classroom and they were allowed to bring those materials to class and share them with classmates. The students were aged between 11 to 13. The final results of the surveys show that the majority (65%) indicated a positive attitude toward reading and learning, and most students(90%) indicated that they are more interested in reading English compared with before.

Extensive reading can not only improve students’ motivation in learning a second language, but it can also encourage students to acquire new vocabulary through reading and thus build their vocabulary recognition naturally. In the study by Lai (1993), there were four schools tested for vocabulary recognition between the experimental groups which practiced in extensive reading and the control group which did not practice in extensive reading. The findings showed that there were three experimental groups which displayed better scores in vocabulary recognition compared to the control groups. These findings also support Krashen’s (1985) theory where it is concerned with how to enhance vocabulary recognition through comprehensible input.

Another study (Day, Omura, & Hiramatsu, 1991) was to examine whether or not, students could learn vocabulary incidentally while reading. The subjects of this study were two groups of EFL learners. There were 397 university students assigned by class to either a control or a ‘treatment’ group and 191 high school students who were randomly assigned individually. The ‘treatment’ group was given a short story and asked to read it. Both of the groups were excluded from using dictionaries and given a vocabulary test in order to quantify attainment of lexical development. In the results, the ‘treatment’ group scored higher on the vocabulary test than the control group. The investigation went on to report that foreign language students can learn vocabulary through extensive reading.

Robb and Susser (1989), used two procedures, extensive reading and skill-based
reading, to compare students’ vocabulary acquisition. The results showed that the extensive reading group scored significantly higher than the skills group on guessing vocabulary from context. The conclusion of this study is that extensive reading has a positive effect on vocabulary recognition ability. Based on the above studies, we support the idea that extensive reading can enhance students’ vocabulary recognition.

Furthermore, extensive reading can push students to read larger amounts of text and it would therefore help to build up reading speeds over time. Once students’ reading speed had built-up, they would spend less time on reading long or large amounts of material and their reading level would show improvement. Apart from the 338 students in control group and 345 students who joined the extensive reading in experimental group in the study of Lai (1993), there were 218 experimental subjects who came from over 100 schools in two summer reading programmes in 1988 and 1989. From the data, it shows that both summer programmes display a great deal of improvement in reading speed. Moreover, Robb and Susser (1989) also find that the extensive group is faster than the skills building group in reading speed. The purpose of Bell’s study (2001), was to know whether extensive reading can improve reading speed or not. There were two groups of elementary level learners at the British Council English Language Centre and they received two different reading programmes; “the extensive reading and intensive reading.” The experimental group had extensive reading, which encouraged students to borrow any books which they wanted to read, and it was expected that they would visit the library regularly to access a large number of books. The control group received intensive reading which focused on the reading of short texts and analyzing the texts for grammar, lexis and rhetorical patterns. Both groups needed to do a great deal of reading in class and for homework. Besides this, both groups were asked to record the time spent on reading each week. In the test of reading speed, students were told to read at normal speed and were given a time limit of three minutes. When the time was up, they needed to mark the place reached in the text. In the results, there was significant data which showed that the students in the extensive reading group achieve faster reading speeds than students in the intensive reading group.

Gao’s (2004) study, has many of the same consequences, that the students in extensive reading programmes on average gained 19.52 WPM (words per minutes) while the control group’s reading speed dropped 22.9 WPM. It indicates that “free reading experience was likely to enhance students’ reading speed” (p.86). According to the above studies, extensive reading can increase students’ reading speed.

To sum up, it seems that extensive reading can not enhance students’ reading comprehension. However, extensive reading has its benefits in promoting student motivation in learning English, in enhancing their vocabulary, and increasing reading speed. To evaluate and examine the effect of extensive reading, a semi-standardized technique was employed.

Methodology

Subjects

Eleven subjects, age range 20-23 were involved in this study. The participants were college students at I-Shou University. Two of them were sophomores, eight were juniors,
and one student was a senior. Among them, nine had majored in English, one majored in mathematics, and another had majored in mass communication. Every participant received a consent form before the interviewing took place. In the consent form, it mentioned the topic of this research paper, the allotted time for the interview, and their right to review materials or withdrawing from the process. In addition, the consent form also mentioned that the participants’ individual information would be private for their protection and that the data would be provided only for the director.

**Sampling Strategies**

Purposeful sampling strategy was used to select the participants, because the participants who had experience of extensive reading would be required in order to provide enough information to demonstrate the topic of research paper. There were 11 interviewees who participated and the participants’ numbers depended on their order in the interviewing procedure. The student interviewed first is therefore regarded as participant no.1. The simplicity of this procedure considerably enhanced the smooth running of this investigation.

**Instrumentation**

A semi-standardized interviewing technique was adopted in this research, because such an interviewing technique allowed a greater degree of flexibility to the investigators who could thus respond to answers with more appropriate follow-on questions. Fifteen questions were composed regarding the participants’ past and present experiences, and their opinions of, extensive reading. The details of the questions are attached in the Appendix. During the interviewing process, some participants’ answers were considered to be out of the research topic; therefore, similar questions were asked again in order to lead participants’ answers back to the topic. Some participants did not have any ideas about their experiences, so the participants were asked questions with increased detail to arouse them to talk about their experiences. Sometimes, the participant would express boredom in relating their experiences. In such situations, the method of sharing the researcher’s personal experiences with the participants would often inspire them to keep talking even to the extent of giving some advice about learning English through extensive reading.

Before interviewing, a pilot test was done by three junior students majoring in English. After this small test, it seemed that the make-up questions were not suitable. Some participants could not understand questions easily and would feel a little bit confused about these questions. Therefore, changing the questions, by giving more details for example, engendered greater understanding and responsiveness, in the interviewees. Moreover, it proved to be easier to let participants talk more in this way and also to share their opinions thus allowing the interviewer to get more information.

**Research Questions**

The research questions were based on the purpose of study, there were four research questions concerned with the following:

1. Would extensive reading promote student motivation in learning English?
2. Could extensive reading enhance student vocabulary recognition?
3. Did extensive reading increase student reading speed?
4. Would extensive reading improve student reading comprehension?

Hypotheses

1. Extensive reading can promote student motivation in learning English, because students could choose articles which they had a particular interest in.
2. Extensive reading can enhance student vocabulary, because having more reading input would improve their vocabulary recognition.
3. Extensive reading would increase student reading speed, because it would develop the prerequisite reading skills.
4. Extensive reading can not enhance student reading comprehension.

Analysis Technique

In the process of interviewing, tape recording and transcribing were used to collect the data. To develop the profiles, the transcription of each participant would be put in order and the tape recording checked again to ensure whether there was any important information or not. In the coding processes, the repeated parts and some parts which were out of the topic domain were deleted; repeated ‘full-stops’ were substituted in their place …thus. Moreover, [] was used to express nonverbal signals such as laughter, nodding etc. After analyzing the profiles, the researcher started to gather and compare data.

Results

Hypothesis 1: Extensive reading can promote student motivation in learning English.

Nine out of 11 (82%) participants agreed that extensive reading really can promote their motivation to learn English, because they can read articles which they are interested in. Participant no.2 said that “extensive reading can promote the motivation in learning English, because it can make learning become more interesting. We can learn English from interesting articles, not from boring textbooks.” Moreover, participant no.4 indicated that “I agree that extensive reading can promote my motivation in learning English, because we can read different articles or interesting articles.” In addition, participant no.9 said that “extensive reading can improve my reading interest in reading English books, because I like read English magazine more than textbooks. Therefore, I think it can promote my learning motivation.” According to the above data, it shows that extensive reading can promote students’ motivation in learning English, mainly because students can choose the articles which they are interested in. Students are more willing to read English articles and therefore improve their learning motivation. These results completely fit into hypothesis 1.

Hypothesis 2: Extensive reading can enhance student vocabulary acquisition.

Ten out of 11 (91%) participants agreed that extensive reading can build their vocabulary, because having more reading input could improve their vocabulary recognition. According to participant no.1, she said that “I can learn new vocabulary if it shows up frequently in the book and I will look it up.” In addition, participant no.5 indicated that “extensive reading really can help me to memorize vocabularies. I would memorize those words which were interesting, easy to memorize and show many times in the article.” Moreover, participant no.9 mentioned that “through extensive reading, I can learn new
vocabulary if I saw them many times and I would memorize them.” Based on this data, it seems that students will develop their interest and ability, to know words which repeatedly show up in reading material. In this situation, students become more active in learning vocabulary. Furthermore, students can build their vocabulary recognition and learn vocabulary through having greater reading input. These results also fit into hypothesis 2; that is, extensive reading can enhance students’ vocabulary acquisition

**Hypothesis 3: Extensive reading would increase students reading speed.**

Nine out of 11 (82%) participants disagree with that extensive reading would increase students reading speed, by developing their reading skills. Participant no.5 mentioned that “I do not think that extensive reading can really improve reading speed. I think that it’s ok. Reading speed depends on the level of article. If the article is really difficult for the reader, I think that the reading speed will not be fast.” Another opinion from participant no.7, who said that “I also do not think extensive reading can improve reading speed. Reading speeds depend on individual comprehension and reading ability. If the article is difficult to me, I can not read it fast. I must guess some words’ meaning and it really takes some time.” In addition, participant no.11 expressed that “I do not think that the extensive reading can improve reading speed. It depends on how difficult the article is.” According to the findings, this result goes against hypothesis 3.

**Hypothesis 4: Extensive reading can not enhance student reading comprehension.**

Eight out of 11 (73%) participants disagree that extensive reading can not enhance student reading comprehension, they argue (to paraphrase), that extensive reading *can* build vocabularies, and reading ability. Participant no.2 expressed it thus; “I think extensive reading really can improve my reading comprehension, because I learned lots of vocabularies. Therefore, I would read easily if I have vast vocabulary,” and participant no.8 said that “reading comprehension really improves. Reading can build our background information. The more we read, the more we know. In addition, you will build your reading ability and you will be easy to get the main point.” Besides, participant no.11 mentioned that “I also think that extensive reading can enhance our reading comprehension, because you would know many vocabularies and their different meaning. I think that if you have vast vocabulary, you will easy to understand the whole article.” According to these participant’s opinions, this result completely contradicts hypothesis 4.

Therefore, these new findings support the idea that extensive reading can promote students’ motivation in learning English, enhance students’ vocabulary acquisition, and improve their reading comprehension. However, our findings indicate that extensive reading is unlikely to increase students’ reading speed as perceived by the students themselves.

**Discussion and Implications**

After analyzing the data from participants’ opinions, there are three advantages to extensive reading; they include- extensive reading can promote student motivation in learning English, it can enhance student vocabulary acquisition, and also improve their...
reading comprehension. The other finding, namely in response to hypothesis 4, is against extensive reading in that it can not increase student reading speed. Let us deal with these points in order.

First, extensive reading can improve student motivation in learning English. One characteristic of extensive reading is that students can choose books or articles which they are interested in. Once students have this right of choosing books or articles, they like to read English articles increasingly. According to the result, we can show that students prefer reading interesting articles or books which are related to their interests, rather than reading textbooks. Therefore, students have more motivation to read English materials. This finding completely fits into the literature (Powell, 2005).

Second, extensive reading can enhance student vocabulary. In the process of extensive reading, students can read some words which show up frequently in the article. When students read more and more, they will become increasingly familiar with the words to which they are frequently exposed; students’ vocabulary recognition will be developed in such a process. They can acquire these words and memorize them more easily. In addition, students have greater motivation to learn some special or interesting words through reading. Consequently, extensive reading can enhance students’ vocabulary, such findings fit into the literature (Lai, 1993).

Third, extensive reading can improve student reading comprehension. Students can acquire a more extensive vocabulary, build their reading ability, and access to background information through extensive reading. If students read more, their vocabulary recognition will be developed. Once the students’ ability in vocabulary has been built-up, it will become easier for them to get the main idea from articles and other texts. For this reason, students think that extensive reading can improve their reading comprehension. However, this finding does not fit into the literature (Gao, 2004).

Fourth, extensive reading can not increase students’ reading speed. Reading speed depends on many factors. One is individual reading speed, because students can not change their original reading speed through reading a lot of materials. Another is individual reading comprehension. If students’ reading comprehension is quite good, they will easily get the main point in a short time. The other factor is the level of difficulty in the articles, because it will influence students’ reading speed. These three factors can affect students’ reading speed. Therefore, extensive reading is shown not to improve students’ reading speed and this finding does not fit into literature either, (Bell, 2001).

After discussing these new findings, we can embed them into a grounded theory. It seems that students can not increase their reading speed through extensive reading. However, extensive reading can promote student motivation in learning English, enhance students’ vocabulary, and improve their reading comprehension.

According to our opinion and what we have learned from the participants, extensive reading is an efficient method to learn English for EFL students. Through extensive reading, students can build their interest and promote their motivation in learning English. Besides, extensive reading can help students to memorize words, so that it can develop their vocabulary recognition and also enhance their reading comprehension. Furthermore,
extensive reading will benefit teachers in teaching English to those students who are not interested in learning English. Finally, we suggest that students ought to discuss with their teacher or classmates and share their opinions with classmates after reading, so extensive reading will become even more efficient. Moreover, teachers should allow students to read material which they are interested in. They should also ask students to share their opinions after reading with classmates or write a summary about the article. With greater student motivation in reading English materials, there arises the opportunity for teachers to ask students to read more difficult articles or materials which students may not have been attracted to originally. All of which presents a more positive learning environment to both teachers and students of EFL environments.
References


Appendix

Interviewing Questions

Interview One:
1. When did you start extensive reading?
2. Did you read for pleasure or be asked by your teacher?
3. Had you ever felt frustrated in learning English? When?
4. What is the difficult part when you learning English?
5. What do you think about reading?

Interview Two:
1. What kind or what level of book did you choose?
2. How many passages or pages did you read once time?
3. What would you do when you occurring new words?
4. After the reading, did you get clear picture about the book?
5. In the process of extensive reading, had you ever felt frustrate and gave up?

Interview Three:
1. What do you think now about learning English?
2. How is your reading speed now?
3. Do you learn new vocabulary through extensive reading? How?
4. What do you think about your reading comprehension after extensive reading?
5. Does it improve? If yes, how?
6. What the advantages or disadvantage do you think about extensive reading?