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Extensive Reading : Inquiry into Effective Program Duration

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Extensive Reading: Inquiry into Effective Program Duration

Yoshihiro Omura

Introduction

Extensive reading (ER) has been playing an important role in recent years in the field of second language learning. Nuttall even claims that the “best way to improve one’s knowledge of a foreign language is to go and live among its speakers. The next best way is to read extensively in it” (1982, p. 168). Many English as a second language (ESL) and foreign language (EFL) programs now require students to engage in ER as part of their assignment. This paper will first review the history, definition, and benefits of ER, comparing them with those of intensive reading. Then, an experimental study will be presented focusing on the duration of an effective ER program.

The idea of ER goes back to early 20th century. The term “extensive reading” was first used in foreign language pedagogy in 1917 by Palmer in his book The Scientific Study and Teaching of Languages. ER has continued to play an important role in language teaching, and it is supported by many influential researchers such as Krashen (1989), Grabe (1991), and Day & Bamford (1998). Krashen uses the idea “comprehensible input” as the underlying rationale for ER; i. e., students move up to the next level when they acquire enough comprehensible input. He also claims that ER can facilitate vocabulary learning as well as overall language proficiency as follows:

Large quantities of light, ‘low risk’ reading, in which students are not held responsible for content, in which they can skip words without fear of missing anything that affects

their grade, will result in vocabulary growth and overall language competence. (1989, p. 455)

ER received renewed interest in 1990's in Japan and its popularity is continuing into this century. Susser and Robb stated that there were only a few experimental studies in ER in 1990, but later The Language Teacher devoted the whole issue to the discussion of ER in 1997. All the authors in this issue argued that ER should be given a larger share in our language curriculum and presented their ideas on how to implement successful ER programs. Day and Bamford carefully examined various aspects of extensive reading and illustrated the procedure of extensive reading programs in their book, titled Extensive Reading in the Second Language Classroom in 1998. They examined 11 ER programs implemented in various parts of the world (1998, p. 34) and concluded as follows:

Students increased their reading ability in the target language, developed positive attitudes toward reading, had increased motivation to read, and made gains in various aspects of proficiency in the target language, including vocabulary and writing. (1998, p. 33)

Several researchers followed up on these ER studies and continued their efforts to further improve ER programs. Lituanas, Jacobs, and Renandya, for example, reported that remedial students improved their reading skills after participating in ER for 6 months. Robb maintains a resourceful website on ER at <http://www.kyoto-su.ac.jp/information/er/index.html> and tries to introduce the benefits of ER. Indisputable benefits of ER are to improve learners' reading proficiency and possibly other areas of language proficiency. It seems, however, very few studies have tried to define an appropriate program length of ER, or a minimum duration of an effective ER program. One exception is the study conducted by Renandya, Rajan & Jacobs (1999) in which they found that ER can be beneficially implemented even in a short program for two months. Their ER study was implemented in an intensive English program in which learners are immersed in English. This paper will try to show an example of an effective use of ER as part of a reading course for English major students at a Japanese college.

Literature Review

There are various ways to incorporate reading in language learning/teaching. Intensive reading and extensive reading are the most widely used procedures. Intensive reading is traditionally the method most frequently employed in language classes in Japan. It is characterized by the careful procedure to tackle the text. Utmost attention is paid so that all the words, phrases, and structures are analyzed, and the reading is done slowly. It is used for translation purposes, to teach vocabulary and structure in context, to teach reading skills such as scanning or guessing unknown words, and to prepare students to eventually read and comprehend all kinds of written material in the target language. Traditional reading classes often employ this procedure. Extensive reading, in contrast, is characterized by the reading of large amounts of material for pleasure and information, just as learners do in their own language. Students read a large amount of easy material at a fast pace without paying too much attention to grammar or unknown words. Nuttal (1982) gives the rationale for encouraging ER as follows:

The FL student's problem is that he does not know the language well enough to chunk effectively. He tends to read word by word, especially if the text is difficult. So to encourage good reading habits, it is necessary, to give a lot of practice with easy texts. The amount of practice needed is too great to give in the classroom; this is one purpose of an extensive programme. (p. 33)

Low level students in an ESL and an EFL environment are not exposed to a lot of comprehensible input. ER may be one of the few ways of effectively learning a language through increased exposure to a variety of language use. Renandya (2000), a strong advocate of ER, lists the definition of ER as follows:

1. Students read large amounts of printed material.
2. Students choose what they want to read.
3. Students read a variety of materials in terms of topic and genre.
4. The material students read is within their level of comprehension.
5. Students take part in post-reading activities.
6. Teachers read with their students.
7. Teachers and students keep track of student progress.

8. Teachers provide help and guidance where needed.

Finding appropriate and sufficient materials to support Points 1 through 4 is not easy where funding is limited. Some researchers reported how they collected materials (Lituanas, 1997), whereas other teachers created materials by themselves (Toh & Raja, 1997) or involved students to create their own reading materials (Dupuy & McQuillan, 1997). Points 6 through 8 require teachers to actively participate in the procedures to maximize the effects. Teachers should be a model as well as an encourager/helper. It should be noted that Point 7, monitoring students' progress, is extremely important because very few students are willing to move up to a higher level unless they receive encouragement.

The benefits of ER are extensive. Grabe (1995) stated the benefits of ER as follows:

- (1) Extensive reading develops automatic word recognition, particularly by building up orthographic knowledge and letter-sound correspondences.
- (2) It may be the best way to develop a large recognition vocabulary.
- (3) It is a key source for building student motivation once students are 'hooked'.
- (4) It has demonstrated positive influence on students' general background knowledge; this is important for learning to read new material in other domains and learning new information from texts that are to be read.
- (5) It has demonstrated positive influence on reading comprehension proficiency, as well as on other language skills.
- (6) It may be the only genuine way for students to develop and maintain reading strategies, and to become more strategic readers.
- (7) It is essential for developing the ability to "read to learn", a major goal for academically oriented instruction.
- (8) It is a key means for students to continue learning a second language on their own when they complete instruction.

The present study is designed to address the following four questions. In what areas do learners improve their proficiency after participating in an ER program? How much ER do learners need to significantly improve their reading skill? What is the minimum duration for an ER program to be effective in a regular language course? Lastly, how do learners perceive ER? Do they find it

useful, interesting, easy, and/or enjoyable?

The Study

Subjects

The current experiment was conducted with 52 first year students at Kansai Gaidai Junior College who were enrolled in Reading & Vocabulary class in Spring & Fall 2000. Japanese was their first language and none of them had had extensive learning experience overseas. The 52 cases were all females and they were 18-19 years old. They had studied English at Japanese junior and senior high schools for 6 years.

The students were English majors but they were not enrolled in an intensive English program. (They take other college classes concurrently.) The following are their English course components:

- (1) Oral Communication (3 hours a week)
- (2) Reading and Vocabulary (3 hours a week)
- (3) Writing (3 hours a week)

Procedure

The students learned reading strategies in Reading & Vocabulary class using a textbook specifically designed for that purpose. The class met three times a week. Students were all required to participate in the ER program outside the class in addition to receiving overt reading strategy instruction. A group of earnest teachers had persuaded the school to purchase graded readers to set up an ER library, and the school had purchased a few thousand graded readers varying from level 1 to level 6. The students were instructed on the guidelines of ER as well as its benefits. ER counted 20% of their total grade. Students were instructed to read at least one graded reader per two weeks period, but they were encouraged to read more if they could for extra credit. Therefore, the number of graded readers students read vary to a certain extent.

Following the level designations by the publishers, the graded readers are classified into 6 different levels according to ease of reading as well as number of vocabulary employed, level 1 being the easiest and level 6 the most difficult. Due mainly to the difference of font size and page numbers, reading a level 4 book takes more time to read than a level 1 book. To count

fairly the number of pages students read, a weighted page system was therefore used. Level 3 was used as a base and reading a 30-page level 3 book counted as 30 weighted pages, while reading a 30-page long level 1 book counted as 15 weighted pages. The rationale behind this is that a level 1 book has approximately half the number of words per page compared to a level 3 book. The conversion table used is as follows:

Table 1 : Weighted page conversion table.

Level 1	x0.5
Level 2	x.75
Level 3	x1
Level 4 & 5	x1.25

After compiling the number of weighted pages, the 52 students were divided into 4 groups; high volume readers (HVR), medium volume readers (MVR), low volume readers (LVR), and zero readers (ZR). HVR were those readers who read more than 400 weighted pages, MVR students read more than 200 pages, and LVR students read less than 100 pages. The 52 cases separated equally into four groups: 13 HVR, 13 MVR, 13 LVR, and 13 ZR. Table 2 below lists the four skills proficiency levels of participants. The English proficiency level of the participants were very similar because students were placed into appropriate classes based upon their placement test results. The only difference among the four groups is the amount of ER they completed. Since the number of pages in each book varies even at similar levels, it is hard to estimate how many books the participants in each group read. A student, however, who had read one book in two weeks was likely to be placed in HVR group (This depends, of course, on the choice of reading level).

Instruments

Three instruments were used to collect data in this study. The first is a test designed to measure participants' proficiency in English. The junior college requires all students to take Michigan Placement Test three times a year to assess proficiency level and to place students at an appropriate level in the upcoming semester. (Mandatory English classes are divided according to students' proficiency level.) The Michigan Placement Test consisted of four sections: (i) listening, (ii) grammar, (iii) vocabulary, and (iv) reading. The test was administered at the beginning of the academic year, at the end of the first semester, and at the end of the second

semester, i.e., the end of one-year instruction.

The second instrument was a book report form given at the beginning of the course. The book report form asked students to record the title of the book, the number of pages, the reading level, the number of weighted pages, as well as their subjective impression of the book: the difficulty level of the story (very easy, easy, appropriate, difficult), and the extent to which the story was interesting (very interesting, interesting, OK, not interesting).

The third instrument was a questionnaire constructed to elicit information from participants regarding the overall ER assignment. Participants were asked the difficulty level of the ER materials (1 – difficult, 10 – easy), the extent to which the ER materials was interesting (1 – boring, 10 – interesting), and the degree of their comprehension (1 – none, 10 – perfectly) as well as, whether they thought ER improved their English proficiency, and whether they would like to continue with an ER style reading on their own.

Results

Descriptive statistics for the data from the Michigan Placement Test are displayed in Tables 2 through 7. Table 7 shows whether there were significant differences among groups. For example, the first row indicates that HVR reading group improved their total and reading scores significantly higher than ZR group.

Table 2: Pretest scores (N=52)

	Total	Listening	Grammar	Vocabulary	Reading
HVR (N=13)	46.61	8.62	16.85	13.62	7.54
MVR (N=13)	46.92	8.50	17.33	13.08	8.00
LVR (N=13)	46.57	8.00	17.07	14.50	7.00
ZR (N=13)	45.57	8.14	17.07	12.86	7.50

Table 3: Post test Scores After One Semester (N=52)

	Total	Listening	Grammar	Vocabulary	Reading
HVR (N=13)	50.92	10.08	19.00	13.00	8.85
MVR (N=13)	48.58	9.58	17.17	13.83	8.00
LVR (N=13)	51.14	9.64	18.93	14.79	7.79
ZR (N=13)	49.36	9.71	17.86	13.43	8.36

Table 4: Posttest Scores After Two Semesters (N=52)

	Total	Listening	Grammar	Vocabulary	Reading
HVR (N=13)	57.08	11.54	19.23	15.31	11.00
MVR (N=13)	51.83	10.08	16.83	14.75	10.16
LVR (N=13)	53.21	10.29	18.86	15.43	8.64
ZR (N=13)	49.36	9.57	17.79	13.64	8.36

Table 5: Average Score Gains After One Semester (N=52)

	Total	Listening	Grammar	Vocabulary	Reading
HVR (N=13)	4.30	1.46	2.15	-0.62	1.31
MVR (N=13)	1.67	1.08	-0.17	0.75	0.00
LVR (N=13)	4.57	1.64	1.86	0.29	0.79
ZR (N=13)	3.79	1.57	0.79	0.57	0.86

Table 6: Average Score Gains After Two Semesters (N=52)

	Total	Listening	Grammar	Vocabulary	Reading
HVR (N=13)	10.46	2.92	2.38	1.69	3.46
MVR (N=13)	4.91	1.58	-0.50	1.67	2.17
LVR (N=13)	6.64	2.29	1.79	0.93	1.64
ZR (N=13)	3.79	1.43	0.71	0.79	0.86

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Table 7: P values of t-tests for Average Score Gains Between Groups After Two Semesters (N = 52)

	Total	Listening	Grammar	Vocabulary	Reading
HVR - ZR	0.011*	0.157	0.162	0.458	0.004*
MVR - ZR	0.674	0.845	0.417	0.620	0.058**
LVR - ZR	0.111	0.530	0.159	0.897	0.312
HVR - LVR	0.121	0.689	0.616	0.587	0.067
MVR - LVR	0.514	0.631	0.143	0.698	0.543
HVR - MVR	0.086**	0.252	0.107	0.990	0.150

The study had not found significant improvement after one semester, but a significant gain ($p < .05$) was found after two semesters between the HVR reading group and the other reading groups, which led the researcher to contemplate on the duration of an ER program. The HVR reading group showed a trend to mark higher scores in the reading section compared to LVR ($p < .1$). The MVR reading group showed a trend to mark higher scores in the reading section compared to ZR ($p < .1$). The result of the questionnaire is displayed in Table 8 below.

Table 8: Questionnaire result

Extent to which ER was interesting 1-boring, 10-interesting	6.1
Extent to which ER was easy 1-difficult, 10-easy	7.7
Extent to which ER material was comprehended 1-none, 10-perfectly	8.2
Extent to which ER improved English proficiency 1-none, 10-very useful	7.3
Desire to continue with ER on their own 1-no, 10-yes by any means	6.4

Discussion

After completing the ER program for one year (two semesters including a summer break), significant improvement was found for HVR in reading as well as overall scores when compared to those students who did not participate in the ER. This finding leads the researcher to predict that the insignificant results after one semester was attributable to the short duration of the ER program. Results indicate that those who read at least one graded reader per two weeks for a year significantly improved their reading scores as well as overall scores when compared to those who did not engage in ER. Here, perseverance appears to be the key. As mentioned earlier, a study by Renandya, Rajan & Jacobs (1999) found that even a two-month ER program was beneficially implemented. Their study, however, was conducted as part of an intensive immersion program and participants were required to do a large amount of ER. Most language courses at universities in an EFL environment cannot replicate their methodology. Rather, instructors should find an appropriate amount of ER so that it is effective, but, at the same time, not a burden to learners. The Japanese ministry of education, culture, sports, science, and technology suggests college students study twice the amount of class hours outside the class. In other words, a class that meets for 90 minutes a week should require students to study for 180 minutes outside the class. If that is the case, requiring students to read one graded reader a week may be too much work. Most participants in this study reported that it usually took two to three hours to finish a book. Therefore, one graded reader per two weeks outside the class seems a reasonable requirement and it has been found effective in this present study.

The answers to the first research question, as to the areas of improvement after participating in an ER program, are reading proficiency and overall English proficiency. The HVR reading group gained higher scores in listening, grammar, and vocabulary sections, according to Table 6, but their improvements were not statistically significant. Although Krashen claims (1989) learners gain vocabulary knowledge after participating in an ER program, this study did not find any significant improvement in vocabulary scores. The insignificant finding in this study can be attributed perhaps to the fact that the vocabulary level the Michigan Placement Test tests does not match the level of vocabulary participants gained through the ER program. It is possible that students gained vocabulary knowledge significantly, but this was not detected by the Michigan Placement Test. Had a different instrument been used to measure participants' vocabulary level, such as Nation's vocabulary test, a different result might have been found. It

was not possible, however, to administer another test due to time constraints. The same could be true with grammar improvement. Syntax used in graded readers was very simple and they hardly contained any grammatical areas tested by proficiency exams. Further investigation is needed for listening improvement.

The answers to the second and third questions, concerning the amount of reading and duration for an effective ER program, are that learners need to participate in an ER program for at least a year and read at least one graded reader per two weeks. If the required amount is increased, learners might be able to achieve a significant gain in a shorter period of time. Results indicate the above amount of reading material and duration were found to work well.

These results indicate that an ER program can benefit EFL learners to improve their reading proficiency as well as their overall English proficiency. However, there might be another factor we may need to take into consideration. Since ER was not a required activity, it is also possible that those who read large quantity had higher motivation to learn the language than those who did not read much or at all.

Participants also provided valuable feedback through the questionnaire. As Table 8 shows, participants reported reading materials were rather interesting (6 . 1 out of 10), and quite easy (7 . 7 out of 10). They also indicated that ER materials were very easy to comprehend (8 . 2 out of 10) and felt that ER improved their reading proficiency (7 . 3 out of 10). It is also found that most participants would like to continue with ER on their own. Overall, the participants responded very positively to the ER program. Thus, the questionnaire found that students perceived ER useful, interesting, easy, and enjoyable.

Conclusion

It is found that ER does have a positive influence on improving reading proficiency as well as other language skills. Simply providing students with reading materials, however, is not enough to implement a successful ER program. Since one of the aims of ER is to make the learners get used to a variety of reading materials in various genre, it is desirable to devise a procedure so that learners don't stay only with their favorite category or at the same level. Students should be encouraged to move up to the next level when they feel they are staying at a lower level than the level they should be at. Teacher monitoring and peer collaboration become very important in

order to ascertain these points.

Future research is needed to maximize the benefits of ER as well as implement a successful ER program. The study by Renandya et al. (1999) found significant improvement in reading proficiency even after a two-month intensive course, while the participants in the present study needed a year to gain significant improvement. Participants in Renandya et al's study were required to read 20 books during the program; i.e., students were required to read one book in three days. Participants in this study, however, completed one book in two weeks at the most. Additional research should be conducted to find out the correlation between the amount of required ER and the duration of ER program in order to maximize the benefit of an ER program in any language program.

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