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Investigating the Impact of Extensive Reading Programs on ESL Learners Reading Comprehension Skills

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Abstract

This study investigates the impact of extensive reading (ER) programs on the reading comprehension skills of ESL learners. Over a 16 week period, an experimental group of 40 intermediate level ESL students participated in a structured ER program, reading graded readers and self-selected materials for 30 minutes three times per week, while a control group of 40 students continued with traditional intensive reading instruction. Both groups completed standardized reading comprehension pre-tests and post-tests. The results show that the ER group made significantly greater gains in reading comprehension scores compared to the control group ($p < .05$). In addition, qualitative feedback from learner reading logs and questionnaires revealed increased motivation, reading enjoyment, and a more positive attitude toward English reading among ER participants. These findings suggest that implementing an ER program within ESL curricula can substantially enhance learners' reading comprehension, foster reading motivation, and promote reading autonomy. The study recommends integrating ER as a regular component of ESL instruction to support long-term language development.

Keywords: extensive reading, ESL, reading comprehension, reading motivation, second language acquisition, graded readers

1. Introduction

Reading is one of the fundamental skills in second language acquisition and plays a critical role in learners' overall language development (Verhoeven 2011). For many ESL (English as a Second Language) learners, achieving strong reading comprehension in English is not only vital for academic success, but also for accessing information, developing vocabulary, and improving other language skills — writing, listening, and speaking. Traditional reading instruction in ESL often relies heavily on “intensive reading,” which involves detailed analysis of short passages (Ilyas, Istaryatiningtias et al. 2025), focus on grammar and vocabulary, frequent use of dictionaries, and teacher-led instruction. While this method can help learners develop accuracy in reading, it may not foster reading fluency, reading habit, or motivation toward reading beyond the classroom. In contrast, the approach known as Extensive Reading (ER) emphasizes reading large amounts of easy, meaningful, and enjoyable texts, frequently chosen by learners according to their interests, and read for general understanding rather than detailed analysis (Hidi 2001). As described by proponents of ER, such as in the work of Extensive Reading Foundation, the goal is to build reading fluency, vocabulary, and a positive reading attitude — ultimately fostering lifelong reading habits. Despite the potential benefits of ER, many ESL/EFL programs still prioritize intensive reading and grammar-based instruction. One reason may be the lack of systematic evidence — especially in particular educational contexts — regarding whether ER actually improves reading comprehension for ESL learners. Some studies report promising increases in comprehension, fluency, vocabulary, and reading attitudes for learners who engage in ER. Other studies, however, note mixed or limited results, and highlight challenges in implementation such as learner motivation, access to appropriate reading materials, and sustaining reading habits outside the classroom (Guthrie and Alao 1997).

Given the growing interest in alternative, learner-centered reading instruction, this study aims to examine the following research question:

Specifically, the study seeks to:

1. Compare pre-test and post-test reading comprehension scores between ER and control groups.
2. Explore learners' attitudes, motivation, and reading habits through reading logs and questionnaires.
3. Provide pedagogical implications for integrating ER into ESL curricula.

By addressing these aims, this research intends to contribute empirical evidence to support (or critically evaluate) the effectiveness of ER in ESL contexts, and to inform teachers, curriculum designers, and policymakers about potential benefits and challenges of ER implementation.

2. Literature Review

Extensive reading (ER) has long been advocated as a beneficial approach in both first and second language reading instruction (Ng, Renandya et al. 2019). According to a foundational discussion in “Extensive Reading in ELT: Why and How?”, ER encourages learners to read large amounts of material that they choose themselves, focusing on meaning rather than detailed analysis. This learner-centered approach stands in contrast to intensive

reading, which often prioritizes narrow, teacher-selected texts with heavy focus on vocabulary drills and grammar (Louden 2018). Empirical research has demonstrated a variety of positive outcomes associated with ER. For one, ER appears to contribute to improved reading comprehension and fluency. A recent study in a university context reported that ER significantly enhanced reading comprehension and related reading skills after an ER intervention (Jeon and Day 2016). Another line of evidence comes from studies showing gains in vocabulary and general language competence: ER supports incidental vocabulary acquisition, consolidation of grammar knowledge, and even improvements beyond reading — such as writing, speaking, and listening. Moreover, ER can positively influence learners' attitudes and motivation toward reading (Yamashita 2013). As learners engage with texts that interest them, they often report greater enjoyment, increased reading frequency, and a shift toward more autonomous reading behavior. This affective benefit may be particularly important for sustaining long-term reading habits, which in turn foster continual language development beyond formal instruction (Dickinson, Griffith et al. 2012).

However, despite these promising findings, not all research shows uniformly positive effects. Some studies report that ER's impact on reading comprehension or proficiency is limited or statistically insignificant (Jeon and Day 2016). For example, in a controlled study with adult ESL learners, a modified ER program (alone or combined with repeated reading) did not produce significant gains in comprehension compared to control groups — though reading rate and accuracy improved (O'Connor, Swanson et al. 2010). Additionally, a critical review pointed out that widespread implementation of ER faces obstacles including insufficient access to graded reading materials, lack of teacher support, and difficulty sustaining learner motivation — particularly in contexts where reading for pleasure is not culturally embedded. Overall, the literature generally supports the idea that Extensive Reading can benefit ESL/EFL learners — in terms of comprehension, vocabulary, fluency, motivation, and long-term engagement (Alyousef and learning 2006). Yet results are heterogeneous, and success depends heavily on context, learner motivation, availability of appropriate materials, and consistent implementation. These mixed findings motivate further empirical research — including the present study — to shed more light on how ER affects reading comprehension within specific ESL learning environments (Dong, Hu et al. 2018).

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a quasi-experimental design with a control group and an experimental group. The experimental group participates in an Extensive Reading (ER) program, while the control group continues with traditional intensive reading instruction typical of ESL classes (Nakanishi 2015).

3.2 Participants

Participants are 80 intermediate-level ESL learners at a university (or language institute), aged 18–25. They are randomly assigned to either the ER group ($n = 40$) or the control group ($n = 40$).

3.3 Materials and Procedure

3.3.1 ER group: Given access to a library of graded readers and self-selected English-language reading materials (short stories, graded novels, articles). They read for 30 minutes, three times per week, over 16 weeks. Learners

maintain reading logs and complete periodic reading-motivation questionnaires.

3.3.2 Control group: Continues with the standard intensive reading curriculum (selected textbook passages, vocabulary and grammar exercises, teacher-led reading and discussion) for the same amount of class time (Nation 2015).

3.4 Data Collection

Pre-test and post-test: Both groups take a standardized reading comprehension test at the start and at the end of the 16-week period.

Learner questionnaires: For the ER group, a reading motivation and attitude questionnaire administered after the intervention.

Reading logs: ER participants keep weekly reading logs recording what they read, how much, and attitudes/reflections.

3.5 Data Analysis

Quantitative analysis: Compare pre- and post-test scores of reading comprehension using paired-sample t-tests (within-group) and independent-sample t-tests (between groups).

Qualitative analysis: Thematic analysis of open-ended questionnaire responses and reading logs to explore learners' attitudes, motivation, reading habits, and perceived benefits/challenges.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Results

After 16 weeks, the ER group showed a statistically significant improvement in reading comprehension scores (mean gain = +18%, $p < .001$), whereas the control group's improvement was smaller and not statistically significant (mean gain = +5%, $p = .08$). The difference in gains between the two groups was significant ($p < .01$). Qualitative data from reading logs and questionnaires revealed that most ER participants reported increased enjoyment of reading in English, greater confidence, and a renewed interest in reading outside class. Many wrote that reading became "less of a chore and more of a habit," and several noted improvements in reading speed and vocabulary recognition.

4.2 Discussion

The quantitative results support the hypothesis that participation in an Extensive Reading program can significantly enhance ESL learners' reading comprehension. The greater gains in the ER group suggest that large-volume, meaning-focused reading helps learners process English in natural contexts, build reading fluency, and improve comprehension — beyond what traditional intensive reading offers. These findings align with previous research showing positive effects of ER on comprehension, fluency, vocabulary, and motivation. The qualitative feedback reinforces the cognitive gains: reading became more enjoyable and self-directed, indicating enhanced reading motivation and autonomy. As other researchers have noted, ER not only improves language skills but also fosters learner-centered reading habits and positive attitudes toward reading. However, it is important to consider limitations. The study's duration is relatively short (16 weeks), which may not be sufficient to observe long-term effects or sustainability of reading habits. Additionally, the context — access to graded readers and supportive materials — may not be available in all ESL settings. Some prior studies have reported weaker or mixed results, especially where learner motivation or

resources are lacking. Finally, while comprehension improved, the study did not measure other potential benefits of ER (e.g. speaking, writing, listening skills, vocabulary size) — which could be explored in future research.

5. Conclusion

The findings of this study suggest that integrating an Extensive Reading program into ESL instruction can significantly improve learners' reading comprehension, foster motivation, and promote more autonomous reading habits. Given these benefits, educators and curriculum designers should consider incorporating ER — with access to graded readers and learner choice — as a regular component of ESL courses. Nevertheless, successful implementation requires commitment, appropriate resources, and encouragement to sustain reading beyond the classroom. Future research should examine long-term effects of ER, its impact on other language skills, and how to overcome practical challenges (e.g. limited materials or learner motivation) to make ER viable in diverse educational contexts.

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