

THE EFFECTS OF EXTENSIVE READING ON LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY AND MOTIVATION TO READ ON FOURTEEN YEAR OLD STUDENTS IN MALAYSIA

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Abstract

This research was carried out to investigate the effects of extensive reading on language proficiency and motivation to read on fourteen year old students in a premier school in Malaysia. There were 120 participants who were divided into monitored and unmonitored groups. The monitored group was engaged in a weekly scheduled time to do extensive reading by reading single page articles in school while the unmonitored group read single page articles whenever they were free. Results revealed that the monitored group scored significantly higher in comprehension, cloze and vocabulary tests than the unmonitored group after 9 months of treatment. However, there was no significant difference in the affective questionnaire which measured motivation to read for the groups. The results suggest that proper management of extensive reading should be part of the curriculum where teachers and students play a crucial role in improving students' language proficiency. There seems to be a need for a shift in schools towards a reading pedagogy that appreciates the spirit of the ER approach with its focus on reading for pleasure and information.

1.0 Introduction

Extensive reading (ER) programmes involve students silently reading large quantities of materials. These materials are usually at a level that permits students to gain at least a fair understanding of what they are reading without outside help (Jacobs and Gallo, 2002). The benefits of such programmes for first and second language (L1 and L2) learners are well documented (Coady, 1997; Day and Bamford, 2005; Elley, 1996; Krashen, 1993; McQuillan, 1994; Nagy, Anderson and Herman, 1987; Ng, 1988, 1994; Yu, 1993, 1999). There is overwhelming evidence that students engaging in free reading progress in language and literacy development. Studies thus far have shown that in-class free reading where class-time is set aside for free reading, students typically do well on tests of reading comprehension and vocabulary, a result that holds for first language acquisition and foreign language development (Krashen, 2004).

This shows that an extensive reading programme must be a student-centred activity and an integral part of reading instruction in the second language classroom. The second language reading lesson that incorporates extensive reading addresses two aims of students reading a great deal and enjoying reading. It is simplistic but nevertheless true that the more students read, the better they become at it. "Reading... must be developed, and can only be developed, by means of extensive and continual practice. People learn to read, and to read better, by reading," (Eskey, 2002).

2.0 Research Problem

Despite this strong, widely disseminated evidence supporting ER, implementation of some extensive reading programmes have been less than a complete success. Greaney (1996) notes that in many lower income countries, ER programmes must grapple with problems such as lack of reading materials and inadequate preparation of teachers. Additional constraints on the implementation of ER exist even in countries with more favourable financial conditions. One of these constraints flows from pressure brought by administrators, students and parents to cover the entire syllabus and to complete every page in the textbook and every exercise in the workbook. Such pressure leaves little or no time for ER, which is relegated to the status of "luxury" or "optional extra" (Yu, 1993).

There are many other challenges in encouraging students to read. Table 1 shows the reasons reading among primary and secondary students was still at a low level in Malaysia.

Table 1 Reasons for low reading levels (Program Nilam, 1997)

No.	Reasons	%
1.	No time	70.30
2.	Reading is boring	49.70
3.	Prefer to play	38.64
4.	Books are not interesting	38.33
5.	Not enough books	31.67
6.	Prefer to watch television and listen to the radio	29.09
7.	Tired	26.88
8.	Uncomfortable environment / noisy	26.67
9.	No opportunity to go to the library	24.39
10.	No interest to read since young	23.64

3.0 Theoretical Framework

The theory which underpins extensive reading's effectiveness in terms of enhancing comprehension is Krashen's (2003) 'Comprehension Hypothesis' which stresses that acquisition of a second language is facilitated if students are given enough comprehensible input, and when learning is conducted in a tension-free environment. The input hypothesis states that "we acquire language in one way: by understanding messages and we acquire language when we obtain comprehensible input". In extensive reading programmes, students will be saturated or immersed with reading materials which provides a great deal of comprehensible input.

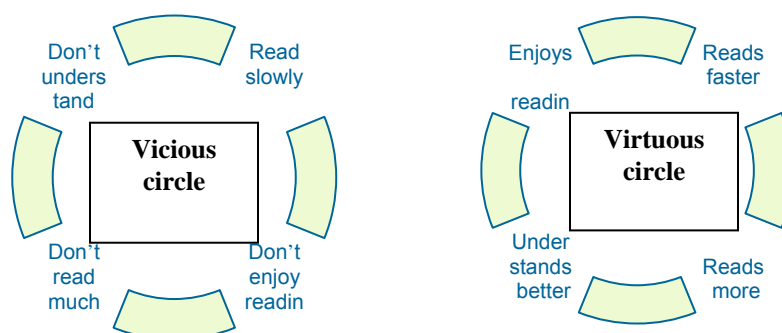
Besides reading materials, the environment for reading is equally important. Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis (1993) states that in anxiety-producing situations, there is

an affective filter which acts as a mental block preventing acquirers from fully utilizing the input they receive. But when the filter is low or down, the acquirer can fully comprehend the message and use the input to enhance their language competence. This hypothesis states that in a low-anxiety environment, that is, an environment where students feel relaxed and at ease, students learn better. Extensive reading creates this environment since students read books of their own choice i.e. according to their interest and they read them at their own pace and level. They do not make a conscious effort in reading since they are not required to take tests. They only read for pleasure and for enjoyment.

Day and Bamford (1998) two strong advocates of ER, suggested an extensive reading programme if set up and carried out appropriately, not only helps students learn to read in the second language, but also helps them to enjoy reading. This encourages them to continue reading long after formal study of the second language is over. ER, at the very least, consolidates students' learning of the second language and at best, increases their language proficiency.

The vicious and virtuous reading circles (Nuttall, 1996:127) highlights the importance of reading for pleasure.

Vicious and virtuous circles (Nuttall, 1996:127)



4.0 Research Objectives

Based on the limitations in the implementation of the current NILAM programme and successful ER programmes in other countries, this research carried out an ER programme called Pleasure Reading. The objectives will be to compare monitored and unmonitored environments for ER and their effect on enhancing students' language proficiency and students' motivation to read on their own. This research will address having comprehensible and a variety of reading materials in a tension free environment. It would highlight the role of teachers and compare the ER programme that is monitored (scheduled into the school timetable) and unmonitored.

5.0 Methodology

5.1 Methods for data collection

During the 9 months treatment period of this research, the participants were required to complete pre and post tests. Randomly selected students were also interviewed to

elicit feedback on the programme. Article Reports and Reaction reports that were distributed were also collected and analysed.

5.2 Samples and distribution

This research focused on 14 year old students in Sultan Ibrahim Girls' School, Johor Bahru. This is because these 14 year old students have adjusted to a new environment after being in secondary school for a year and they do not have any public examinations in the year.

Before the research was conducted, the population was tested for normality of distribution. 248 Form two students had sat for an exam that comprised the comprehension, cloze and vocabulary sections.

A normal curve plotted on the students' results showed that it is reasonably symmetrical and bell-shaped. The participants involved in this research were from a normal population as shown in Figure 1.

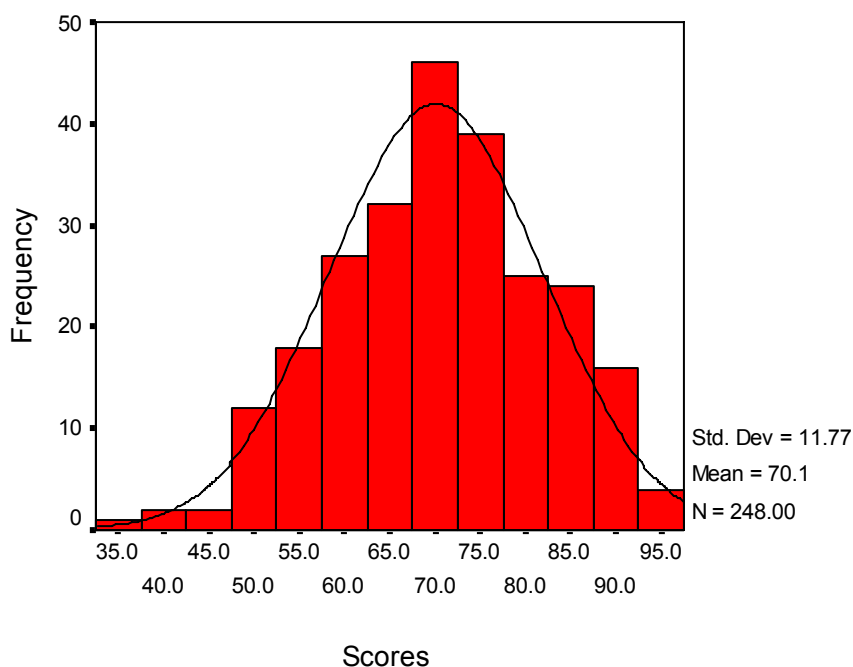


Figure 1 Distribution of scores

There were 248 fourteen year old students enrolled in this school and they were divided into seven classes. These students were not divided according to academic qualifications but were based on the subjects that they were taking. 120 of them, who were from four randomly selected classes, participated in this research. They represent 48.39% of the total fourteen year old student population. The two English Language teachers in charge of the four classes were qualified and with minimum three years experience.

The groups were randomly selected. Group I, which was the monitored group, had 59 students. Group II, with 61 students, is the unmonitored group with no scheduled time for reading. The treatment for Group I and Group II was carried out and monitored by the researcher .

5.3 Instrumentation

This research investigated the effects of ER on students' English Language proficiency and motivation to read. The instruments that were used were:

- a) Comprehension test
- b) Cloze test
- c) Vocabulary test
- d) Affective questionnaire

5.4 Reliability and Validity

The reliability and validity of the instruments are summarised in Table 2.

Table 2 Instruments' reliability and validity

Instruments	Alpha Reliability	Validity
Comprehension test	0.804	Australia International Competitions for form 2 students in Malaysia, University of New South Wales.
Cloze test	0.795	'Penilaian Menengah Rendah' examinations
Vocabulary test	0.826	Revision books
Affective questionnaire	0.813	Adapted from Hisougi and Day (2004) and Mori (2002) affective questionnaire

5.5 Methods for data analysis

The research hypothesis were analysed using the quantitative approach. The t-test paired and independent samples were employed to examine the significant differences between the mean scores of the pre and post results of the instruments. However, the interviews from the students were analysed using the qualitative method through in-depth open ended interviews. The article reports and reaction reports were analysed using descriptive statistics.

6.0 Research Findings

The quantitative results for the four instruments can be summarized in Table 3.

Table 3 Quantitative results for language proficiency

Quantitative Test	ER Programme	Non ER Programme	Independent samples	
			Pre-test	Post-test
	t-test paired samples	t-test paired results		
Comprehension test	0.024	0.356	0.197	0.000
Cloze test	0.000	0.546	0.220	0.000
Vocabulary test	0.002	0.691	0.215	0.000
Affective questionnaire	0.371	0.398	0.228	0.323

$\alpha = 0.05$

The analysis above showed that students in the ER programme had a significant difference in their comprehension, cloze and vocabulary results. However, there was no significant differences for the affective questionnaire. A further comparison was carried out to examine the impact of ER on students with low English proficiency (LEP) and high English proficiency (HEP) in the ER programme group.

To analyse the students' English language ability, the total marks from the three tests were computed, which meant that the comprehension, cloze and vocabulary results were totalled. LEP students were identified as students who scored below 45% in their pre-total scores. HEP students were students who scored above 80% in their pre-total marks. Table 4 lists the pre-total percentage and the post-total percentage of LEP and HEP students from the monitored group.

Table 4 Low English proficiency and high English proficiency students' pre and post-total percentage

Students	Pre-total percentage	Post-total percentage	Percentage Gain
Low English Proficiency (LEP) (<45%)	34	59	25
	41	55	14
	42	78	36
	44	72	28
	40	59	19
	41	72	31
High English Proficiency (HEP) (>80%)	81	95	14
	81	90	9
	82	91	9
	84	93	9
	85	95	10
	91	93	2

The results highlighted in Table 4 showed that the ER programme has a positive impact on students, regardless of their proficiency levels.

In the interviews carried out on the students, they all agreed that they enjoyed reading the simple and interesting single page articles. The ER group read a total of 3343 articles and the non ER group only managed to read 29 articles.

7.0 Discussions

The prominent roles that policy makers and school administrators, teachers and students play in incorporating an ER programme in an English Language classroom is important for ER to benefit students.

7.1 Policy makers and school administrations

They can provide moral support by providing insightful and careful orientation to ER for both teachers and students. In addition, administrators provide the different genres of comprehensible single page reading materials.

7.2 Teachers

Teachers are the facilitators and role models in the ER classroom. The following are guidelines that teachers can give to students when they engage in extensive reading.

- a) Read, read, and read some more
- b) Read easy books
- c) Read interesting materials
- d) Reread books you found particularly interesting
- e) Read for general understanding
- f) Ignore unknown or difficult words. Skip them and continue reading
- g) Avoid using dictionaries
- h) Expand your reading comfort zone
- i) Set reading goals and keep a reading log
- j) Enjoy! Enjoy! Enjoy!

7.3 Students

ER empowers students in the teaching learning process. It encourages them to explore, evaluate and make their own decisions on what to read. This self-directed learning approach is student centred and provides greater autonomy to students.

8.0 Conclusion

This research has shown the effects of extensive reading on fourteen year old students in Malaysia after a 9-month experiment. It suggests that extensive reading should be implemented carefully in schools as a core part of the curriculum and be part of the reading pedagogy in the classrooms. The results reinforce the same conclusion of other researchers that extensive reading can contribute positively to language proficiency.

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