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Extensive Reading and its Potential in Assisting Low-ability EFL Learners to Increase their Reading Comprehension and Motivation

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Abstract

Reading comprehensible texts is referred to by Krashen (2005) as representing a bridge to heavier reading such as journal and magazine features or academic texts as it helps provide competency that is crucial to facilitate comprehension. Reading such texts extensively has also been reported repetitively by substantial research, both in ESL and EFL contexts, as contributing to the enhancement of reading ability and, particularly, motivation to continue the reading engagement. This paper reports on findings from an experiment with low-ability Thai undergraduate students and discusses whether the claims made about extensive reading (ER) and its existing knowledge are applicable in the context of a 'low-valued' reading society like Thailand. Theoretical and empirical evidence is presented related to aspects of reading abilities, *i.e.* reading comprehension, speed, narratives, and motivation. Also provided are the practical implications from the research findings for optimal benefits, particularly to reading instruction.

Introduction

Although a large number of Thai students have a greater chance of exposure to English texts through the wide range of media available, the fact that they use English as a foreign language reduces their necessities to use it in their everyday lives. In addition to the sociocultural context, the prevailing intensive reading (IR) approach, which focuses on skill practice, lessens the chances of exposure to language input. One major reason is that students are commonly required to spend some of their reading time completing supplementary exercises to strengthen their competence in language features. Most importantly, the low proficiency level of many students/readers makes the reading practice through demanding materials worthless as the results of their word-by-word translation are often time-consuming with little or no comprehension at all. On the overall, the context of EFL, with its emphasis on language features rather than reading, as well as the low ability level of students/readers, diminishes a reader's motivation to read, which in turn adversely affects their reading ability.

That said, it seems that existing reading curricula and instruction need some alternations. Grabe (2002: 56) points out that *"most teachers, curricula, and instructional materials do not recognize the severely limiting impact of relatively low amounts of exposure to L2 reading texts."* According to him, the solution is obvious and simple, *i.e.* get students to read extensively. Similarly, Eskey (2002) believes that to become a competent reader, engaging in a large quantity of reading is a prerequisite. The reading teacher must motivate and facilitate reading by first, introducing appropriate texts and encouraging reading in a large volume, and second, teaching students reading strategies.

Encouraging reading extensively among students seems to be a promising strategy as there are plenty of chances for exposure to language input. However, not all types of reading materials can be read widely. To further explain, very low-ability readers may not be able to understand authentic texts that are written exclusively for native speakers of the language. In order to prepare students to benefit greatly from extensive reading (ER), the underlying

theoretical rationale should therefore be studied, and, if possible, followed accordingly.

Theoretical Grounds

Input Hypothesis: ER, also referred to as book-based or comprehension-based activities, is well supported by the proposed Input Hypothesis of Stephen Krashen (1982), an influential theorist of Innatist Theory of Second Language Acquisition (SLA). The key concept of this hypothesis is the following:

One acquires language in only one way—by exposure to comprehensible input. If the input contains forms and structures just beyond the learner's current level of competence in the language ($i+1$), then both comprehension and acquisition will occur (Krashen, 1982: 2-3).

The Input Hypothesis makes the following claim: a necessary (but not sufficient) condition to move from stage i to stage $i+1$ is that the acquirer understands input that contains $i+1$, where “understanding means that the acquirer focuses on the meaning and not the form of the message” (Krashen, 1987: 21). Based on this hypothesis, choosing the right texts to read is a crucial prerequisite to language acquisition. As such, it is necessary that teachers provide a wide range of books at all difficulty levels for students to choose from so that they can find books that truly match not only their personal interests but also their levels of language ability.

Affective Filter Hypothesis: The Affective Filter Hypothesis, also proposed by Krashen (1987), places an emphasis on equipping students with a high level of motivation, self-confidence, good self-images, and a low level of anxiety in order to become successful in second language acquisition (SLA). It has been observed that a combination of low motivation, low self-esteem, and debilitating anxiety can raise the students' affective filter. The filter will then form a ‘mental block’ and obstruct the acquisition of comprehensible input. Therefore, what teachers should do to prepare the best environment to support their students' learning is

to design tasks that are low-filter-oriented so that readers can read in a carefree state.

In addition to the provision of reading materials and environments in support of language acquisition, 'enjoyment' and 'quantity' are equally important to success in reading, as pointed out by Nuttall (1996). According to her, people who fail to make progress in reading are being trapped in a 'vicious circle.' These readers read slowly, do not enjoy reading, read less, and end up unable to understand what has been read. To help them get out of such a depressing cycle, the teacher needs to encourage wider reading. This is because the more students read then the better they understand the text. Once readers read with enjoyment, then unconsciously they read faster.

Effective reading lessons should, therefore, include four aspects for reading lessons: comprehensible materials, low-anxiety atmosphere, enjoyment, and sufficient quantity of reading to enhance readers' competency. As a result, these aspects are among the major components of the ER activities in the experiment reported in this paper.

How to Organize ER Activities

To provide an enriched learning experience for language acquisition, the aforementioned underlying framework of comprehensible input, low-filtered environment, enjoyment, and quantity are eminent. Generally, in an ER context, students read large quantities of self-selected materials that are within their linguistic capability. The purpose of reading is for general comprehension, pleasure, or information. The best-known 'top ten principles of ER' identified by Day and Bamford (1998: 7-8) seem to satisfy all the mentioned components as they provide an environment that is reader-friendly. Detailed guidelines are as follows:

1. Students read as much as possible.
2. A variety of materials on a wide range of topics are available so as to encourage reading for different reasons and in different ways.

3. Students select what they want to read.
4. The purposes of reading are usually related to pleasure, information, and general understanding.
5. Reading is its own reward.
6. Reading materials are well within the linguistic competence of the students in terms of vocabulary and grammar.
7. Reading is individual and silent.
8. Reading speed is usually faster.
9. Teachers orient students to the goals of the programme, explain the methodology, keep track of what each student reads, and guide students in how to make the most out of the program.
10. The teacher is a role model for the students in terms of reading.

Since developing a pure ER course for an existing language curriculum is not always practical, integrating it into a language course is a more doable alternative. A brief report of the inclusion of ER into a reading course for low-ability Thai university students in the subsequent part offers an example as well as some guidelines of how a flexible ER program can be implemented with EFL learners. The research findings and some suggestions on how the activities can be improved or implemented in similar contexts are also elaborated on.

Experiment of ER with Low-ability Learners

The 15-week experiment was conducted with 34 second-year non-English major students at Nakhon Pathom Rajabhat University. A random selection was conducted with students who had registered for the 'Fundamental Reading' course, the only English subject these students took in the first semester of the academic year 2007. Prior to the experiment, the participants took three sets of pretests developed by the researcher to assess their reading comprehension ability, reading speed, and comprehension of narratives.

The ER tasks were integrated into a reading class taught by the researcher. The classes met for three consecutive 50-minute periods each week. The first part of the class was devoted to instruction of reading strategies; the second was used for motivating activities, *e.g.* sharing what students had read, exchanging views on characters, plots, genres, and lessons from stories as well as collecting some new words; and the third was spent on silent reading of simplified materials of students' interests. The students were also required to read as much as possible out of class and record the amounts of reading they had undertaken as well as complete an attitude survey after they had finished each book. Each of them was then interviewed to make sure if they had indeed performed the claimed reading and to crosscheck the data provided in the self-recorded surveys.

At the end of the experiment, all the recorded amounts of each reader's reading were totalled. Analysis of these data revealed that the lowest and highest quantities of reading were 79 and 481 pages, respectively. Based on a middle range of 250 pages, these readers were subsequently divided into two groups with 17 readers in each group. The first group, 'heavy readers,' read an average of 364 pages, while the second group, 'light readers,' read only 147 pages on average. The categorization of readers also affected subsequent statistical procedures as all the collected data were compared to identify differences between those who read more and those who read less. Apart from concluding reading amounts and responses to attitude surveys, the researcher also administered a posttest with the students using the pretest one more time at the end of the 15-week reading engagement.

Research Findings

Results of the data analysis using t-test statistics showed that, in fact, prior to the treatment, these two groups of readers were of the same ability in reading comprehension, reading speed, and comprehension of narratives. However, by the time the posttest was administered, the 'heavy' group had improved with statistical differences as evidenced by their scores of the reading comprehension ability test. Also, the data confirmed that reading around one and a half page per day (147 pages in total over 15

weeks) did not improve a reader's reading proficiency, whereas reading three to four pages a day (average 364 pages) did. As for reading speed, either reading one page or up to four pages accelerated a reader's reading pace but within different ranges. Regarding comprehension of narratives, both groups were found to have equal posttest mean scores, thus reflecting that their understanding of the stories they had read did not differ with statistical significant.

With regard to reading motivation, the aspects that were rated relatively high following the readers' corresponding reading amounts consisted of the desire to continue reading although not assigned, personal like of English, and interest in reading. Some aspects that showed a rising tendency but at a lower degree included confidence in reading (moderately high) and reading from own initiative (considerably high). The last set of reading motives were shown to have an inclination towards going up, but the degrees were less consistent across the 15 weeks of treatment. These aspects included enjoyment and pleasure from reading and benefits of reading. The enjoyment and pleasure from reading may have depended more on the selections of books.

Major reasons that inspired readers in the low groups to read their first 50, 100, and 150 pages were identified as their desire to improve language skills, enjoyment of the story, and selection of an appropriate book. Similarly but with a different order, the aspects that motivated readers to read during their initial stage of engagement in the 'heavy group' were appropriate books, enjoyment from reading, and desire to improve language skills. It is noteworthy that from 200 pages upwards, enjoyment from the story was the only reason the readers posed as their most important reason of their continued reading.

Although the subjects in this study read considerably lower amounts when compared to others EFL students in other contexts as reported in previous studies, their reading ability and particularly motivation to read were enhanced. The study findings revealed that positive attitudes towards reading evidently increased in relation to the reading amounts the students had covered. Such finding is seen as promising as motivation has already been

identified as an essential factor that strongly attracts students to reading engagement.

Implications for Language Instruction

The fact that the students/readers themselves have indicated that ER is a particularly valuable means that can motivate them to read and continue the reading habit voluntarily and on their own is encouraging for language teachers. This in itself seems effective enough to start with as, once students have developed the desire to read, the language features or skills can be enhanced just by their mere exposure to the language in the books. Derived mainly from comments provided by the participants at the end of the experiment and the research findings, the following suggestions are made for an ER program. Additionally, some guidelines are carefully considered for further implementation of ER projects with EFL learners who share similar backgrounds and educational contexts.

1. Organizing ER activities as a part of a language curriculum

It would be more suitable that ER tasks are integrated directly into a language course rather than be taught as a separate extra-curriculum activity. The major reason is due to the nature of reading development, which cannot be accomplished within a short period of time. Readers themselves can become discouraged, and they can simply give up reading at any moment, especially those with a low proficiency who more commonly face considerable difficulties making sense of the texts. There are numerous reasons why readers stop reading. For example, in this study, half of the participants were not successful and could only achieve an average of 147 pages although they themselves desperately wanted to get better grades for the course. Difficulties in reading cause anxiety among readers, and if there is nothing important that is worth their attempt, these readers tend to stop the task at any random point of time. Therefore, if the reading assignment is not integrated into a course and if there is no teacher in charge, the students may easily disappear from the reading group any time.

2. Incorporating ER into a reading course

The best course to incorporate ER is within any reading course, although previous research has found that several skills can be enhanced by reading in quantity. The main benefits resulting from integrating this pleasure-oriented reading include the following:

First, for lower-ability readers, ER allows them to use reading strategies correctly. Although readers in this study did reveal that the instruction of reading strategies was useful and helped them read better and faster, most complained that they could not make full use of it with their course books. For instance, they were unable to guess word meanings, read for main ideas, and interpret or summarize some parts. The main reason given by them was the texts were too difficult for them to apply the taught strategies. On the other hand, with their i+1 texts, they would be able to read more strategically, similar to their L1 reading. For instance, they were able to guess the meanings of words as there were more known than unknown words and read for general comprehension. They were also able to identify the subjects, main verbs, and some modified phrases as the structures were not too complicated. The confidence arising from the readers' experience with fluent reading of comprehensible texts can be extended to the reading of their course book, which is the main purpose of the course.

Second, additional reading can be likened to a bridge for transferring the readers' positive attitudes and motivations, language knowledge, and reading strategies. The following statements are taken from the participants' reflections referring to their early stage of reading:

- *It was very difficult as I didn't know many words. When I read more it became easier and faster. This made me feel like continuing another book.*
- *At first, I didn't like it at all. After was able to read faster and understand it, I began to like it.*
- *I became a reading lover unconsciously.*
- *I read better and understand more so I would like to continue with another one.*

- *I am proud to be able to read hundreds of pages in English in limited time, so I'd like to read more.*
- *It is unbelievable that I can read in English. Before learning this subject, I did not like English at all. I could not translate it and did not know many words. Now I'm very glad that I can read.*

All these sentiments signify the meaning of a 'bridge' to which ER has been referred and with which it has been compared. Briefly speaking, despite reading easy books, most participants in this study, during their initial stage of reading, had negative attitudes toward reading in English. After frequent engagement with narratives, they became increasingly positive to continued reading while developing their knowledge of words and strategies. Although these readers still had limited vocabulary, the reading experience had made them feel more confident at managing their course books.

Third, for high proficiency readers, additional reading is recommended as it allows them to make full use of their potential. Apart from beginning with comprehensible texts to accelerate fluent reading, students should also be encouraged to read authentic materials, especially those accessible *via* the Internet. The frequent and higher quantities of reading will boost these readers' confidence to expose themselves to more challenging texts, thus increasing their positive attitudes and reading motivation.

Finally, a combination of strategy training and reading texts of interest strengthens the effectiveness of the reading course in making preparation for skillful readers. Generally, a typical reading course is intensive-reading oriented, *i.e.* students read fewer, shorter, and more difficult texts in detail, followed by, among other things, linguistic enhancement in the form of grammar exercises, vocabulary, and text analysis. The purpose of the reading is for a complete and detailed understanding of the texts, which is basically considered 'Reading for Academic Purposes.' While students learn how to use effective reading skills overtly from those lessons, they also need the practice of reading in large volume to coordinate and organize the skills and strategies already acquired in order to read

texts from a wide range of sources to achieve academic requirements (Carrell and Carson, 1997).

3. Providing appropriate materials to suit readers' interests

Books were a main reason that effectively initially attracted and subsequently motivated the readers in this study to read extensively. According to the participants, books that were appealing to them contained easy vocabulary, had reasonable plots, included lots of sensible pictures, and were particularly easy to read. In fact, when individual readers choose appropriate books, that is, containing $i+1$, they will find their reading experience a lot happier. When a story is comprehensible, the reader is more likely to find it interesting, enjoyable, and even pleasurable. In contrast, difficulties or problems with vocabulary, comprehension, or boredom occurring from making a wrong choice of books can turn off any reader. Therefore, choosing the right book to read can solve most of the reading problems. As evidenced in the findings of the present study, following a reader's own interests helps make reading a successful and even fun-filled experience.

To serve the readers' various interests, sufficient stock and availability of reading materials is very important. There should be a variety of text genres at all levels—from beginner to advanced levels. If readers are satisfied with the books they select, then reading problems will be reduced. Books at the beginner levels should contain interesting and sensible graphic illustrations to aid comprehension. Most of the poor readers in this study relied heavily on pictures as a means to comprehend the stories. However, a number of participants complained about the length of some books. In general, short stories are good particularly for poor readers as it yields these readers with an opportunity to gain a sense of accomplishment once they have finished the book, which, in turn, may stimulate them to move on to the next book. On the contrary, longer reading materials have a tendency to bore them and make them lose their concentration. Hence, it is important that a sufficient number of low-level books are available to serve the poor readers' requirements.

4. Using collaborative activities as appropriate

Sharing among peers has both advantages and disadvantages. In this study, peer assistance was raised throughout the 15 weeks of reading engagement as a reason for many readers' continuation of reading. Responses from the study participants have suggested that peer recommendations can be a source of inspiration for them to read a particular book, generate cooperation among group members, and create enjoyment, sharing, and a sense of belonging to a learning community. However, the findings have indicated that assembling students from time to time in class was not always productive due to a number of reasons. For example, an inequality of knowledge can make less able readers feel disadvantaged, which in turn makes them unwilling to share with the others. Other unfavorable factors include uncooperative relationships among group members, doubts of peers' explanations or knowledge, social chat, and disagreement among members over an issue. The pros and cons of collaboration among peers signify that this ER activity should be adopted with great care to ensure a fruitful outcome.

Recommendations for adopting peer cooperation in terms of pedagogical preparations include the following:

- setting clear purposes for implementing the tasks, *e.g.* to motivate more reading, to share knowledge and to share what has been read;
- limiting the time and specifying procedures for each task;
- emphasizing an individual's contribution to the group works, so all members are required to participate;
- choosing the tasks that are relevant to the books that students are reading so each has to read in order to share something from their own perspectives;
- organizing activities systematically so that students will learn that the teachers are serious with their performance;
- providing advice on efficient organization of group work.

5. Providing support

It is essential that teachers take the reading sessions seriously and be ready to provide assistance whenever a reader encounters a reading problem. When the teachers lower their expectations, the students intuitively realize this and then lessen their efforts accordingly. Organizing meetings regularly with an individual student is an effective way to ensure that everyone in the group is tended to. It is possible that poor readers may avoid talking to the teacher; therefore, making them realize that the purpose of the meeting is to provide assistance, not to check their comprehension, is crucial. Giving moral support, expressing sympathy, and suggesting ways to solve their problems are always effective in helping poor readers. If they are not too low in their language ability (real beginners) nor have any problems with time, and in particular if they still want to improve their language skills, then problems are definitely solvable. Most importantly, close supervision and guidance are necessary; otherwise, students may feel lost, withdraw themselves, and eventually give up engaging in the reading activities.

6. Making reading engagement a continuation

Teachers should make reading and its follow-up activities a class routine. It is reasonable to organize a weekly sharing arena for all readers so that when each finishes one book, he or she can share experiences with other members. If there is no activity on what has been read, some students may feel that it is meaningless to read just for fun, especially at the beginning of the project. Sharing in any form—writing reports, drawing and narrating, or just talking—makes reading meaningful and encourages further reading.

Preferably, the ER project should be organized across all levels of students whether in schools or at universities. At the university level, for instance, students should, from their first year onwards, be encouraged to read as this exposure to English texts increases the chances of early language acquisition. Students could be asked to read online, which stimulates even more enthusiasm because both good and poor students, being born into the age of

technology, can easily access and read authentic texts from all over the world. Such experience can make them realize that English is something that constitutes a crucial part in their life. Moreover, regular reading practices benefit students when they search academic texts for their own assignments. Teachers should keep yearly files of each of their students and pass them on to the next teachers who take responsibility for the subsequent instructional activities in the subsequent years.

7. Ensuring students have time to read

According to the study of participants' reflections, availability of reading time was, to a great extent, a major factor affecting their overall amount of reading. Where the majority of students take responsibility for themselves by working overtime, the teachers' expectations in terms of the amount of reading should be adjusted to more realistically meet their availability. Sometimes it is necessary that free time at school or university should be reserved solely for this purpose, *e.g.* half an hour after lunch, before the class begins, or everyday after class. A number of readers in this study mentioned that reading in class was good in that they had more time to read.

In contrast, where students have less of a burden and more time to spend on reading, the teachers should set more demanding expectations. In this study, the participants who read more than 400 pages stated that the main reason they read substantially was free time. Simply put, they had nothing to do and reading was one way to kill the time. However, it should be noted that their real motivation came mainly from an enthusiasm to know what was going on in the stories. Among these more enthusiastic participants, one reader read the same story entitled 'The Pearl' four times just to know why the pearls end up in the fish's stomach. She was very glad to be able to understand the story by herself and to share her discovery with the teacher.

Conclusion

On the overall, ER lends itself as a favorable tool in English language teaching. Put another way, ER activities should be placed

as a major supporting part of a language curriculum, particularly in reading courses. Essential components that help strengthen the effectiveness of the activities include availability of appropriate materials, teacher support, peer collaboration, continuation of activities, and the time reserved for reading. It is worth noting at this point that all these components seem to be equally important and that placing an emphasis on some aspects at the expense of the others is likely to depreciate the overall achievement of the project.

Based on the experiment, reading one and a half pages of a simplified reader can help poor readers increase their reading speed and comprehension of narratives, while reading more than that enhances not only those two aspects of reading ability but also reading comprehension of academic articles. Furthermore, reading at least one and a half pages a day can boost readers' positive attitudes and motivation, with a greater amount of reading leading to a higher level of motivation. Therefore, one way to help low-ability learners catch up with the mainstream of the class is to assign supplementary reading and provide reading supports on a regular basis. The extent to which the bridge (ER) can reduce the gap between the low-ability readers' current ability and the expected ability level depends mainly on the quantities of their exposure to the language input, particularly through reading. Such quantities can be made possible through three main components: comprehensible input, low-filtered environment, and enjoyment language learners and gain, and then sustain, simply from reading extensively.

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