THE EFFECTS OF EXTENSIVE READING ON OVERALL LANGUAGE ACHIEVEMENT IN THE FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

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Abstract - The aim of this study is to investigate the effects of in-class extensive reading on the foreign language achievement level of the learners at a private university preparatory school of English in Istanbul, Turkey. An in-class extensive reading program was conducted with 37 participants aiming to examine if extensive reading performed within the class hours would make any impacts on students’ foreign language achievement. The treatment group (n=18) received extensive reading sessions where they were required to pick readers of their own level of language proficiency and interest from a set of readers of different levels and genres and just read without any pre-, while, or post reading activities-to minimize stress and make reading more enjoyable- for about 30 minutes every school day for a period of 7 weeks. The post test results indicated that, although there had to be some devotion in terms of covering the school syllabus in the extensive reading class, there were significant gains in overall language achievement, especially in reading comprehension and grammar skills of the extensive reading group compared to the control group (n=19).

Index Terms - extensive reading, foreign language learning, foreign language achievement, graded readers.

I. INTRODUCTION

According to the input hypothesis, suggested by Krashen (1982), reading is very often considered an effective source of comprehensible and meaningful input which is the sufficient condition for the unconscious acquisition of the target language [9]. The reading hypothesis by Krashen (1993), provides further support for reading as a crucial means of language instruction by basically stating that the more we read in a TL the greater our vocabulary will be [10].

As Nation (2009) puts it, reading provides meaning-focused input where learners focus on the meaning of the text and there are only a few language features beyond their proficiency level. Extensive reading is an important source of meaning-focused input which means engaging students in large amounts of reading. Reading also provides the learners with a context for language-focused learning which involves focusing on the language items deliberately. Furthermore, reading is also a source of fluency development which takes place when there is almost no new language items to master and when the goal is to make the best use of what has been mastered before. Fluency development in reading, as well as in writing, is often ignored because teaching and learning something new usually has the priority in language courses. However, fluency in reading is really essential in developing reading comprehension skills in the target language since increased fluency assists comprehension and ultimately improves language learning attitude. When only 2-5% of the vocabulary or the grammar items are unknown, this provides meaning-focused input conditions. On the other hand, having almost no unknown vocabulary or grammar structures provides fluency development conditions [17]. Since it tends to be relaxing and students are allowed to pick materials which are based on their language proficiency levels and interests, extensive reading (ER) is sometimes called pleasure reading (PR) [3], free reading (FR) [11], sustained silent reading (SSR) [8] or drop everything and read (DEAR) [17]. ER has been drawing growing attention from many ESL/EFL educators and researchers for being an effective and efficient means of reading instruction in English language teaching [5, 6, 14, 17].

Learning via extensive reading is mostly incidental, that is, learners focus on the story rather than the language items. That is why quantity of input which involves adequate opportunities for substantial vocabulary repetition is required to foster learning gains. The quantity of input is meant to be around 500,000 running words in a year, which equals to about 25 graded readers per year [17]. Extensive reading could take place within or outside the class time, which in both cases require careful planning as well as attentive monitoring. In a study by Day and Bamford (1997), extensive reading is characterised as “involving a large quantity of varied, self-selected, enjoyable reading at a reasonably fluent speed” [3]. In other words, extensive reading is defined as a procedure of providing students with “the time, encouragement, and materials to read pleasurably, at their own level, as many books as they can, without the pressures of testing or marks” [2].

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

There have been numerous researchers who have studied the effects of extensive reading on language
learning in ESL/EFL contexts, and many studies have found that extensive reading benefits the language learners in numerous ways including their reading proficiency, reading habits, reading fluency, vocabulary retention as well as writing and spelling (Nation, 1997). Besides the gains in different language skills, learners often experience delight and positive feelings in language learning as extensive reading encourages them for further reading and study [11].

Elley and Mangubhai (1983) carried out a comprehensive study in the 1980s. They investigated the impacts of an 8-month reading program (Book Flood) on second language receptive skills. The participants were 380 4th and 5th graders from 12 schools in Fiji. The study compared the two Book Flood groups and the control group. With the SBE group, the students were read aloud 5 highinterest stories by the teacher and were asked to complete follow-up activities such as art work or roleplaying. The students in the SSR group read self-selected readers silently for about 30 minutes in class with no follow-up activities. To assess the effect of the intervention, the researchers applied a Reading Comprehension test, English Structures Test and the Word Recognition Test as the Pre-and post-tests. The results indicated that the experiment/"Book Flood" groups scored much better (over twice) than the students in the control group in reading comprehension skill, and they also showed a 15-month reading growth during this 8-month reading-based program. The researchers conducted another one-year follow-up study with the very same students. The same tests and methods were applied.

As a result of these two studies, the researchers concluded that L2 students who were continuously exposed to a good variety of highly interesting story books showed better progress in not only reading comprehension but also vocabulary growth and writing skills [4]. Robb and Susser (1989) explored the impact of extensive reading on the development of reading comprehension, reading skills, reading rate, and motivation. The participants of this one-year study were 125 Japanese university students taking an EFL course. The students in the experimental group were assigned to read books from the set of SRA (Science Research Associates) Reading Laboratory Kits and to answer the follow-up comprehension questions during each class period of 90 minutes. They were also supposed to read 500 pages minimum at home and to write short summaries during the treatment period. The pre- and post-tests results indicated that the experimental group reached a reading speed significantly faster than the control group. Additionally, the experimental group developed significantly higher scores on “Guessing vocabulary from context” and “Understanding the important facts” [18]. In her study, Tum (1995) was mainly interested in the effects of extensive reading on vocabulary improvement and reading comprehension. At the end of the eight-week extensive reading outside the classroom, the findings of the post-test results showed that there was a significant difference in reading comprehension and vocabulary performance in favour of the experimental groups [20].

As a part of their research, Mason and Krashen (1997) worked with a group of “reluctant” EFL students in a Japanese college as their experiment group. They wanted to investigate if failures of EFL classes could improve with the support of an extensive reading treatment. At the end of the semester an average of 30 books were completed with the participants’ significant gains in a cloze-test, which was also given as a pre-test. Besides, they submitted significantly better book summaries to the judges at the end of the intervention [15].

In her study with 100 Japanese beginner and intermediate university students, Hayashi (1999) investigated the impact of extensive reading on the learners’ reading comprehension and vocabulary gain. The class met in two 45-minute sessions a week for nine months to cover a textbook involving newspaper articles. Subjects were also supposed to read at least 100 pages from self-selected readers accompanied with summaries and book reports as assignments. At the end of the study, both the beginning and intermediate level experiment group students showed gains in their TOEFL reading and vocabulary test scores [7].

In their study, Lao and Krashen (2000) investigated how literature reading affected L2 reading competence in terms of vocabulary learning, reading rate and reading attitudes in the EFL classroom. The assessments indicated that the reading speed of the experimental group showed greater improvement than the control group. The results of the vocabulary tests also showed that experimental students made clear and significant improvement in vocabulary [13]. Yang (2001), carried out a study with 120 adult learners from Hong Kong to examine the effects of reading novels, especially mystery novels, on English proficiency level and motivation. Besides their regular textbook, the experimental group read two mystery novels. The study lasted for 15 weeks with 3-hour weekly sessions. When the results of the pre- and post-tests including 100 sentence completion items were compared, it was concluded that the experimental group students showed a greater language gain than the students in the control group, almost twice as much as the control group [22].

In a study by Tanaka (2007), a 5-month home reading program, the materials for which were created by the class instructor, was run with a group of Japanese high school EFL learners and its effects were...
Yamashita (2008) ran a study to investigate the effects of extensive reading on different aspects of foreign language ability, especially on general reading skills and linguistic skills. With an experiment group of 31 Japanese students attending an EFL reading course at a university, she conducted a 15-week extensive reading program. The class met once a week for 90 minutes. Students were to read self-selected readers from a set of about 500 readers of various levels inside and outside of the class and submit a book report in the L1, Japanese, as a requirement for credit. The result of the pre- and post-tests were examined and the difference for the extensive reading treatment was significant. That is, this extensive reading program resulted in significant improvements in general reading ability of the learners. However, Placement/Progress pre- and post-test results indicate that the extensive reading program did not have much impact on the linguistic ability of the learners [21].

In a recent study, Chen, Chen, Chen, and Wey (2013) investigated the impacts of extensive reading of e-books on the EFL learners’ English performance with 89 Technological University freshmen. The treatment group were encouraged to read materials from three e-book library collections for ten weeks while the control group followed the regular syllabus only. The pre-and posttest results of reading and vocabulary tests showed that the students in the experiment group outperformed the control group [1]. In his comprehensive research, Yannaz (2015) analyzed the effects of extensive reading on reading comprehension, vocabulary and grammar knowledge, and attitudes towards reading with forty 9th grade students. The study lasted for 10 weeks, during which students were to read one book per week followed by class discussions when the reading was completed. The books were assigned by the teacher. The pre- and post-test results suggested that the extensive reading treatment significantly improved the reading comprehension skills, vocabulary and grammar knowledge of the participants in the experimental group [23].

Research Question

The current study was designed to find the answer to the following research question regarding in-class extensive reading and its relationship to foreign language achievement: What is the effect of extensive reading on the overall language achievement in the foreign language classroom?

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Research Setting

The study was conducted at the Preparatory School of English of a private university in Istanbul, Turkey. Students who have passed the university exam are required to take and pass a proficiency test of English in order to verify that their level of English is adequate to follow the instructions in English in their departments. Those who fail the proficiency test need to attend English courses at the Preparatory school. These students sit another exam called a placement test to identify their proficiency level. There are four modules formed according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), which are A1 and A2, B1 and B2. Each module lasts 8 weeks, so students placed in A1 can finish their English language education at the end of the school year as long as they fulfill the requirements of each module and pass the exit exams at the end of each module. Students are required to take 3 written achievement exams and a speaking achievement exam per module besides performing their portfolio assignments every week. Written achievement exams consist of listening, reading, grammar, vocabulary and writing sections while the speaking exam involves 3 tasks administered by two teachers and rated independently. Exit exams assess four main language skills, namely listening, reading, writing and speaking. Those whose overall average rate is a minimum of 70% are considered as to be qualified to start their department education.

B. Participants of the Study

As the participants of the study, there were 37 Turkish EFL students in two classes, 17 males and 20 females. They were all Turkish native speakers, aged 18-19 years old. They had been learning English intensively for about 6 months before the study and were at B1 level. It was their 4th week in the B1
module when they took the Achievement Exam 2 as a pre-test to identify the two classes out of 24 with the closest results and taught by the same teachers. Class 1 was assigned to be the control group (n=19), and Class 2 (n=18) was assigned as the experimental group.

C. Materials

A total of 81 graded readers of various genres and grade levels were provided for the in-class extensive reading program with the experimental group. The readers were from different publishers’ series of readers, such as Oxford Bookworms Library, Penguin Readers, Heinemann Guided Readers and Macmillan Readers.

D. Instruments for collecting data

Achievement Exam 2, consisting of listening, reading, grammar, vocabulary, and writing sections, was administered to all the students at the school, and this was used as the pre-test to see the English achievement level of both the control and the experimental groups. Achievement Exam 5, also consisting of listening, reading, grammar, vocabulary, and writing sections, was considered to be the post-test to identify if there was any impact of the treatment. No pre-reading tasks, follow-up activities, or book reports were asked from students in order to make sure that the treatment was stress-free.

E. Procedure

Before the study was conducted, necessary approval was taken from the administration, because the intervention would be conducted within the class time, which meant having to catch up with the syllabus whose content the students were to cover for their achievement tests every other week. The procedure used for the extensive reading is detailed in Figure 1. The graded readers box was kept locked in a locker very close to the experimental classroom, and the instructor would take the box to the class with them when the extensive reading sessions were scheduled and put it back to the same locker when the session was over. Students did not keep the books with them; they were given the books they had been reading at the beginning of the session and were asked to put the books back to the box at the end of the session. They would pick another one of their interest and level when they were done with a book and asked to note down the name and level of the book when returning it on a log which is kept to track the number and level of the books read.

- Extensive reading should be undertaken for at least 30 minutes
- Students should only read their readers, not any other work.
- When students finish a book, they should note the name and level of the book next to their names in the log.
- Students themselves should pick another book of their interest and level when they finish a book.
- Students should not take the books with them after the session.
- At the end of the sessions, students should put the books back in the box.
- The box and the log should be placed in the locker after the session.

Figure 1: Extensive reading program guideline

Students were not allowed to do any other work during the sessions. The teacher also read, too, to set a good example when the students were reading. Students were told to pick the readers below the level they assumed they were at first. They were advised to read the very first paragraph(s) of the book to see how comfortable they felt in understanding the language, remembering that there should be no more than 2-3 unknown words in about 100 words. They were also told to read several books of the same level before they felt competent enough to go on reading higher level graded readers. The treatment took 7 weeks with a couple of days off due to national holidays. At the end of the treatment, a total of 118 books were read with an average of 6.2 books per student. Although there were some slow-readers who covered as few as 3 or 4 books in 7 weeks, there were also several students who could read as many as 9 books in the same period. At the end of the 7th week of the extensive reading program, Achievement Exam 5 was scheduled to be given. This test was taken as the post-test of our treatment to figure out whether there was any difference between the test results of the extensive reading group and the control group.

F. Data Analysis

The results obtained from pre-test (Achievement Exam 2) and post-test (Achievement Exam 5) for both the control group and the intervention group were analysed using the statistical software program SPSS v.20. The results of the achievement exams were analyzed for normality of distribution. Independent samples T-test and Mann-Whitney U-test analyses were done to identify whether or not the
extensive reading intervention within the classroom resulted in any significant difference in students’ overall English achievement level.

IV. RESULTS

To identify which tests to apply, the normality of the distribution of the pre-test total scores was checked. The pre-test total scores were found to be normally distributed (see Table 1). Given normal distribution, an independent sample t-test was applied to means of the control and the experiment groups’ pre-test results in order to identify whether the difference between the means of the two groups was significant or not.

As can be seen in Table 2, the pre-test means of the control group (M=68.26) and the experimental group (M=68.78) were very close to each other. The analysis of the results with the independent sample t-test (p=0.90) also shows that there was no statistical significance of the difference between the groups in terms of overall English achievement level before the extensive reading treatment (see Table 3).

Table 1. Test of Normality for Pre-test Scores

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Kolmogorov-Smirnov Statistic</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
<th>Shapiro-Wilk Statistic</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pre-test</td>
<td>.098</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>.200</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>.523</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*. This is a lower bound of the true significance.

Table 2. Group Statistics of Pre-test Scores

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GROUP</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
<th>Std. Error Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Control Group</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>68.26</td>
<td>11.82</td>
<td>2.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experiment Group</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>68.78</td>
<td>14.17</td>
<td>3.34</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. Independent Samples t-test of Pre-test Scores

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Levene's Test of Equality of Variances</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Sig. (2-tailed)</th>
<th>Std. Error Difference</th>
<th>95% Confidence Interval of the Difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Equal variances assumed</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>.45</td>
<td>-.12</td>
<td>35.00</td>
<td>.90</td>
<td>-.51</td>
<td>4.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equal variances not assumed</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-.12</td>
<td>33.18</td>
<td>.91</td>
<td>-.51</td>
<td>4.30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4. Tests of Normality of Distribution of Post-test Scores

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Kolmogorov-Smirnov Statistic</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
<th>Shapiro-Wilk Statistic</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Post-test</td>
<td>.103</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>.200</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>.063</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*. This is a lower bound of the true significance.

Table 5. Group Statistics of Pre-test Scores

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GROUP</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
<th>Std.Error Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Post-test</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control Group</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>65.89</td>
<td>11.99</td>
<td>2.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experiment Group</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>74.44</td>
<td>10.27</td>
<td>2.42</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

After the seven-week extensive reading program conducted within the class time for about 30 minutes per school day, students were given the Achievement Exam 5, which is regarded as the post-test in this study. The post-test scores were found to be normally distributed (see Table 4). Since the distribution was normal, the means of the pre-test and the post-test were compared in order to investigate if the extensive reading treatment had any impact on students’ language achievement. T-test group statistics show that the post-test results of the experimental group (M=74.44) is numerically higher than the mean of the post-test results (M=65.89) of the control group (see Table 5). To test if the difference is
statistically significant, an independent samples t-test was performed.
The independent samples t-test finding indicates that the difference between post-test results of the treatment group and the contrast group is statically significant (p=0.03) (see Table 6).

Table 6. Independent Samples t-test of Post-test Scores

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Levene’s Test for Equality of Variances</th>
<th>t-test for Equality of Means</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Equal variances assumed</td>
<td>Sig. (2-Mean tailed)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>df</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sig. Difference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Std. Error Difference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Error 95% Confidence Interval of the Difference Lower Upper</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Post-test | F | Sig. | t     | df | .03 | -2.32 | 35.00 | .03 | -8.55 | 3.68 | 16.02 | -1.08 |
| Equal variances assumed | | .03 | .87 | | | | | | | | |
| Not assumed | | | | | | | | | | | |

V. DISCUSSION

According to the results of this study, extensive reading with pressure-free features appears to have positive effects on language achievement level. When the Tables 2 and 5 are examined, it can be seen that the extensive reading group increased the achievement test mean from M=68.78 to M=74.44, while the control group did not show any increase (indeed, there was a slight drop in the mean from M=68.26 to M=65.89). The difference between the pre-test results of the groups was not significant prior to the treatment (see Table 3), whereas the post-test comparisons of the results of the groups (see Table 6) indicate that the extensive reading treatment seems to have a considerable effect (p=.03) on the students’ overall language learning achievement. It should be noted that there were some concerns about the structure of this research at the beginning. Because the extensive reading would take place within the classroom during the instruction time, students in the experimental group would receive less school instruction than the control group, and the content of the instruction was to be asked in the achievement exams, therefore there had to be some reduction in time devoted to the teaching the subject material of the course. These concerns remained until the Achievement 5 (post-test) results were announced, when it was demonstrated that the concerns were unnecessary, since just the contrary to the assumptions happened to be true: students in the extensive reading group did much better than the group who were bound to a scheduled curriculum. Whatever the students gained from extensive reading seems to have outweighed what they missed from their syllabus. Maybe, it could be suggested that more exposure to the language, even though it was simplified, fostered what has been learned and reinforced the basic language structure of the language and formed a stronger basis for the learners to take the next step of language learning more confidently.

VI. IMPLICATIONS

In this study, although there were some concerns at the beginning, an extensive reading program was deployed in the classroom, which meant devotion of some classtime. This meant that students would have less time to cover the syllabus content, which was asked in the exam, which would actually be our post-test used to see if there was any difference in the performance of the extensive reading group compared to the control group. However, there was no need to worry, as results showed that reading compensated for what students missed and added more to their competence. So, inserting the extensive reading into the classroom should not be concerning, as the current study suggests.

As Krashen’s Affective Filter Hypothesis suggests, during the extensive reading sessions, they were experiencing a language exposure with less stress since they were not asked to do any tests, quizzes or fill in any review or report papers, which was one of the distinctive features of this study. Besides, they were given the chance to pick the text they liked the content of and felt more comfortable with the level, which again matches with Krashen’s Comprehensible Input Theory. Thus, the present approach to extensive reading suggests that we should just provide our students with an environment for them merely to read. This actually puts almost no burden on either the students or the teacher, even though the gains are impressive. In order to have success in an extensive reading program, there are certain requirements to fulfill. First of all, there needs to be a large amount of reading - one book per week is recommended - of materials which are lower than the learners actual level of language. The reading materials should be of
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A variety of topics and genres. It should be the students who pick what to read, teachers can provide guidance if asked by the learners. Reading should be fast, rather than slow, so any task detaining students’ reading pace should be avoided. Reading should be individual and silent. The teacher, in order to be a role model and a good example of a reader should also read with the students, preferably a book from the class set.

Moreover, some participants may tend to take the extensive reading sessions as free time activity since reading is mostly considered so, and may be reluctant to read but prefer to do some other assignments. Therefore, participants must be persuaded to take these sessions seriously because this is not a free time activity but a course requirement. So, there may need to be a good monitoring for the sake of the application. Besides, monitors should also read themselves in order to model the desirable behaviour. Despite the consistently positive results of extensive reading programs, there still seem to be doubts as to its effectiveness: study after study says it works, but very few language programs have adopted it [12]. Thus, with another study which approved extensive reading, this low burden but high gain approach to reading should be implemented in foreign language classrooms. Reading can be a good source of not only learning but also enjoyment. It provides a source for both establishing previously learned grammar and vocabulary and learning new language items. Moreover, with the feeling of achievement and success in using the language, it can yield further enthusiasm in learning more. As the learner improves in seeing reading as a means of gaining world knowledge, the enjoyment can increase, which accelerates further learning.

VII. LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The number of subjects in the control group and the treatment group was only 37. For more reliable research findings the number of participants needs to be increased. The period of extensive reading treatment was also very short. More significant findings could be reached if there could be more time when implementing the extensive reading program. For extensive reading, there should always be a good variety of resources. Towards the end of the study, there were some demands for more books, which meant students would lose interest in reading if the study continued for some more time with the same set of readers. Besides readers, since the aim is to make the students read what they like to read, there should have been more variety not only in terms of genres but also content. For instance, it would have been more appealing if there were not only readers but also some magazines, comics, graphic novels, etc. about different topics like music, sports, cinema (stars), etc. in the readers’ box in this study. The extensive reading study had a quasi-experimental research design. Since the experiment was to be conducted in an institution during the school day, participants could not be taken out of their original classes, so groups were assigned as classes rather than with random sampling. More reliable and valid results could be yielded with randomly assigned groups.

Since our learners are so much involved in technological improvements and better use of technological devices, extensive reading integrated with technology or internet could be more appealing to language learners. So, the effects of e-books or any other applications regarding reading should also be tested.

CONCLUSION

This study has clearly shown that extensive reading can be and should be implemented in a language classroom. Anyone concerned in language education, teachers, administrators or students should open-mindedly consider what benefits extensive reading would bring to the language learning experience of the students. Extensive reading should be embedded in the classroom teaching, as learners would benefit from it so much that it should not be left outside the classroom. Extensive reading should not be taken only as a free time activity, because it really is a serious, useful learning experience which should be valued in all terms and should be introduced to the classroom environment.

REFERENCES

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