Students' Perspectives Towards Extensive Reading Program At A College In Vietnam

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Abstract

Results from previous studies have recognized the importance of extensive reading (ER) in teaching English to second language learners. However, there is little research investigating the use of ER with non - English majors at college level. Hence, this study was conducted to discover if students hold attitudes towards ER in learning English - a compulsory subject at all tertiary institutions. Twenty Vietnamese students at a provincial college were invited to join the study for one semester (15 weeks). They got involved in an ER website (https://www.er-central.com) for 14 weeks. To collect the data, the researcher used semi-structured interviews. The results showed that most students held a positive attitude towards ER because of the establishment of reading habits and motivation, convenience, and linguistic competence. In contrast, negative attitudes on ER were also found in this study involving the lack of vocabulary and low interest in reading and dyslexia – a popular disorder. It is hoped that the findings of this study could partly contribute to the field of ER with further research.

Keywords: Extensive reading, reading comprehension, students' perspectives, dyslexia, reading habit.

1. Introduction

Reading comprehension is not only the full understanding of a text's meaning in a proper and efficient way but also the ability to answer comprehensive questions related to the text [1]. This means the processes of linguistics and cognition are involved in reading comprehension. Reading texts in English is more difficult since students need to fully understand the content in such language. To master reading comprehension, there are different techniques suggested by lots of scholars. Typically, two initial reading models, labeled as 'top-down' by [2] and 'bottom-up' by [3], originated from research that focused on reading within the context of English as a first language. These models had a substantial impact on shaping the comprehension of second language reading. They introduced two separate strategies for effectively interacting with text. The top-down processes encompassed higher-order tasks such as capturing the overall textual meaning and utilizing pre-existing mental structures or prior knowledge to enhance understanding. In contrast, the bottom-up processes encompassed activities often viewed as more foundational, involving the identification of individual words and the derivation of meaning from word or phrase definitions.

These two metaphors provided a clear representation of divergent directions in the reading process: one progressing from the reader to the text, and the other from the text to the reader.

Extensive reading (ER) has just been popular for the last two decades when a large number of books graded from A1 to C2 were available on different platforms such as book stores or online websites [4]. ER is considered as an approach to encourage students to establish the habit of reading so that they would attain not only knowledge related to various fields but also fluency and speed. By utilizing ER techniques, students are able to choose any reading materials as long as the level of the texts are matched with the ones in the classroom. Compared to intensive reading, ER is more relaxing since students can read their favorite topics.

ER is believed to improve not only students' reading skills but also other skills such as writing, speaking, and listening [4]. Once students practice reading regularly, they would gain knowledge related to various aspects as well as vocabulary. On a similar thought, [5] concludes that ER brings back three main benefits to the students including the improvements of reading speech, writing skill as well as the increase in students' motivation. Besides, ER is believed to be more effective than traditional reading since students are not restricted to choose and read their favorite materials as long as these materials are written in the language they are studying [6].

The practice of ER in English Language Teaching (ELT) has been popular worldwide due to its advantages. A comparative study conducted by [7] to seek for certain effectiveness of ER in second language learning. It is concluded that ER did have identifiable benefits once the reading resources are not restricted. In Indonesian context, a case study conducted by [8] shows that ER is necessary in ELT classrooms due to 5 main benefits involving fascinating activity, enjoyable learning atmosphere, vocabulary improvement, reading comprehension improvement and reading motivation. Besides, the participants also express their positive attitude towards the implementation of ER in ELT classrooms. To explore learners' perspectives on online ER during COVID-19 online learning period, [9] has carried out a qualitative study. The findings reveal that learners hold a positive attitude towards ER in terms of the variety of topics, the appropriateness of texts and levels, the usefulness of ER routines during research period and the convenience of ER program. Similarly, [10] and partner have investigated the impacts of ER on students' autonomy. According to the results, ER practice not only enhances learners' autonomy but also improves abilities in recognition of decision making, purpose setting, time allocating and self-evaluating. Besides, the majority of students reflect that their reading speed has also been increased.

Although various ER programs have been implemented in ELT contexts around the world, there is little research on the practice of ER in non-ELT classrooms. Hence, this study is proposed to explore teachers and students' attitudes towards the practice of ER in a non-ELT context.

2. Literature review

2.1. Definition of Extensive Reading

According to [11], (ER) is defined as an instructional method that promotes learners to engage in extensive reading with the aim of developing fluency in English or any other foreign language. This simple approach is based on the concept that the most efficient method for developing reading skills is through actual reading. What makes ER remarkable is that it provides students with the freedom to choose both the type and quantity of reading materials. Nonetheless, it's crucial for instructors to ensure that the selected material matches the students' reading abilities. This method brings various benefits to students. For instance, it enables them to understand the core message of a text while experiencing great enjoyment and satisfaction from their reading. Furthermore, students are not obligated to finish every book they select; educators using the ER approach permit learners to abandon a book if they perceive it as too challenging or uninteresting.

Similarly, ER is referred to as an approach that teachers use to teach reading skill with the aim of improving students' linguistic proficiency through a large number of materials [12]. This has been supported by [13] when they believe that once students participate in ER, they must read a large quantity of books or articles at a fast speed. The difference in the concept between [12] and [13] is that while [12] stresses on the improvement of linguistic proficiency, [13] think that students should read to gain general understanding regardless of the language itself.

In a different vein, [14] asserts that extensive reading is a language learning method whereby learners read a lot of easy, interesting books with little or no systematic attention to vocabulary and grammar. They are also concerned that the primary consideration for many researchers when determining whether their subjects are engaged in 'extensive reading' is whether they can readily understand and grasp the meanings and concepts within the text or not.

Overall, ER is understood and interpreted in different ways if it is relevant to certain contexts. ER could be described as the reading of as many books as possible to gain general knowledge or a teaching and learning approach to enhance students' linguistic skills. No matter what the definition is, ER plays an important role in teaching and learning since it assists students in establishing reading habits.

2.2. Benefits of Extensive Reading

Research shows that a large number of students prefer to play games on smart devices or watch videos on social media to read books [15]. Once students start to read extensively, they are able to comprehend the content of the text step by step as long as the routine is an ongoing process with the right level of materials. The task of ER is to encourage learners to engage in extensive reading and broaden their exposure to various materials, providing them with understandable content [15].

In the ER program, teachers' instruction is of great importance because students are diving into a loaf of chaotic books of various levels and find it tough to choose the relevant ones. Reading speed, fluency and vocabulary improvement are another advantages of ER due to the regular practice of reading which has been proved by [11] and [16]. This is due to the fact that when students read daily, they are familiar with the vocabulary with no hesitation in pronouncing the words. Hence, their reading speed along with the fluency would be much improved after a certain period of time. The students' vocabulary is much improved when students find the right strategy. For instance, some students might be interested in using mind maps to learn vocabulary while others are into using synonyms or acronyms.

[6] proposes that ER brings back not only motivation but also learner autonomy to students. When students participate in face-to-face learning in the classroom, they have to read the required books and materials assigned by the teacher. In contrast, when they are given freedom to choose the materials advised by the teacher, they will be more motivated to jump in the program and autonomous in their studies.

Another benefit of ER is connected with linguistic proficiency including writing, speaking, listening and grammar [16]. Research by [16] has revealed that those who practice reading novels for sake tend to be better in listening along with speaking. In [17] view, students are incapable of writing with complex and flexible grammar structures if they are unable to read. As a result, once the reading competence is improved, students would also get improvement in writing and grammar as a matter of fact.

Scholars worldwide hold different views on the pros of ER implemented in their specific contexts. To summarize, the most popular benefits of ER found are the improvement of reading comprehension, reading speed, motivation and learner autonomy, and linguistic proficiency.

2.3. Disadvantages of Extensive Reading

The first and foremost problem with ER is that students lack vocabulary which is the key barrier in reading comprehension [18]. Although it is believed that ER allows students to freely choose materials to read, students still report that the suggested materials were too difficult in pursuing the content of the texts. In addition, students with low academic scores also have trouble with understanding poems or stories in literature.

Another downside of ER is that students tend to be hesitant to read if the topics in the recommended books and materials are not amongst their interests [19]. Students have various preferences when it comes to ER; some might consider space exploration as the most priority topic for reading while others concern adventure. However, the topics in the coursebook might not match students' interests. Once teachers run an ER program in the classroom, it is better to suggest students choose the books or materials that are close to the topics since this equips students with knowledge and vocabulary which match the lessons.

Another problem of ER is that students cannot find authentic materials. The exposure to authentic resources in the EFL context is essential since it assists students in gaining knowledge along with the vocabulary in the actual world [19]. During the ER program, students are stimulated to find and read as many books as possible with the relevant level

of comprehension without concerning the authenticity of the language. This would be a dilemma since students will not have an opportunity to be exposed to the vocabulary or structures that the native speakers use.

Research conducted by [20] shows that a certain number of students express their low interest in ER when being asked to read the English texts. This is due to the limitation in vocabulary and the dependence on translation apps or websites. Besides, some students feel uncomfortable when being forced to join an ER program. As a result, these students just read the text and do the follow up reading comprehension activities in a superficial way.

There is no doubt that each issue holds both pros and cons and ER is not an exception. Specifically, when ER is being implemented in different contexts, new problems will rise. Students' lack of vocabulary, the hesitation to read, authentic materials and low interest in reading are amongst the popular problems of ER.

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants
The participants in this study were 20 freshmen majoring in Business and Administration at a local college in Vietnam. These students were 18 years of age with 12 females and 8 males. The results from the internal English test showed that their level of English proficiency was A2 based on the CEFR framework. The convenience sampling technique was used to guarantee the most level of comfort for both participants and researcher.

3.2. Materials
All reading materials were accessible online via the website https://www.er-central.com/, which was created by Extensive Reading Central, a non-profit organization dedicated to developing extensive reading and extensive listening approaches for second language (L2) learning. There were several reasons for selecting this website. Firstly, it offered a diverse selection of text genres on a wide range of topics, aligning well with the requirements of an extensive reading program. Additionally, it was designed to be user-friendly, providing clear instructions on how to effectively utilize the available resources. Lastly, it was freely accessible, which made it particularly beneficial for teachers and students in developing countries with limited financial resources, such as Vietnam.

3.3. Data collection and analysis
A qualitative methodology was carried out in this study to investigate non-English majors' attitudes towards ER. Specifically, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the most ease of students. Besides, the researcher would record the interviews before transcribing, coding, grouping themes and analyzing data.

3.4. Procedures

The length of this study was 15 weeks. During the first week, the researcher introduced the ER program to the participants and the consent forms were delivered as well. Following this, the comprehensive instructions on how to use the website https://www.er-central.com were presented with illustrations. Next, the researcher established the accounts for participants with instructions to log in and commence by taking a reading level assessment available on the website. Participants were suggested to choose a relevant level containing as less unfamiliar words as possible to ensure their reading comprehension. Besides, participants were also required to write a short paragraph to reflect what they have learnt from the reading texts weekly.

4. Results

The results from the interviews revealed that most students held positive attitudes towards the ER program.

4.1. Establishment of reading habit and motivation in learning English

Amongst 30 students participating in the ER program, 21 of them believed that the ER program helped establish a weekly reading habit. The extracts below are the clear illustrations.

"ER program in English lessons helped me establish a reading habit every week. This was a good habit for me because I have never practiced this before. Whenever I read, I tried to understand the texts thoroughly and reflected on the topic. I felt more motivated to learn English." (S4)

"I have always wanted to learn English but I was lazy and didn't know where to start. By joining the ER program, I was free to choose the texts related to my interested topics and explore fascinating knowledge. I was also more motivated and confident to do the tasks or answer my English teacher's questions." (S9)

On the one hand, this finding shared the similarity with [6] in motivating students to learn English. On the other hand, while participants in this study were more motivated in learning English, others in [6] retained learners' autonomy.

4.2. Convenience and improvement in linguistic competence

Ninety percent of the participants believed that convenience is among the most important points that the ER program has brought back. Meanwhile, only seventy percent of all participants stated that their linguistic competence was better than before.

"I think the ER program was very convenient because I had one week to read 2 texts and do the related activities. In Particular, I could do this online so it was much easier with my smartphone or laptop." (S1)

"For me, I had better pronunciation because I listened to the audio which contained the reading texts. While I was listening to the audio, I imitated sentence by sentence with pauses. I did this task every week and then my teacher gave me a compliment on my pronunciation." (S8)

"When reading texts on this ER program, I explored a lot of grammar structures. I knew that it takes time, but I tried to understand and asked my teacher to explain for me. Then I wrote in my notebook and practiced using these in my writing." (S10)

This report of convenience and improvement in linguistic competence is somehow similar to studies conducted by [16] and [17]. Through the students' responses, ER program assisted them in improving their pronunciation and grammar structures.

4.3. The lack of vocabulary and low interest to read

4 of students expressed that they still lack vocabulary when being suggested to choose the suitable reading texts on the website because of the length of the text along with the new words. The two examples below illustrate the point.

"The text was long for me and it took me much time to read and understand the content." (S15)

"When I looked at the text, I was hesitant to read because it was long." (S18)

"I was too lazy to read the long text." (S20)

In addition, thirty percent of the participants responded that they didn't feel motivated when it came to reading. When being asked the reason for this, they said that they blame themselves for not owning the routine of reading books.

"I was never motivated to read. It was unusual for me to read any long texts." (S7)

"I just read when my teacher asked me or when I prepared for the exams but it was in Vietnamese." (S4)

These findings are closely related to the conclusion of [18] and [20] in terms of students' lack of vocabulary and low interest in reading. However, participants in this study mentioned the lack of reading habit which caused low motivation in reading comprehension that are different from the findings of [18] and [20].

4.4. Dyslexia

Five percent of the participants stated that he experienced difficulty in reading fluency and often made errors with reading the words not only in English but also in Vietnamese. As a result, he had trouble with reading comprehension. This finding is quite different from other results discussed in this study.

"I could not read as fluently as others which prevented me from studying many subjects. Besides, I also experienced the recognition of letters in the words. When the teacher assigned us two reading texts every week, it was a big challenge for me. I had to spend more time reading but there's no improvement. I felt pessimistic when it came to reading." (S7).

5. Discussion

The present study explored how students were aware of ER in the research period. Based on the interviews with the participants, it was clear that most students held a positive attitude towards ER because of the establishment of reading habits and motivation, convenience and linguistic competence. From these, teachers could encourage students to maintain their reading habits weekly to achieve more success. This is because once students don't continue to read, they will go back to the starting point. Teachers can expand the sources of graded books by asking students to share their resources or organize short discussions related to ER before teaching the new lessons. Besides, teachers could also use rewards such as bonus points to attract more students to participate in ER.

On the other hand, negative attitudes on ER are also found in this study involving the lack of vocabulary and low interest to read and dyslexia. To assist students in increasing their vocabulary, teachers should design various online quizzes to reinforce the words appearing in the reading texts. This could be done through various platforms such as quiz, quizlet and google form. In addition to this, creating an online group via familiar social networks like facebook, zalo or google classroom also works well. However, teachers should set the rules for such groups to limit the unnecessary topics. In terms of dyslexia, it is the students who need to spend more time and effort to improve their disorder step by step. Teachers are those who encourage and motivate these students to be strong and confident to reach the goals.

6. Conclusion

The practice of extensive reading programs is beneficial for students in improving language proficiency, critical thinking, and vocabulary expansion. In an era where the sources for accessing various skills are available, the practice of extensive reading is easier than ever. This plays an important role in remaining the invaluable tool for students' intellectual growth. By spending much time reading a variety of topics, individuals can unlock the doors to the world of knowledge. The incorporation of extensive reading program in English Language Teaching should be practiced more at different levels to firstly establish the habit of weekly reading. Once students are familiar with such routine, they would gain more motivation along with desire with the subject; hence, students tend to master the language better.

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