

Extensive Reading: A Stimulant to Improve Vocabulary Knowledge

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Abstract: Extensive reading, ER, can be considered as a good learning technique to improve learners' vocabulary knowledge. Bell (2001) states that ER is a type of reading instruction program used in ESL or EFL settings, as an effective means of vocabulary development. The subjects participated in this study were 40 upper-intermediate and 40 lower-intermediate learners drawn from a population through a proficiency test to see if ER helps them improve their vocabulary knowledge at the above-stated levels. To this end, at each level an experimental and a control group (EG and CG) were formed each of which comprised 20 subjects randomly selected and assigned. All the conditions especially teaching materials were kept equal and fixed at each level, except for the EG the subjects were given five extra short stories to read outside for ten weeks. The results showed that EG at both levels indicated improvement in their vocabulary learning after the experiment.

Key words: Extensive Reading; Reading; Vocabulary improvement

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INTRODUCTION

As an element linking the four language skills in EFL, vocabulary plays the most significant role in foreign language learning. In order to communicate well in a foreign language, students should acquire a great number of words and should know how to use and where to use them.

Even though students realize the vital importance of vocabulary when learning language, most EFL learners learn vocabulary passively which can be resulted from several factors. First, they consider the teacher's techniques such as explanation for meaning or definition. In this case, language learners have nothing to do in a vocabulary learning section but to listen to their teacher. Second, students only focus on knowing the primary meaning of new words.

Thirdly, students usually only acquire new vocabulary through contextualized new words in their textbooks or when given by teachers during classroom lessons.

It is clear that comprehension is one of the most fundamental reasons for reading, and vocabulary, in turn, plays significant part in comprehension. Vocabulary clearly makes a critical contribution to understanding what has been read.

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One important way to develop vocabulary knowledge is through extensive reading. Students by reading extensively will be exposed to variety scope of vocabulary which is necessary in reading comprehension. Extensive reading (ER) is an important aspect of any English as a foreign/second language reading program. Bell (2001) states that ER is a type of reading instruction program that has been used in ESL or EFL settings, as an effective strategy of developing reading fluency, comprehension, and vocabulary development.

Day and Bamford (2004) argue strongly for including extensive reading in the L2/FL curriculum. They mention that not only can extensive reading improve reading ability; it can also enhance learners' overall language proficiency.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Several studies have been done in the area of extensive reading and vocabulary development. As Schmit (2000) holds one of the most important reasons for supporting ER is that many teachers argue that intensive reading alone will not make good and fluent readers. Besides, Bell (2001) adds that extensive reading leads to increasing reading rate and general language proficiency. Writing proficiency is also considerably impacted by reading extensively (Asraf and Ahmad, 2003).

It is not surprising that it helps students become better readers. Research in both L1 and L2 shows that we learn to read by reading. The more our students read, the better reader they would become. Learners encounter the same words over and over again in context, which result in vocabulary learning (Horst, 2005). While Read (2000) emphasizes the role of large vocabulary knowledge in reading comprehension and its relationship with fluency, Renandya and Jacobs (as cited in Richard & Renandya, 2002) argue strongly for including extensive reading in the second or foreign language curriculum. There is now compelling evidence that extensive reading can have significant impact on learners' second or foreign language development.

Teachers and researchers are increasingly aware of the importance of reading in the development of L2 proficiency and the role reading plays in expanding vocabulary knowledge. "Reading is important because comparison of many studies shows that written texts are richer in lexis than spoken ones"(Nation, 2001). So, these concerns have promoted many ESL/EFL programs to include extensive reading components as a supplement to regular language classes. According to Day and Bamford (2002), the main goal of extensive reading is developing reading fluency; that is, rapid access to know L2/FL vocabulary is seen as an important additional benefit.

Nation (2001) claimed that when learners read, they not only learn new words and enrich their known ones, but they can also improve their syntactic knowledge. To him, the aim of extensive reading is to read, or listen to, massive amount of comprehensible language within one's comfort zone with the aim of being to build fluency. Finally, "extensive reading is the only way in which learners can get access to language at their own comfort zone, read something they want to read, at the pace they feel comfortable with, which will allow them to meet the language enough time to pick up a sense of how the language fits together and to consolidate what they know"(Bell, 2001).

Accordingly, the main question of this study can be stated as follow:

Does extensive reading enhance vocabulary learning?

From this question the following hypotheses were found:

1. There is no significant difference in vocabulary learning between the control group and the experimental group under the treatment through extensive reading in upper-intermediate level.
2. There is no significant difference in vocabulary learning between the control group and the experimental group under the treatment through extensive reading in lower-intermediate level.

METHOD

Participants

Subjects of this study were 80 EFL learners at six language institutes in Dehdasht, Kohgiluyeh & Booyerahmad Province, Iran. All of these learners were enrolled in the spring semester (school year of 2011) and all of them were male learners, between ages 17-27. They were selected from 120 language learners. In the selection of them a language proficiency test was used. After that 40 upper-intermediate and 40 lower-intermediate learners were selected on the basis of their scores in proficiency test.

Instruments (Apparatus)

In order to collect the data, different instruments were used in this study. First of all, a Michigan test of English proficiency was used to identify learners' level of language proficiency: upper-intermediate and lower-intermediate. The second instrument was a post-test which was used to gather data about the student's improvement in vocabulary knowledge in each level after the experiment.

In addition to students' textbooks in Language Institutes, *Interchange 1* for lower-intermediate and *Interchange 2* for upper-intermediate, five short stories were given to upper-intermediate and five short stories were given to lower-intermediate learners in the experimental groups as the materials of this study.

PROCEDURE

After taking the administrative procedures to get the required permission, 120 EFL learners were participated in a proficiency test, a Michigan test of English proficiency (2001). The main aim was to identify learners' proficiency level in English. Therefore, 80 learners were selected as the participants of this study. In order to determine upper and lower intermediate learners, those who took one SD above the mean were selected as upper-intermediate and those who took one SD below the mean were determined as lower-intermediate. After that, the learners in each level were divided into two groups: upper-intermediate and lower-intermediate ones, each level was comprised of 40 EFL learners. Then the learners at each level were randomly divided into experimental and control groups each of which was comprised of 20 learners. On the first day of class, students of the experimental groups were informed of the importance of the extensive reading and the vocabulary knowledge and their vital importance in language learning. Therefore, to investigate the effect of extensive reading on vocabulary learning ten short stories, five for upper-intermediate and five for lower-intermediate, were given to learners in experimental groups, while learners of both experimental and control groups, at each level received the same reading instruction appropriate to their levels. Learners of experimental groups read one story per two weeks. After finishing each story, learners in experimental groups were required to give a summary of the story and to write a paragraph and a sentence contextualizing a newly learned word. This study was conducted for ten weeks from February to April 2011. At the end of the experiment, a post-test was given to learners in both control and experimental groups in two levels to distinguish the effect of extensive reading on the improvement of vocabulary knowledge.

DATA ANALYSIS

The data collected from the subjects' performance on the post-test are analyzed in terms of mean (X), standard deviation (SD), and t-test.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

For the reason that this is a quantities research, this part shows the results of the research and analyzes data collected from the ten-week experiment with the EFL learners.

Research Results

The outcomes of this research can be illustrated in the following Tables.

Table 1: The Results of T-Test Between Experimental and Control Group of Upper-Intermediate Level

Group	N	Mean	SD	t- value	df	p
Experimental	20	50.8	2.37	5.43	38	.001
Control	20	44.2	4.88			

*P=0.001<.05

Table 1 shows the vocabulary posttest scores of the upper-intermediate learners between the experimental and control groups. The mean of the posttest scores of the experimental group was 50.8, while that of the control group was 44.2. The t-value for the vocabulary posttest scores between the experimental and control group was 5.43. The significant difference between the vocabulary posttest scores of the control and experimental groups was at the significance level of 0.05. This means that there was found a significant difference between the experimental and control group at $p < .05$. In the other words, this result means that the experimental group' mean was significantly higher than the control group's mean scores. As it was mentioned before in the first hypothesis that there is no significant difference between the experimental and the control group of upper-intermediate level in vocabulary learning; therefore, based on these results this hypothesis was rejected. So, learners in the experimental group, those who read the story, knew significantly more vocabulary than those learners, control group, who hadn't read the story.

Table 2: The Results of T-Test Between Experimental and Control Group of Lower-Intermediate Level

Group	N	Mean	SD	t- value	df	p
Experimental	20	47.85	4.55	3.63	38	.001
Control	20	42.9	4.05			

*P=0.001<.05

Table 2 shows the vocabulary posttest scores of the upper-intermediate learners between the experimental and control groups. The mean of the posttest scores of the experimental group was 47.58, whereas that of the control group was 42.9. The t-value for the vocabulary posttest scores between the experimental and control group was 3.63. The significant difference between the vocabulary posttest scores of the control and experimental groups was at the level of 0.05. This means that there was found a significant difference between the experimental and control group at $p < .05$. In the other words, this result means that the experimental group' mean was significantly higher than the control group's mean scores. This statistical difference seems to be accounted for the treatment applied to the experiment, the extensive reading method as the independent variable. Based on this result, the second hypothesis which was stated that there is no significant difference between the experimental and control group in vocabulary learning of lower-intermediate learners was rejected. According to this data, learners in the experimental group learnt more vocabulary than that of the control group.

DISCUSSION

In response to research question 1: Does extensive reading enhance vocabulary learning? The data which was collected from experimental and control groups of upper-intermediate level showed that the mean of the experimental group was 50.8 while that of control was 44.2. The t-value for these groups was 5.43

and the significant difference was at the level of 0.05. For the experimental and control groups of lower intermediate level, it showed that the mean for the experimental group was 47.85 and that control group was 42.9 and the t-value was 3.63. The significant difference was at the level of 0.05. So, these results showed that extensive reading could improve vocabulary learning.

The results of the current research are in line with Horst (2005); Pigada & Schmitt (2006), regarding the contribution of the extensive reading to increasing reading comprehension and vocabulary learning. Moreover, it was shown that the extensive reading strategy could lead to substantial vocabulary learning and learners' development in spelling and vocabulary knowledge.

CONCLUSION

The present study was conducted to investigate the effect of extensive reading on the students' vocabulary learning.

The results of the research can be summarized as follows.

The result of the study shows that there was a significant difference in vocabulary learning at the level of 0.05 ($p < .05$) between the experimental and control groups relevant to the upper-intermediate proficiency level. In the case of the lower intermediate level, there was a significant difference in vocabulary learning at the level of .05 ($p < .05$) between the experimental group and the control group. In other words, the students in the experimental group of each level could recognize the meaning of vocabulary far better than those in the control group at each level. The significant difference is due to the impact of the extensive reading program because the experimental group was given more reading practices for a period of ten weeks, while the control group at each level only received the conventional reading lesson. The reason for this might be that the readers in the experimental groups had more reading practices than those of the control groups. Consequently, it can be concluded that the students had increased their vocabulary knowledge through extensive reading while they were participating in the extensive reading program for ten weeks.

According to Laufer (2003) and Helgesen (1997), to be able to guess meaning from a given context, the reader need to know more vocabulary at least 95% of the text to be able to infer the meaning of the new words and this is practicable via reading extensively. Therefore, since the experimental group at each level has higher language proficiency in terms of reading comprehension and lexic knowledge in the posttest, it can be concluded that they could infer meaning of the new words better than the control groups.

Since the extensive reading materials consisted of a wide range of short stories, the students learnt a wide range of vocabulary. The students could recognize the meaning of the learnt vocabulary well when they came across the new vocabulary many times in the stories. Moreover, every time a word was repeated and this helped them fix the meaning of vocabulary in their mind. Above all, they also learnt the use of vocabulary in context. According to Pigada and Schmitt (2006), as the reader come across new words in appropriate extensive reading materials, the reader can infer the context-based meaning provided by the text, which are not generally found in dictionaries. So, when a word is repeated, it is in a slightly difficult context. Therefore, the repetition of words in the reading materials helps the readers of experimental group at each level develop a deeper and more accurate understanding of word meaning and foster vocabulary learning.

Richards, Platt and Platt (1999) report that extensive reading is "intended to develop good reading habits, to build up knowledge of vocabulary and structure, and to encourage a liking for reading and make positive attitudes towards extensive reading."

Therefore, it may be concluded that extensive reading gives students a chance to follow up more intensive classroom work in order to develop their vocabulary knowledge. As Krashen (2004) concludes, learners acquire language through extensive reading. According to him, learners who do free voluntary reading make better progress in reading comprehension and vocabulary development. He strongly

believes that learners who read for pleasure are better readers, better writers and have more grammatical competence.

Consequently, it may be concluded that extensive reading program can be a positive factor to develop EFL learners' vocabulary knowledge and other language skills.

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

Reading is one of the four language skills that second or foreign language learners should acquire in their language learning process. The ability to read is seen as the most stable and durable for the second or foreign language skills (Rivers, 1981). However, the importance of reading is not reflected in the teaching curriculum. Most EFL learners are frequently observed not to put their noses to work seriously to get involved with reading their comprehension courses. Most EFL learners see English as an obligatory part of curriculum. Therefore, they do their best to prepare themselves to pass the tests, but most of the students are not well-motivated to read in foreign language because they don't think they will ever use it after their graduation. So, the importance of reading is so axiomatic that Davies (1995) said: "every day, with the wide available of audiovisual devices and materials, reading remains the major avenue of learning."

Therefore, the results of the present study revealed the effectiveness of reading, especially extensive reading, on vocabulary development, attitudes, and other language skills. According to the results of this research, the researcher does not propose to replace the current curriculum with extensive reading. Rather, extensive reading should be an addition to the curriculum, providing the students with a rich input of natural language by which most textbooks are not able to provide them with. However, the current curriculum does not pay the way for the students to master the language well. It is felt that extensive reading, in addition to the current curriculum, intensive reading, will allow students to acquire fuller knowledge of the foreign language. Furthermore, there should focus more on extensive reading because it can prepare students for the examination less painfully.

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