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## **EXTENSIVE READING: THEORY, RESEARCH AND IMPLEMENTATION**

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**Abstract:** There are three purposes of this paper, the first of which is to elucidate the theory and principles underlying extensive reading. Long-held principles will be discussed in light of practical classroom and contextual considerations. Secondly, a critical summary of current research on extensive reading that has been conducted in English as a Second Language and English as a Foreign Language contexts and has been published over the last five years will be presented. By highlighting the vast benefits of extensive reading on improving many aspects of L2 learners' language proficiency, we hope to encourage greater implementation of extensive reading in educational institutions worldwide. Teachers will also become more familiar with future directions in the practice of implementing extensive reading programs such as how to capitalize on the potential of the Internet to monitor and assess learners' progress in reading extensively. Thirdly, the paper provides directions for future research which we believe might fill critical gaps in our knowledge about ER.

**Keywords:** extensive reading, L2 proficiency, comprehension hypothesis

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There are many different terms for extensive reading (ER), including pleasure reading, self-selected reading, free voluntary reading, and wide reading. Over

the years, a plethora of studies has revealed that ER enables students to reap numerous linguistic benefits, including improved reading fluency (Huffman, 2014; McLean & Rouault, 2017, Nakanishi, 2015), vocabulary acquisition (Suk, 2016; Webb & Chang, 2015), and better writing skills (Mermelstein, 2015; Park, 2016). Besides linguistic benefits, students also develop wider and deeper knowledge about the world, which is essential in relating and connecting with the text and other people (Renandya, 2016). According to Day and Bamford (1998), ER provides students with a lot of easily comprehensible English books of various genres, allowing them to enjoy the learning process while improving their reading proficiency at the same time. In 2002, Day and Bamford (pp. 137-141) developed 10 principles of ER which could be regarded as the key ingredients of a successful ER program and encouraged teachers to use them. The 10 principles were:

1. The reading material is easy
2. A variety of reading material on a wide range of topics is available.
3. Learners choose what they want to read.
4. Learners read as much as possible.
5. Reading is for pleasure, and to gain information and general understanding.
6. Reading is the reward itself.
7. Learners generally read quickly and not slowly.
8. Reading is silent and individual.
9. Teachers orientate and provide guidance to students.
10. The teacher models being a reader.

In 2015, Day conducted a survey to find out how the practice of ER in the foreign language classroom from 1998 to 2015 matched the 10 principles above, and reported that several principles (1, 2, 3, 4, and 8) were widely used, while the rest were less frequently used. There was also one article that was purportedly about ER but did not use any of the 10 principles. This survey led Day (2015) to propose a continuum for ER programs (ranging from Pure ER which applied most if not all of the original 10 principles to Fringe ER which included only a few of the principles). In the same year, a number of ER scholars (e.g., Macalister, 2015; Waring & McLean, 2015) also suggested that Day and Bamford's original 10 principles were too idealistic and might not work well in places where schools and teachers faced contextual and curricular constraints. In these places, ER would not work well unless some forms of

accountability measures are put in place. This often means that principle number 6 “Reading is its own reward” will need to be replaced with “Reading will need to be monitored and assessed” or students will not take ER seriously.

Despite decades of research exemplifying the linguistic and non-linguistic benefits of engaging in ER, it remains underutilized and under-implemented globally (Ewert, 2017). Hence, in this paper, a critical summary of current research on ER programs published over the last five years in the ESL and EFL contexts will be carried out in an attempt to encourage greater implementation of ER programs. The aim of this paper is also to provide a discussion of the major themes and research methodologies in the current studies on ER, and to identify the potential research gaps for future research. This article brings together research and development in ER from refereed journal articles, book chapters, as well as conference proceedings published over the past five years.

### **WHAT IS THE THEORY BEHIND EXTENSIVE READING?**

The main theory underlying extensive reading is Krashen’s Comprehension Hypothesis. The Comprehension Hypothesis states that “we acquire language and develop literacy when we understand messages, that is, when we understand what we hear and what we read, when we receive “comprehensible input”” (Krashen, 2003). The claim made by the comprehension hypothesis is that people acquire the components of language, the “skills” such as vocabulary and grammar, when they obtain comprehensible input (Krashen, Lee, & Lao, 2018). To facilitate language acquisition, the comprehension hypothesis states that, “input must be at least interesting so that acquirers will pay it attention” (Krashen et al., 2018, p. 2). Furthermore, for optimal acquisition, Krashen et al. (2018) go one step further to suggest that input should be compelling, that is, input should be so interesting that the acquirer enters a state of “flow” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). When readers enter a state of flow during reading, they are wholly engrossed in the book (Nell, 1988). The evidence for the Compelling Input Hypothesis are the numerous cases of unexpected improvement in language without conscious effort, but merely by being very interested in reading, or watching films and television programs (Krashen et al., 2018).

The theoretical significance of ER is derived from implicit learning. According to Ellis (2008), implicit learning refers to the acquisition of knowledge without conscious awareness. It is essential in developing reading

processes that contribute to automatic lexical and syntactic processing and fluency in reading (Grabe, 2009). In order for implicit learning to have an impact on reading development, long-term and large volumes of input are necessary (Grabe, 2009), which means that learners need to read a lot and widely.

### **EFFECTS OF EXTENSIVE READING ON LANGUAGE SKILLS**

In this section, we will begin by synthesizing the findings from two meta-analyses on ER by Nakanishi (2015) and Jeon and Day (2016), which encompass the effects of ER on reading rate, reading comprehension and vocabulary. In addition, these meta-analyses also investigated the impact of variables such as age, and length of instruction on the effects of ER. After reviewing the findings of these two meta-analyses, I will categorize the remaining papers into two large categories: (a) the effects of ER on specific language skills and (b) students' attitudes and perceptions toward ER. Important research gaps will be highlighted for each category and recommendations for future research will be put forward after a review of all articles.

#### **Overall Effectiveness of ER**

Both Nakanishi's (2015) and Jeon and Day's (2016) meta-analyses report positive effects of ER on reading rate, reading comprehension and vocabulary. For Nakanishi (2015), a large effect ( $d=0.98$ ) was found for reading rates, medium effect ( $d=0.63$ ) for reading comprehension and small effect ( $d=0.18$ ) for vocabulary. In addition, students in the ER experimental groups had better outcomes than students in the control or comparison group by a medium effect size for both group contrasts and pre-post contrasts. However, it should be noted that 16 out of the 34 studies did not have control groups, so it is difficult to ascertain if the improvements in reading rates, reading comprehension and vocabulary were attributable to ER alone.

Jeon and Day's (2016) meta-analysis reported a small to medium effect for both experimental versus control group design ( $d=0.57$ ) and pre-to-post-test design ( $d=0.79$ ) on the overall effectiveness of ER on reading comprehension, reading rate and vocabulary. This reflects that ER is more effective than traditional reading methods in improving language proficiency.

In terms of the impact of age on the effectiveness of ER, Nakanishi (2015) found large effects for university students and adults, and medium effect for high school students. Meanwhile, Jeon and Day (2016) found the highest mean effect size in the adults group, followed by children and adolescents group. Thus, both of these meta-analyses on ER concur that ER is more effective and beneficial for older participants. This could be due to older learners' more superior analytical skills and maturity in appreciating and understanding the reading materials.

Regarding the duration of ER instruction, Nakanishi (2015) found that carrying out ER instruction over one year produced a medium effect size for group contrasts and a medium to large effect for pre-post contrasts. This suggests that studies conducted over a longer duration tended to produce more substantial effects on students' English proficiency. However, Jeon and Day (2016) found no statistical difference among the duration of programs. All programs regardless of duration (up to one semester, up to one academic year or over one academic year) showed very similar aggregated effect sizes, which seemed to indicate that ER could be effective regardless of the length of the program. Overall, it appears that as yet, there is no consensus on the most appropriate length of instruction period, but ER instruction is beneficial for reading proficiency.

### **Effects of ER on Specific Skills**

In this section, the effects of ER on reading rate and comprehension, vocabulary gains, improvements in writing and grammar will be discussed.

#### ***Effect of ER on Reading Rate and Comprehension***

Reading rate refers to reading fluency. ER promotes reading fluency because students read a lot of books at a suitably easy level, which leads to few interruptions in reading, thereby developing fluency (Stoller, 2015).

Belgar and Hunt (2014) investigated the effects of the type of text (simplified or unsimplified) and level of text (above or below students' vocabulary knowledge) in an ER program on the reading fluency development of 76 freshmen in a Japanese college over one academic year. It was found that for these students with lower intermediate English proficiency, reading lower level simplified texts was more beneficial for fluency development as compared to reading higher-level simplified texts or unsimplified texts. Thus,

this study has provided empirical evidence for the belief that easy texts are optimal for reading fluency development.

Huffman (2014) investigated the effect of ER versus intensive reading (IR) on the reading fluency improvement (silent reading rate) of 66 freshmen in a Japanese nursing college over a 15-week semester. Significantly higher reading rate gains were found for the ER group compared to the IR group. The comprehension score changes for both groups between pre-test and post-test were not significant, indicating that ER leads to reading fluency gains without sacrificing comprehension. Similarly, Suk (2016) carried out an ER versus IR study over the same duration on 171 Korean university students, and found that the ER group achieved significant gain in reading rate and a relatively small gain in reading comprehension.

McLean and Rouault (2017) investigated the effect of ER versus grammar-translation on improvement in reading rate for first-year Japanese university students over an academic year. This study involved 50 participants in total, and revealed that the ER group achieved greater improvement in reading rate than the grammar-translation group (difference in effect size was large at  $d=1.73$ ). It is important to note that McLean and Rouault made sure that comprehension of the texts was maintained at a level of above 70%. This highlights that ER is more effective than grammar-translation at improving reading rates.

The above four studies have all found positive effects of ER on reading fluency improvement at the college level. Huffman's (2014), Suk's (2016) and McLean and Rouault's (2017) studies all concur that ER is more effective than IR or the grammar-translation method in improving reading rate.

Two studies also ensured that reading comprehension was not compromised as fluency developed. However, in ensuring that reading comprehension remained reasonable, McLean and Rouault (2017) required the ER group to score at least 7 out of 10 marks on a comprehension quiz for the book they had read in order to count that book towards their weekly reading target. This did not seem to align with principles 5 and 6 proposed by Day and Bamford (2002), which state that reading in ER should be pleasurable and rewarding on its own. Furthermore, Huffman's (2014) study required students to produce accurate book reports based on the graded reader they had read to show that they had indeed read the book. Students whose book reports failed to capture the main points of the story or contained major inaccuracies had to rewrite the book reports and credit for the books would be withheld until a

suitably satisfactory book report was produced. Such a stringent requirement also did not align with principles 5 and 6, and would likely reduce students' enjoyment of engaging in ER and might put them off continuing with reading after finishing the course. It is also important to note that Belgar and Hunt (2014), Huffman (2014) and Suk (2016) employed a quasi-experimental design with intact classes instead of true experimental conditions.

### ***Effect of ER on Vocabulary Gains***

ER leads to vocabulary acquisition because learners encounter words repeatedly in context, learn to infer the meanings of words in context, and the sheer quantity of words read facilitates incidental vocabulary learning, in terms of general and academic vocabulary. Research has unanimously found positive effects of ER on vocabulary acquisition (e.g. Nakanishi, 2015). Recent papers published add further support to this. For example, Suk's (2016) study found the biggest improvement in vocabulary acquisition compared to reading rate and reading comprehension due to ER.

McQuillan (2019) analyzed the effects of pleasure reading and direct vocabulary instruction on the acquisition of academic vocabulary. After compiling a large corpus of popular, young adult fiction, McQuillan (2019) looked into the frequency of occurrences of academic vocabulary words in the fiction novels and calculated the likelihood that students would acquire these words incidentally. The results showed that pleasure reading is between two and six times more efficient than direct instruction in expanding students' repertoire of academic vocabulary.

Taking into consideration previous research that has shown positive outcomes for audio-assisted reading, Webb and Chang (2015) investigated the effect of ER with audio support on vocabulary learning in Taiwan over 13 weeks. Eighty-two EFL participants who were around 15-16 years old took part in this study. Prior to the start of the ER program, a Vocabulary Level Test (VLT) was administered to determine the participants' vocabulary profile. Based on the scores for the VLT, Webb and Chang (2015) selected ten level 1 graded readers, and three level 2 graded readers with audio-recordings for the experiment. The experimental group did ER for all English lessons each week, which involved reading and listening to one graded reader in class. Meanwhile, the control group received form-focused instruction. After class, there was no required homework, which made reading itself a reward and this reflected the

nature of pleasurable reading. The results showed greater average gains for the ER group in the post-test (19.68 words) compared to the control group (4.43 words). This highlights the effectiveness of extensive reading with audio support in increasing participants' receptive knowledge of words. Furthermore, the delayed post-test which was conducted three months after the treatment showed that the relative learning gains in the ER group was 36.66%. This study suggests the pedagogical benefit of relatively large vocabulary gains through the use of ER with audio support for learners of lower English proficiency.

Webb and Chang's (2015) study and Suk's (2016) study both had almost the same duration and showed that ER (traditional silent reading and audio-facilitated) helps learners in vocabulary learning. However both studies only measured receptive vocabulary gains, so it is unsure whether learners could utilize the words gained in productive tasks. Furthermore, in Webb and Chang's (2015) study, there were three times more students in the ER group (61 students) than in the control group (21 students), which could have skewed the results obtained.

### ***Effect of ER on Writing Ability***

Besides improving reading fluency and vocabulary, ER also contributes to better writing ability and grammar. This could be because sentences in storybooks are more interesting and comprehensible and therefore provides more input for the acquisition of sentence pattern, vocabulary and other aspects of grammar (Lee, Hsieh, & Wang, 2009).

Mermelstein (2015) carried out a year-long study to find out the effect of ER on improving EFL learners' writing abilities. This study was set in Taiwan and involved 211 third-year undergraduate students. The students were more or less evenly divided into two groups: the ER group and the control group. Prior to the start of this study, the researcher carried out a reading level test for all students to find out the level of the graded reader that would be most appropriate for them; the researcher wanted to place students to the graded reader level at which they would understand at least 95% of the vocabulary in the books. Concerning the treatment, the sole difference during class time was that the ER group spent between 15 and 20 minutes per week on silent reading while the control group used the 15-20 minutes on pair work or group work in class. In terms of homework, participants in the ER group were required to continue reading and maintain a record of their daily reading on a record sheet;

whereas participants in the control group were given cloze passages and intensive reading worksheets as homework. Participants' writing ability was analyzed by comparing the pre-test writing score with the post-test writing score. The topic for both tests was similar. The results revealed that both groups achieved significant gains on all of the subscales of writing measured: content, organization, vocabulary, language use, mechanics and fluency. However, the ER group made more improvements than the control group in all six categories, including outperforming the control group significantly in five of the six categories (except organization).

Another study on the effect of ER on writing was conducted by Park (2016), who analyzed the impact of ER on L2 university students' writing, particularly in the EAP writing classroom over 16 weeks. All of these students were enrolled for the in-session intermediate writing course at a US university and almost all of them came from Asia. Fifty-six participants were split equally into two groups: the ER-oriented writing class and the traditional writing class. The only difference during class time was that the ER group spent 15 minutes in each class on silent reading plus five minutes of discussion regarding their reading. During these 20 minutes, the traditional group did free-writing. In terms of homework, participants in the ER class were required to continue ER and do a short writing activity based on what they were reading; whereas participants in the traditional class were assigned textbook-based homework. The essay question used for the pre-test and post-test was the same. The holistic post-test score of the ER class was better than that for the traditional class. In addition, the ER class did better than the traditional class in all five sub-skills of writing: content, organization, vocabulary language use and mechanics.

Both Mermelstein's (2015) and Park's (2016) studies summarized above were powerful in showing how a short amount of in-class time spent on ER each week, accompanied with little-stress ER homework could have huge impacts on all sub-skills of writing compared to the control group that did not engage in ER. The pedagogical potential of implementing ER to improve students' writing ability, particularly at the college level, is convincingly brought across by these two studies. However, Park (2016) used the same essay topic for the pre-and post-test while Mermelstein (2015) used slightly different questions, which involved the use of different tenses, albeit maintaining the same topic. The two questions given by Mermelstein (2015) were: your past summer vacation (pre-test) and your future summer vacation (post-test). The

use of different questions, which involved the use of different tenses, led to an additional variable which could have affected the results obtained to a certain extent, as students' improvement in writing scores in the post-test could possibly be due to a better mastery of the future tense as compared to the past tense.

### ***Effect of ER on Grammar***

In terms of grammar, Lee, Schallert and Kim (2015) conducted a study on 124 Korean middle school EFL learners (13-14 years old) to find out the effects of ER and grammar-translation method on the grammatical knowledge and attitudes of the students. This study took place over the duration of 1 year (two academic semesters). Grammatical knowledge was measured in two kinds of test: a general grammar knowledge test and a test that dealt solely with prepositions and articles. The ER group consisted of 75 students, while the grammar-translation group had 49 students. The only difference between these two groups was that for one lesson a week, the ER group had 45 minutes of reading using English graded readers in the school library while the translation group translated a short English passage into Korean and went over challenging vocabulary or sentence structures with the teacher during that time. The ER group also had to write short summaries or responses in Korean about the book they had read and the teacher provided encouraging comments about the book's content.

Overall, both groups showed significant improvement in general grammar knowledge. For the ER group, the high and middle proficiency students showed significant improvements in both grammar knowledge and usage of articles and prepositions, with the high proficiency group obtaining bigger improvement than the middle proficiency group. In contrast, for the grammar-translation group, only the middle proficiency students improved significantly on both grammar measures. Thus, this study showed that ER had greater benefits for grammar improvement compared to the grammar-translation method.

In Iran, Khansir and Dehghani (2015) also carried out a similar study as Lee et al. (2015) above to find out the effect of ER versus grammar-translation on high school students' (15-16 years old) mastery of grammar. However, this study involved entirely male students and had a much shorter duration (45 days). They found that participants in the ER group outperformed those in the

control group in the grammatical test, which had four components: simple past tense, objective pronouns, adverbs of frequencies, and determiners. The ER group scored higher in all four components compared to the control group, which showed that learning grammar through ER is more effective than learning grammar via the traditional approach of grammar-translation.

Both Lee et al.'s and Khansir and Dehghani's (2015) studies showed that learning grammar through ER has more pedagogical benefits than grammar-translation. However, it would have been insightful to know the proficiency profiles of the students in Khansir and Dehghani's study so that comparisons with Lee et al.'s findings could be made.

### **Students' Attitudes and Perceptions toward ER**

Learners' affective state (emotions and attitudes) is important in reading development. If an ER program engenders positive feelings toward reading and English learning in general, learners' language proficiency may increase over time.

Lee et al. (2015) measured the 124 Korean middle school students' attitudes toward ER compared to translation instruction at the end of the program and found that students' attitude depended on their English proficiency. Low proficiency students in the ER group had significantly lower ratings in perceived English improvement, and less positive feelings and preference for independent reading. However, students who are of middle and high proficiency showed a positive preference for independent reading compared to the translation group. Hence, students with middle and high English proficiency had more positive attitudes toward ER.

Between 2014 and 2018, two large-scale ER programs were implemented in universities in Taiwan and Japan respectively to investigate the effects of ER on students' perceptions and attitudes toward ER and English, as well as general reading habits. Tien (2015) carried out a university-wide ER program in a Taiwanese university involving 5711 students (93 classes). These students were all non-English majors who were enrolled in General English courses. The duration of this study was 1 year and the results indicated that students generally have positive perceptions of the ER program (average mean of 3.83 on a 5-point Likert scale). Students from the College of Management had the most positive attitudes toward ER compared to students from all the other colleges, possibly due to their greater exposure to English-medium courses.

Moreover, students' English proficiency (beginner, intermediate or advanced) had no significant difference in their engagement in ER. On the whole, many students agreed that ER is a productive method of learning English and it helps to develop a reading habit. However, students also reported not having an active attitude toward ER and not enjoying the process of doing ER. It is important to note that students in this study did not have the freedom of self-selecting the books they preferred to read, which might have reduced their enjoyment of ER.

Carried out on a smaller scale and shorter duration, Hagley's (2017) study involved a whole cohort of 600 engineering students in a Japanese university. The ER program was carried out for 15 weeks and the results showed a statistically significant increase in students' positive view of English after the course, which suggests that the ER program had positively affected students' attitudes toward English. This is supported by the positive comments left about the program and that 83.5% of students believed ER was beneficial to their English study. However, a large majority of students stated that they would not continue with ER after the course finished, hence the study had no major impact on students' reading habits.

Overall, Tien's (2015) and Hagley's (2017) studies reveal that while college-level students believe in the benefits of ER in improving their English proficiency and have positive perceptions toward ER, they might not actively take part in ER after the end of the course. More studies need to be carried out below tertiary levels to find out if students would be motivated to carry on with ER at the end of the program and if proficiency in English affects their motivation in doing ER.

## **RESEARCH GAPS AND FUTURE RESEARCH**

The discussion on the ER studies above highlight some important gaps. Firstly, most of the studies had been carried out in universities (e.g. Belgar & Hunt, 2014; Hagley, 2017; Huffman, 2014; McLean & Rouault, 2017; Park, 2016; Suk, 2016; Tien, 2015). Only a handful of studies were conducted with middle and high school students (Khansir & Dehghani, 2015; Lee et al., 2015; Webb & Chang, 2015). However, no study seems to have been conducted in elementary schools recently, which reiterates Jeon and Day's (2016) recommendation for more research to be carried out with children. There were only six samples of studies conducted with children in Jeon and Day's (2016)

meta-analysis. In light of the numerous linguistic and non-linguistic benefits of ER, children have a much better chance of capitalizing on these benefits if they could embark on ER earlier; hence, more research should be carried out with younger learners in the elementary school settings

Furthermore, another research gap is that a number of the studies reviewed above involved vastly unequal student numbers in the experimental group and the control group. For example, Lee et al.'s (2015) study involved 75 students in the experimental (ER) group and 49 students in the grammar-translation group, while Webb and Chang's (2015) study consisted of 61 students in the ER group and 21 students in the control group. Given the unequal size of both groups, the gains in English proficiency due to ER may not be accurate. Hence, future research should attempt to ensure an equal balance of students in the experimental and control groups.

One final research gap worth highlighting is that only one of the studies (Hagley, 2017) reviewed above conducted a post-course survey to find out whether ER had any impact on students' long-term reading habits. Future research could attempt to find out more about the long-term effects of ER on reading habits, which could be a motivating factor to encourage more schools to implement ER.

## **FUTURE DIRECTIONS IN THE PRACTICE OF ER**

Day (2015) suggests that current practices of supervised (or instructed) ER will continue, and independent (or non-instructed) ER might also take place. Moreover, the practice of blended extensive and intensive reading, which focuses on teaching reading strategies while encouraging extensive reading, is starting to be used in some classrooms. Furthermore, Day (2015) posits that there will be greater uptake in the use of Internet ER tools such as Moodle Reader Module, and the Internet will play a very important role in the provision of reading materials. This increasing trend in the prominence of the Internet has been reflected in recent studies such as McLean and Rouault's (2017) and Hagley's (2017) which made use of MReader module ([www.MReader.org](http://www.MReader.org)).

## **CONCLUSIONS**

In conclusion, this literature review on the effects of ER for ESL/EFL learners over the last five years concur with decades of earlier research which

has shown the benefits of ER in terms of improved reading fluency, vocabulary acquisition, writing ability, and grammar knowledge. In addition, students generally have positive attitudes and perceptions toward ER. It is hoped that more educational institutions and teachers will seriously consider the possibility of fusing ER into their English curriculum in order to reap the numerous linguistic and non-linguistic benefits of ER.

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