Extensive Reading and Vocabulary Development

By Jason Parry, 2012
Extensive Reading and Vocabulary Development

The purpose of this paper is to illustrate how useful extensive reading (ER) programs are in increasing L2 learner vocabulary knowledge in the language classroom. This will be accomplished by first outlining some guidelines for a successful ER program, then by closely examining three studies which set out to determine the effect of extensive reading on vocabulary development. These three studies will demonstrate that although ER does lead to the implicit learning of vocabulary, a combination of implicit learning from ER and explicit instruction is the most time effective method for facilitating vocabulary growth in the language classroom.

What is Extensive Reading?

Intensive reading, which is often the norm in the language classroom, differs significantly from ER. While intensive reading usually requires students to turn their attention to a short text, analysing it for meaning, use of vocabulary and grammar, ER focuses on quantity over quality of reading, with texts chosen for their relevance to the learner and not for their literary merit. Both intensive and extensive reading are beneficial to learners and should not be viewed “in opposition, as both serve different but complementary purposes” (Renandya & Jacobs, 2010, p. 296).

ER has been defined as the process of exposing learners to a large amount of input which is at their level of language proficiency. This can include graded readers, which simplify more complex texts by reducing their total number of headwords (Horst, 2005), or unsimplified texts for native speakers (Nation, 1997). The students are usually given the freedom to choose what they would like to read, and are encouraged to read for “pleasure and information both inside and
outside the classroom, to read for meaning, and to engage in sustained silent reading” (Taguchi, 2004, 74).

**The characteristics of a successful extensive reading program**

According to the literature, in a successful ER program, teachers attempt to build a community of readers in and outside the classroom. The goal is to “hook” the learners on reading, creating a shift in their perception and consumption of target language literature. To accomplish this, students should be given the freedom to choose which texts they will consume, and they should be provided with high interest, quality literature to choose from. Moreover, the reading materials should vary in terms of their subject matter and genre of writing style. This allows for exposure to a rich diversity of input, and trains the students to read for a variety of purposes (Renandya & Jacobs, 2010). Finally, the texts should be within the students’ level of comprehension, meaning that the students are able to understand about 95% of the words in the novel (Horst, 2005, p. 361).

Once the texts have been selected, quality ER programs engage the students in post reading activities, such as discussion groups or journal writing. The teacher will read during the ER period as well, modelling enthusiasm for reading and “sending a message that we value reading and that our students should do the same” (Renandya & Jacobs, 2010, p. 297).
The Benefits of an Extensive Reading Program

According to Elley (1991, as cited in Nation, 1997, p. 14), L2 learners benefit from ER as a result of the following factors:

1. Extensive input of meaningful print
2. Incidental learning
3. The integration of oral and written activity
4. Focus on meaning rather than form
5. High intrinsic motivation

Due to these elements, students who participate in an ER program experience improvements in reading and listening comprehension, speaking fluency, and writing proficiency. These claims have been widely documented by a large body of research, which demonstrates improvements resulting from ER across the four skills (for an extensive list of past studies, see Taguchi, 2004; & Horst, 2005).

Elley & Mangubhai (1983) for example, noted improvements in reading and listening comprehension after 380 students from eight Fijian schools participated in an ER program for eight months. In comparison to a control group, their language skills had increased at twice the normal rate. One year after the ER program had been completed, post test results revealed that aside from improvements in their receptive abilities, these students had made considerable gains in their writing ability as well.

In another study, concentrating on four students during an ER program in the United States, Cho and Krashen (1994) found significant increases in spoken ability. For several months
the participants were asked to read for pleasure in their free time. In follow-up interviews each of
the participants reported improvements in their speaking proficiency.

Aside from language proficiency, ER programs also increase intrinsic motivation
promoting an increase in the amount of language study which is completed outside of class. This
was evident in a study involving 10 L2 learners participating in an ER program during their first
year of university in Japan. Taguchi (2004) noted that after a minimum of 733 minutes of
reading, the students were more willing to read long passages, they had increased their exposure
to literature outside of class, and they had learned to discern the meaning of unknown words
from the context of a text.

**Extensive Reading and Vocabulary Acquisition**

Unfortunately, despite the large amount of research which has been devoted to ER, very
little focuses on the “vocabulary-expanding effects of reading extensively in a second language,
simply because it tends to focus on other, more general aspects of language development”
(Horst, 2005, p. 357). According to Horst, the existing research surrounding ER fails to
accurately determine the effect of ER on vocabulary knowledge for three reasons. As mentioned
above, the majority tend to focus on other aspects of language development, and those that do
focus on vocabulary acquisition have two major design flaws. They employ follow up
vocabulary tests which are too small (Horst recommends test which encompass 100s of words),
and they fail to take into account the impact that other exposure to the target language will have
on test results. That being said, a few studies have focused on the effect of ER on vocabulary
gains with these aspects of research design in mind, returning promising results.
In Cho and Krashen (1994), the four participants were asked to underline the new words that they encountered while reading. Three of the students did this, underlining an average of 402 words while reading an average of 114,333 words (0.35%). Some of these students also occasionally used a dictionary to determine the meaning of the words that they had underlined. The students’ words were then used to make extensive personalized vocabulary tests, which were administered over several days following the ER period. Since the fourth student did not underline words, 165 words which the other three students had consistently underlined were used to create her test. Results demonstrated that all four students had made considerable vocabulary gains. One student, who had underlined 535 words, was able to give a definition or write a synonym for 299 of those words. On average, the three students who had underlined unknown words were able to correctly define 68% of them in the post-test. The student who had not underlined words was also able to write definitions for over half of the tested items.

While these results are encouraging, there were some obvious problems in the design of this study. Aside from the fact that there were too few participants to consider the implications of the research, there was also too much variance between the participants in the study. Firstly, they were at different levels of English proficiency and had been learning the target language for a different length of time. Furthermore, they had participated in the ER program for a different amount of time (shortest participation time was two weeks and longest participation time was two months), and had consumed a varied amount of input (lowest amount was 8 books and highest amount was 23). Moreover, while the authors claimed that two of the participants had limited exposure to the target language outside of their ER, there is no mention of the level of exposure that the remaining students had. Finally, the authors note that “the two women who
used the dictionary learned more vocabulary per words read” (Cho & Krashen, 1994, p. 666). Perhaps in the future, this could be considered as a beneficial addition to an ER program.

In another study, Horst examined vocabulary gains from an extensive reading program, while controlling for many of the flaws present in Cho and Krashen (1994). To ensure that outside exposure to the target language would not affect post-test outcomes, lexical items were analyzed using an online corpus (from West (1953) and Coxhead (2000)), and only off list items were included in the tests. Instead of four participants, this study included 21 learners, and still managed to assess vocabulary gains using a 100 item test. Again, individualized post-tests were used to accommodate the various texts which were read, however, definitions were not required from the students. Instead, they were only asked to identify their understanding of the word by selecting YES, NO, or NOT SURE. Afterwards, using an adapted form of Wesche and Paribakht’s (1996) Vocabulary Knowledge Scale (VKS), the participants were asked to demonstrate their knowledge of unknown vocabulary identified in the pre-tests, which was known to have occurred during their extensive reading. Here, each of the participants was asked to define and provide a sentence for at least one word, and the data was recorded as either partial knowledge of a word, or full knowledge of a word.

Using the data from these tests, a t-test analysis was run to determine the significance of the difference between pre and post-test YES answers, revealing “a significant mean post-test increase of about seven words” (p. 373). Unfortunately, these results are much less promising than those observed by Cho and Krashen (1994). In this case, the students had devoted six hours of class time to ER, and had only gained an average of seven words. Given this outcome, it seems that ER alone is an ineffective method of learning new vocabulary.
Teachers should not do away with ER altogether though, as it seems that when explicit teaching is combined with an ER program, vocabulary gains increase considerably. This is well demonstrated by a recent study from Sonbul & Schmitt (2010), which examined the benefits of explicitly teaching specific vocabulary following incidental learning from extensive reading. In this study, forty Arabic speaking female university students, who were enrolled in a first-year English for Specific Purposes course, were asked to silently read a 700 word extract from their course textbook. Following the reading, the teacher gave explicit instruction of 10 words from the text, by giving meanings for each of them, writing them on the board, and repeating them once. This required about one minute per word.

One week following the reading, the students were given three vocabulary tests which targeted 20 lexical items from the text. Ten of the items had been explicitly taught following the reading, and 10 had only been incidentally learned from reading the text. Results revealed that students were nearly twice as likely to have learned the words which were taught explicitly than those which were only encountered incidentally. This confirms that “direct instruction clearly adds value to the learning process and leads to greater learning” (Sonbul & Schmitt, 2010, p. 257).

Discussion

Considering the aforementioned articles, it seems that in order for an extensive reading program to be effective in teaching vocabulary, time should be allotted for direct teaching following reading. This however, is a difficult order to fulfill. As noted earlier in this paper, a key feature of an ER program is the freedom which is given to the learners. How can we continue to allow students to choose their texts, yet also discern which lexical items to direct our
teaching to? Moreover, how can we teach an entire group specific vocabulary for each of the chosen texts? Perhaps the answer to these questions can be found in Cho and Krashen’s (1994) study. As noted by the researchers, the two students who used a dictionary to look up unknown words performed much better on the post-reading tests. Possibly allotting time for this following reading would be a suitable adaptation of direct teaching in this circumstance. Another option would be to have the students write 10-20 words which they encounter in their reading on a piece of paper, then have them survey each other in a jigsaw format to find the answers. Following this, definitions for words which could not be uncovered by the group could be addressed by the teacher. This approach would allow a class of students to benefit from extensive reading across the four skills, while also learning new lexical items in the process.
References


