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# Extensive Reading and Effects on Reading, Writing and Vocabulary: A Literature Review

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## Abstract

This paper reviews recent research into Extensive Reading (ER). Firstly, in seeking a common understanding of the approach, differing characterizations of ER are discussed, and the need for a common understanding of ER is asserted. Literature relating to assessment of ER follows, revealing that students read more when assessed. Next to be explored is the effectiveness of ER in relation to the three specific skill areas of reading, writing and vocabulary. The paper concludes in noting certain issues in the literature, and with final thoughts as to the suggested value of ER.

この論文は多読の最新の調査をまとめ、考察したものである。最初にこの教授方法の一般的な理解を探求し、多読の特徴について考察し、さらに多読の理解のために必要な要素を提言する。次に、文学に関係した多読の評価について、生徒がより多く読むことになることを明らかにしながら詳述する。次に多読の有効性について三つの読み、書き、語彙の具体的な分野に絞って探求する。そして、結論として、様々な文献や概要についてのいくつかの問題点を指摘し、多読の価値に関する最終的な考えを述べる。

**Key Words:** Second Language Acquisition, Extensive Reading, reading, writing, vocabulary acquisition

The research literature in the academic area of Extensive Reading (ER) has grown considerably in the last three decades. While the volume of research is now considerable, and some strong claims have been made for the positive effects of Extensive Reading (ER), research has been hindered by the lack of a common understanding of the characteristics of ER (Waring and McLean, 2015), while research methodologies employed have additionally been highlighted as too often problematic (McLean & Rouault, 2017; Robb & Kano, 2013; Waring and Takaki, 2003). The present paper offers a focused review of the literature, commencing with a sought characterization of Extensive Reading. The paper then offers discussion of a selection of the most pertinent and most oft-cited literature, critically examining asserted claims regarding effects of Extensive Reading on reading skills, writing skills, and vocabulary acquisition.

## **1. Extensive Reading in the literature: What is ER?**

Firstly considered are recent efforts to more effectively characterize the nature of Extensive Reading. The discussion is split between detailing the variable dimensions or principles, followed by noting how ER is enacted by teachers.

### **1.1 Characteristics and overview**

Perhaps the most cited suggested set of characteristics are Bamford and Day's (2002) 'Top Ten Principles', the development of which was influenced by Williams' (1996) suggested ten principles for intensive reading. These principles have been regularly referred to in the subsequent Extensive Reading literature, but have not been used in their entirety as a full set of defining characteristics. The principles listed 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. The purpose of reading is usually related to pleasure, information and general understanding.
6. Reading is its own reward.
7. Reading speed is usually faster rather than slower.
8. Reading is individual and silent.
9. Teachers orient and guide their students.
10. The teacher is a role model of a reader. (Day & Bamford, 2002, pp. 137–141).

Of the more than five hundred articles listed at the Extensive Reading Foundation website, Day (2015) isolated forty-four pertinent articles which offer characterizations of ER, and examined the frequency with which the suggested principles were employed for this purpose. The most commonly cited principles were found to be:

- (1) Learners read as much as possible;
- (2) Learners choose what they read;
- (3) A variety of reading materials on a wide range of topics is available;
- (4) The reading material is easy (Day, 2015, p. 298).

Waring and Mclean (2015) had a similar aim, noting that due to the very differing reading situations described, some of which would do not in fact appear to be reporting research under the ER umbrella, there is a deleterious overall effect on the reliability of the literature. The authors took a differing approach to that noted above of Day (2015), seeking to isolate what they term 'core' and 'variable' dimensions. The core dimensions are suggested as:

- Fluent, sustained comprehension of text as meaning-focused input;
- Large volume of material
- Reading over extended periods of time
- Texts are longer, requiring comprehension at the discourse level (p. 164).

The latter core dimension relates to how the reading is being experienced, and differs significantly to how many language students may typically experience and view reading, particularly in Japan, where a skills-based approach is more commonly adopted in schools (Gorsuch, 1998; McLean & Roualt, 2017; Nishizawa, Yoshioka & Fukuda, 2010).

Unsurprisingly, there is considerable overlap between the approaches. Taken together, the two approaches should nudge the field toward a commonly understood paradigmatic ER—what is ER, and what is not ER (the latter removing a number of research papers commonly cited in support of ER, but which, applying the two above definitional approaches, do not meet the criteria).

## 1.2 Reading inside and outside the classroom

Above are noted competing and largely overlapping lists of characteristics of extensive reading, but when is this extensive reading to take place? Bouts of intensive skill-based reading are short, and easily fit into chunked class time, and may be readily set as homework. Robb & Kano (2013) make a helpful distinction between *replacement* and *additive* ER in this regard, and note that the bulk of the research thus far has been undertaken evaluating reading within the language class. So-called ‘replacement’ occurs within class time, and necessarily something has to give way to allow the time for the reading. But, duly noting that class time is limited, and there are multiple competing study components, reluctant teachers may be reluctant to change their teaching approach or to adjust their syllabus to give time for ER (Takase, 2002), particularly if unfamiliar or unconvinced by the approach. Instead, where course designers and instructors may be sufficiently persuaded of the merits of ER to give it a try, an *additive* approach may be more acceptable, particularly where the teachers are not existing advocates, whereby the additional planned reading is, in effect, ‘bolted onto’ an existing course and occurs outside of class time—on the train commute, at home, in a coffee shop, anywhere the students choose, but not within limited class time.

## 2. Should reading be assessed? Assessing reading using quizzes

One of the key suggested tenets of extensive reading, as promulgated by Bamford & Day (1988), was that Extensive Reading should not be assessed. The argument for this was that L2 reading should be akin to reading in a person’s first language, which is for enjoyment, focused only on following the meaning of the text. Such an idealized ‘only intrinsic motivation’ approach was trialed at a Japanese university by van Amelsvoort (2017), who notes a low amount of reading completed in those circumstances, and who sought to change approach the following academic year to include tracking of reading completed. Reading volume is recorded to have risen upon more fully integrating the reading into classes and tracking students’ reading progress. Aside from the practical work aspect of teachers needing to assess students within language programs, contributing ultimately to assignment of grades, students thus also appeared to be more motivated to read, and read more, to the integration and oversight. Duly noting the irony, it does appear that the ‘free’ reading needs to be mandated.

Stoeckel, Reagan & Hann (2012) examined assessment and attitudes and found that reading quizzes have no negative impact on reading attitudes. Curtis (2015) notes positive student attitudes to assessment: “Overall, students appear to enjoy doing M-Reader quizzes” (p.78). Cheetham, Harper, Elliott & Ito (2016) discuss usage of online software M-Reader in an ‘M-Reader Challenge’ and note passing quizzes as a positive motivational factor. Robb (2015) asserts a need to assess, noting various studies that note increased student engagement due to assessment. The present research is within a program that uses M-Reader to record reading

volume. Attitudes to M-Reader and quizzes are not the present focus. It is however useful to note that the literature, limited that it is, notes no negative effects of assessment.

### **3. ER Effects on reading**

Hafiz and Tudor (1989) investigated reading gains of 16 Pakistani born English resident upper primary age children. While reading gains are asserted of the experimental group, the research is questionable. The children are asserted to be reading in L2, but were resident in the UK, thus likely substantially (at least) bilingual. With research in an English environment, the control group was inevitably considerably contaminated.

With the authors duly noting that their study took place before the regular availability of graded readers, Robb and Susser's (1989) study was of university students (N= 124) reading of a required 500 pages of reading of US teen books. The control group worked in a skills-based approach, using a regular reading text. Gains were recorded in the experimental ER group in reading speed, comprehension and vocabulary. However, the authors note that differences could have occurred due to the extra volume of study of the experimental group, at around double the amount of study hours. In noting this, one particularly pertinent comment from the authors, which relates to much of the extant research discussed herein is:

“It may be just that the EXTENSIVE readers are able to spend more time reading thanks to the nature of the material. Thus, in terms of experimental versus control, there is plainly an issue, but it is interesting to note that the approach itself appears to naturally lend itself to more language exposure, and to concomitant language improvements.”(p. 246).

Lai's (1993) study looked at comparative reading rates of EFL junior high school students in Hong Kong. Students aged between 11 and 15 years of age read an average of 16 graded readers each, inside and outside of class time, during a 4-week summer course. Reading fluency gains between the three groups of students are recorded, though at differing improvement rates. Due to the nature of the summer program, the control, was not isolated, thus there is some inevitable cross-contamination. Comparisons are not available between the control and the experimental groups, which detracts from the study.

Bell (2001) examined ER and reading speed, with a control and experimental group of 26 adult elementary level ESL learners in Yemen. The experimental group (n=14) engaged in Extensive Reading, while the control group (n=12) engaged in what we may consider to be a more 'traditional' approach to reading, with a succession of short passages accompanied by assorted means of comprehension exercises, cloze tasks, multiple choice questions and such like. This was all conducted within class time, over a period of two semesters. The experimental group are asserted to have significant reading speed gains: improved speeds of 59.43 words per minute (wpm) compared with an increased speed of 14.08 wpm for the control. Further, comprehension scores were noted to have improved.

Sheu (2003) researched reading at a junior high school in Taiwan across one academic year. There were two experimental groups. The first experimental group read graded readers. The second experimental did group readings of regular texts aimed at native language readers. The third was a regular control group class, studying in a skills-based manner. Reading was for forty-five minutes, in class. Both experimental groups are recorded to have improved reading comprehension and grammar compared with the control. The ER group is noted to have increased vocabulary. Robb and Kano (2013) surmise that the difference may be due to

the challenging vocabulary in the ungraded materials, whereas the 'graded' approach, providing limited vocabulary across levelled bands, offered students a more efficient and effective approach.

Taguchi, Takayasu-Maass & Gorsuch (2004) conducted a study of elementary level Japanese university students. The control group continued with repeated readings, while the experimental group engaged in ER. The study was conducted for 17 weeks. There was no significant difference noted between the reading rates of the control and the experimental group.

Tanaka and Stapleton (2007), researching in Japanese high schools across Hokkaido in northern Japan, investigated reading comprehension and reading speed. 113 students were in each of the control and experimental groups. The authors note significantly higher reading speeds and improved comprehension among the experimental group, and opine that "Japanese high schools . . . should increase reading input within the students' linguistic levels both inside and outside of the classroom" (p. 115).

Iwahori (2008) researched reading speeds of 16 and 17-year old students (N=35) in a middle-ranking Japanese high school. Students were provided with graded readers to read outside school for seven weeks. The target set for students was to read 28 graded readers in this time period. Reading rates, measured pre- and post-reading, showed a thirty per cent increase in speed.

#### **4. ER effects on writing**

Does volume of reading inform and improve L2 writing ability? Various aspects of writing ability in relation to ER have been investigated. Writing ability has been variously evaluated using a range of approaches, and for different aspects, such as essay length (number of words written), number of clauses (C-Units, T-units), and number of error-free clauses. Analysis has been a mix of statistical, holistic, or a combination thereof (see e.g. Tsang, (1996) for the latter mixed methods approach). Typically, the approach is of pre-test and post-test, where students are required to write an essay - sometimes the same title, sometimes not.

The early work by Hafiz and Tudor has been influential, though it should be noted that this is in an ESL setting (where students can leave the class and be exposed to the target language in the surrounding environment), in the UK, not in an EFL setting (where students leave class and are within their L1 setting - the language is indeed 'foreign'). Similarly, Janopoulos' (1996) oft-cited finding that writing improves with increased volume of pleasure reading is within the L2 setting of a US university—which is an English as Second Language (ESL) study environment. Both studies differ to the EFL setting of Japan.

Increases due to extensive reading have been asserted for accuracy - measured both as a percentage of error-free T-units (Lai, 1993) and as percentage of syntactically and semantically acceptable sentences (Hafiz and Tudor, 1989; Tsang, 1996; Tudor and Hafiz, 1990). In other words, extensive reading is asserted to improve the accuracy of the written content. The range of vocabulary was asserted by Tudor and Hafiz (1990) to increase, while spelling and writing fluency was also noted to have improved (Hafiz and Tudor, 1989; Tudor and Hafiz, 1990; Lai, 1993). However, in Tsang's study (1996), spelling of the experimental group did not improve. Also, vocabulary showed no signs of improvement in two studies (Tudor and Hafiz, 1990; Tsang, 1996).

However, to add a cautionary note, as Lee and Hsu (2009) observe, the research is problematic in some respects, notably in the limited amount of extensive reading provided, and in practical restraints of the research locale, wherein relatively short time-frames were accorded for reading. For example, Mason and Krashen (1997) measure writing holistically,

non-specifically, and assert gains due to ER. More recently, Kirin (2000), researching in the local Asian context of Hong Kong, notes no writing improvements, though neglects to note what aspects of writing ability were being measured.

## **5. ER effects on vocabulary**

The literature pertaining to second language reading (not just extensive reading) and vocabulary is extensive, but not always entirely convincing, due to issues with research methodology.

In first language acquisition, incidental vocabulary acquisition appears to occur rapidly, with perhaps 3000 words per year learned from grades three to twelve of school (e.g. Nagy & Herman, 1987). Krashen (1989) has made strong claims in extending the efficacy of first language acquisition to second language study, in reference to his Input Hypothesis (IH). Within the Input Hypothesis framework, Krashen asserts that language learning occurs through a focus on meaningful input - on attention to message more than focus on form (Day, Omura & Hiramatsu, 1991). The incidental vocabulary learning hypothesis (Nagy, Herman, & Anderson, 1985) is the claim that ER should be the chosen approach as language learners can acquire vocabulary more speedily and effectively than through an explicit vocabulary learning approach (Coady, 1997; Wodinsky and Nation, 1998). Advocates of the strength of ER in this regard argue not just for uptake of a breadth of individual vocabulary items (words), but also the depth of vocabulary improvement due to repeated exposure to the same vocabulary items and increased knowledge of multi-word lexical items used in differing situations (Bahns & Eldaw, 1993; Kweon & Kim, 2008).

Dupuy and Krashen (1993) examined the learning of French by Spanish students, so will not be considered further here as the present delimited focus is on English as the target language, and focusing mainly on EFL rather than ESL setting. Similarly, for present purposes Pigada & Schmitt's (2006) study of a single Greek learner of 133 French words is not directly pertinent. Grabe and Stoller's (1997) study is additionally not of English, but of Portuguese in Brazil, and is problematic as this does not appear to be extensive reading, but of a wide intensive reading.

Hayashi's (1999) study is certainly more relevant, of one hundred Japanese university students learners of English. The students read in class for ninety minutes a week. Hayashi records significant correlation between the number of pages read, improved test scores, and improved vocabulary.

Horst, Cobb and Meara (1998), again though oft-cited, also does not appear to be evaluating effects of extensive reading in reference to the Bamford (2015) or Waring and McLean (2015) principles noted at the top of the present article. A single text, Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge* was read aloud to 34 Omani students of English. This was being read to, but was not students undertaking their own reading.

Mason and Krashen (1997) have conducted a number of ER experiments. Regarding vocabulary, in their first experiment repeater students were provided with books to read, and the average number read by students in the class was thirty. The control group continued with a regular intensive reading program. Gains are asserted for general English ability and motivation.

Pitts, White and Krashen's (1989) research study is a replication of the Saragi, Nation & Meister (1978) study, using Burgess' *Clockwork Orange* and the Russian-origin invented non-English nadsat words. The authors note small but significant level of incidental vocabulary learning.

Waring and Takaki (2003) designed their study in a way that sought to rule out any prior

exposure to the vocabulary items, following in similar suit to the nadsat approach discussed above, but using invented words for some common terms. Students were tested for recognition and retention of word meaning. Low recognition and retention rates are noted. Suggested are two main issues, which would have likely had a deleterious effect: firstly, that learners need repeated exposure to new vocabulary to ensure retention, and this was insufficient in the text; secondly that students are reading for overall comprehension, rather than for intensive vocabulary study. Thus, there is the suggestion that the very nature of Extensive Reading, of a regular LI-fashion reading, may in itself be unlikely to yield implicit learning of vocabulary items.

Kweon & Kim (2008) examined incidental vocabulary learning of 12 intermediate level Korean university students. Due to the nature of the assigned reading, it is again questionable whether this research really qualifies as ER, despite being oft-cited, as the reading was of five non-graded texts, which were designated by teachers. The authors assert significant incidental learning, and retention after a month. Conversely, Brown, Waring and Donkaewbua (2008) record almost no sustained incidental learning of vocabulary took place in their research, with only one out of twenty-eight items retained after three months.

In a useful overview prior to conducting the research cited above, Waring and Takaki (2003) pay particular attention to claims made, the types of studies, and the assortment of methodological shortcomings that have blighted some of the research, citing Coady (1997) and Nation (1999) in this regard. The authors delineate the issues, noting four main problems, which are given in full herein. Firstly is the issue of a lack of retention data—it is not clear for how long any new vocabulary that is purportedly gained may remain ‘known’ in some regard. It is an open question as to what extent a word is ‘learned’ if it is not retained. Secondly, the authors note a general failing to consider the extent to which a word is learned, referred to as ‘depth’ in the vocabulary literature. There are degrees of knowing and of using a word. Thirdly, and related to the second aspect, is the issue of effective assessment and of problematic instrumentation. Multiple choice tests have often been used, but these may not sufficiently indicate the depth of knowing. Fourthly, the frequency occurrence of words asserted to have been learned is rarely noted. To summarise Waring and Takaki (2003), there has been a volume of research into vocabulary acquisition, but even where the research appears to have been robustly conducted, findings are inconclusive concerning incidental vocabulary gains.

## 6. Conclusions

In reading and evaluating the most pertinent research papers published in the area of Extensive Reading, including many not discussed and referenced in the present paper, but which have informed present discussion, several points can be noted from close examination of the research literature. Two major issues are noted. Examining the literature reveals two major limitations. Firstly, the issue of very differing characterizations of Extensive Reading arises. Some research, which ostensibly pertained to effects of ER really is not—falling short due to the volume of reading (insufficient), and the types of texts. This issue should be minimized if subsequent researchers refer to Day (2015) and Waring & McLean (2015) in clearly establishing their research practices as occurring within a tighter ‘core’ ER. Ideally, the two frameworks can be subsequently combined, to offer what might hopefully be a lasting paradigmatic characterization, and ideally pithy one, so as to be readily usable. Secondly, the asserted positive effects of ER, are often made in reference to a very similar bank of repeatedly and insufficiently critically cited papers, which do not always sufficiently hold up on closer examination. Some of the literature is not really ER, and the methodology is suspect in some cases (even allowing



for the sub-optimally inexact nature that is real-life research).

To summarise, the findings thus far suggest that using extensive reading as an approach to teach new vocabulary would be ill-considered and inappropriate. Vocabulary is levelled in graded readers, and a tenet of Extensive Reading is that students should be reading reasonably freely and fluently, largely within their existing L2 capability, which plainly necessitates a familiarity with most of the vocabulary in the text. The findings indicate that a ‘vocabulary implicit’ approach is ineffective, and that ‘vocabulary explicit’ approaches should be used (see e.g. Nation & Newton, 1997). That noted, a prolonged ER program is likely to provide language learners increased depth of vocabulary knowledge, due to repeated exposure to the same limited vocabulary set, multiply and differing collocating and colligating which are fundamental for language improvement (Hoey, 2005, Sinclair, 2004) and this needs further subsequent research focus. Research is suggestive of increases in reading speed and of reading comprehension. Tanaka & Stapleton (2007) and Robb & Susser (1989) both note significant improvements in student reading due to ER. While improvements in aspects of writing might be intuitively appealing, there remains a relative paucity of robustly conducted research in this area with L2 students. Despite the volume of references to Hafiz and Tudor (1990) and Tudor and Hafiz (1989), due to the seemingly incorrect categorization of the research participants and the near certainty of contamination of the control, the go-to research looks to be Tsang (1996), who notes findings of increased accuracy of writing, but not of improved spelling.

It is the view of the present author that more widespread adoption of an Extensive Reading approach in Japanese universities and high schools would be beneficial for students, as additive rather than replacement ER (Robb & Kano, 2013). Gains appear likely in depth of vocabulary understanding, reading speed and comprehension, and possibly in writing. A forthcoming three-pronged research project into the efficacy of Extensive Reading at the present institution, Kobe Shoin Women’s University, will be undertaken by the present author, investigating volume of reading, attitudes to second language reading, and language ability.

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