Are There Any Negative Aspects to Doing Extensive Reading?

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Abstract

This research review covers whether or not there are any negative aspects to using extensive reading (ER) in English as a Foreign Language classroom situations. The positive effects of extensive reading have been espoused and trumpeted over the last decade almost to the exclusion of any negatives that such a learning approach might result in. Recently, due to research done at the university level, educators have been quick to adopt extensive reading, done particularly with Moodle reader, and have also required students to complete ER assignments in many courses, both inside and outside the classroom. These general questions about extensive reading could be asked: What problems in the research or the research design of extensive reading projects are ignored by those who support the extensive reading research? Are there any negative aspects relative to the students who are asked to do extensive reading? What, if any, are the negative aspects related to the teachers who assign or who are assigned to do extensive reading in their classes? The main or overarching question could be: Have educators and administrators been too quick to adopt such assignments without investigating if there are any possible negative aspects? This paper does not totally answer these questions. However, the intention of this literature review was to find out if such negative aspects exist and to reveal them to any educator who might be interested.

[Keywords] : *Extensive Reading, EFL Teaching, EFL Learning, EFL Research, Learning Strategies*

Introduction

In recent years, there has been a surge in the research, application, and discussion supporting the adoption of extensive reading (ER) in schools around the globe for both native speakers of English and for those learning English as a second language (ESL) or a foreign language (EFL). The proponents of this trend say that extensive reading can increase vocabulary, increase reading speed, and result in higher scores on standardized tests such as TOEIC and TOEFL. Additional benefits cited are easing the acquisition of the new vocabulary and increasing learner motivation due to positive feelings gained while reading. Thus, in an age where

university administrators are requiring teachers to get higher standardized test scores out of their students, many say that extensive reading is the way to go. They cite the pervasive literature that shows that using ER will indeed help students' increase their standardized test scores. As a result, some university administrators have begun to require that ER be used as an outside-of-class time assignment for many of their students' required classes. As any academic researcher can guess however, there are usually negatives associated with any type of learning or teaching implementation. This author acknowledges the positive aspects or benefits of ER, but this paper will outline some of the possible negative aspects which have be gleaned from the recent literature dealing with extensive reading.

Background

In order to clearly delineate and understand the negative aspects of extensive reading, it is perhaps necessarily to look back at a history of this learning technique. Ostensibly, extensive reading began to be applied to learners in English as a Second Language (ESL) situations and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) during the late 1990's, but was used primary for English speaking native speakers long before that time. In its most popular first language incarnation, extensive reading was done primarily by assigning out of class reading utilizing a library reading programs or by using SRA (Science Research Associates) reading comprehension laboratories in class. The SRA's were one or two page offerings which featured short readings of different levels with comprehension and vocabulary exercises after each reading. This technique was utilized for native speakers of English in the United States from the 60's and continued all the way through the 1990's. In the 1980's and increasing exponentially in the 1990's, second language education pioneered the use of both intensive reading (that type of reading that focuses of form and meaning) and extensive reading. What is extensive reading anyway? In contrast to intensive reading, extensive reading is done when reading is "focused on the language rather than the text." (Waring, 2012) Synonyms for extensive reading are "free reading," "book flood," and "reading for pleasure." (As will be seen later, the definition of ER seems to change depending on how it's practiced.) As the popularity and necessity of learning English grew due it becoming a world language, demands on getting beginners to increase their vocabulary and reading ability increased. Teachers began looking for other ways of making "comprehensible input" available to their students rather than using textbooks in the classroom utilizing intensive reading.

Though probably not the first practitioners of ER for ESL/EFL in the 1980's and 1990's, Day

and Bamford (1998) were probably the first to categorize a group of common traits that were basic to the use of extensive reading. They call them the Top Ten Principles for Teaching Extensive Reading (TTPTER): (1) The students should read as much as possible. (2) The students' reading materials should be well within the individual reader's grammatical and vocabulary competence. (3) These reading materials should also be varied in subject matter and character. (4) Students should choose their own reading material and are not compelled to finish uninteresting materials. (5) Reading normally should be for pleasure, information or general understanding. (6) Reading should be individual and silent. (7) Reading should be its own reward with few or no follow-up exercises after reading. (8) Students' reading speed should usually be faster when they read materials they can easily understand. (9) The teacher should be a role model who also orients the students to the goals of the extensive reading program. (10) The teacher should keep records of what has been read and guides students in materials selection. (Day and Bamford, 2002)

Most researchers in the field of extension reading tend to agree with the above statements. However, a cursory look at the research shows that a few of these traits are either ignored or glossed over or perhaps re-defined in order to meet a specific goal. Another well-known practitioner in the field of ER, Nation (2005) suggested that the following conditions should also be met when students learn by using extensive reading: (1) The focus should be on the general meaning of the English text. (2) The students should understand the type of learning that can occur through such reading. (3) That the student should have a choice of interesting and engaging books. (4) The students should do large quantities of reading at an appropriate level. (5) The extensive reading should be supported by other kinds of learning. As one can see, Nation's conditions overlap a great deal with the traits of Day and Bamford, but add other important points.

With these standards generally accepted and recognized by the ESL/EFL community, progress in improving ER programs was then furthered in other ways. To satisfy the requirement of being within the reader's grammatical and vocabulary competence (that is, at an appropriate level, TTPTER number 2 and Nation number 4), graded reader series became popular. Grader readers do for non-native English learners what the SRA laboratory did for native speaking learners. Students can choose materials at their own level (or teachers can help them decide) and after demonstrating competence at one level, they can move up to the next level. Recently, it has been the Oxford series and the Penguin/Longman series of graded readers that are the most used in the extensive reading community. Using these Graded Readers (GR) can satisfy a couple of the basic tenets of the TTPTER.

The next step in the extensive reading chronology was finding a way to keep accurate

records of students' progress. In the past, teachers either depended on library book check-out records or relied on the students' own record-keeping. Sometimes teachers required students to bring what they were reading to class and then recorded it at that time. Perhaps the most used method in recent times is Moodle. Moodle is a free open-source software learning management system that was employed in many academic situations even before being utilized for extensive reading. When adapted for ER, the system is called Moodle Reader. Perhaps created as early as 2007, the Moodle Reader Quiz Module helps to lessen the difficulties of applying ER by managing the quiz records of a large population of students. (Robb, 2007) Using a university's server on the internet, students can take quizzes on over 5500 graded readers and have their scores recorded and accessible to their instructors. The system is overseen by Thomas Robb, who has done a great deal of research in the field of ER which show that the benefits of ER in reading comprehension, writing performance, grammatical competence and vocabulary (Robb and Kano, 2013). The creation of Moodle Reader and the capability of any university to add the Moodle Reader software to their own servers sets up the impetus for this paper. However, as will be detailed later, using GR and utilizing the Moodle Reader module moves students further away from what some consider to be true extensive reading.

This particular institution (Saga University, a national university in Japan) began introducing extensive reading into classes using both the graded readers and Moodle Reader as early as 2012 with a project by Fellner and South (2012). Since that time, the positives have generally outweighed the negatives, particularly when the number of graded readers that students had access to was increased. In addition, when other instructors began to use the system here, various types of research were conducted and the results basically mirrored the positive results that most extensive reading researchers achieved in their experiments. In 2013, here at Saga University, a new preparation for study abroad program began. This International Study Abroad Curriculum (ISAC) enables students to take intensive classes in English so as to prepare them to study abroad at a foreign college or university. In addition to taking their regular class load from their departments, students in ISAC must take an additional three to five classes in English per term (for example, Intercultural Communication, Integrated Writing, or Critical Thinking). Thus, one of the goals of the program is for the students to achieve a high enough score on a standardized test (such as TOEFL) to enter university programs abroad or to reach a point in their learning where they could enter a regular English-speaking university level curriculum. In attempting to help the students achieve these goals, some instructors and administrators have decided that ER is a good requirement for the students and have begun to require teachers to include ER in the syllabus for 1st and

2nd year ISAC students. While agreeing that ER is a good learning strategy, some teachers at Saga University are reluctant to require their students to use it in their classes. So, the question is: Why is there still resistance in applying ER in this configuration (graded readers plus Moodle reader) at this university in particular? In surveying the literature, the author can only suppose that at least a few of the ideas in the following section may contain some of the reasons.

Some Negative Aspects of Extensive Reading

Before listing the negative aspects of extensive reading, there are some caveats to consider. First, since there are an incredible of amount of extensive reading studies being conducted and published, the author has certainly not covered all of them at the time of this writing. Second since the author has not done any extensive reading research himself, much of what is reported here is only in the purview of what he has seen, heard, or read. Third, some of these negatives apply specifically to the use of ER which employs graded readers and the Moodle reader platform. Also, these negative aspects may only pertain to the use of ER at this particular university (Saga University), but not other institutions of learning.

So, the following are some of the negative aspects of extensive reading (NAER): (1) Some researchers say ER which utilizes graded readers and Moodle reader is not "pure" ER. (2) As with most technology, there are software glitches and crashes. (3) Most ER research does not use control groups, thus comparisons to non−ER groups are spurious. (4) Many proponents of ER tend to ascribe the positive results of their research to ER only. (5) Some researchers claim that ER is not sufficient on its own to provide the entire L 2 lexicon. (6) Students are able to cheat on the Moodle Reader quizzes. (7) Students often do not have enough time or motivation to complete ER assignments. (8) ER may not be a match to many students' individual preferred learning style or learning strategy. (9) ER may not be a match for the new culture of non−readers (10) Requiring ER using the combination of graded readers and Moodle Reader and requiring a certain amount of books or words to be read might not be considered "reading for pleasure." (11) There are some students who prefer to be taught. (12) Incidental grammar might be learned using the graded readers and Moodle reader, but for some grammatical structures classroom teaching is required. (13) Despite the advances in record−keeping by using Moodle Reader, there is still a greater demand on a teacher's time and organization. These thirteen negative aspects will now be considered individually.

The first negative aspect is (1) Some researchers say ER which utilizes graded readers and Moodle reader is not "pure" ER. Many of those who pioneered the use of ER in the second

language or foreign language classroom, have been cited as saying that use of Moodle reader, requiring that students take the follow-up quizzes and or do book reports is not pure extensive reading. For example, one of these pioneers, Richard Day (co-creator of the aforementioned Top Ten Principles for Teaching Extensive Reading) has stated that more research has to be done to quantitatively and qualitatively show that a couple of the principles are true. He added that "Reading is its own reward" (TTPTER number 7) is controversial because of Moodle Reader. The requirement to take quizzes or do a book report and having ER as part of class requirements takes away from reading as pleasure. Students may feel forced to complete assignments as opposed to reading because they like it. He adds "…I am not a big supporter of the idea of book reports and traditional ways of comprehension question afterward, but there are other ways in which students can do post-reading activities." Also "Teachers become a role model" (TTPTER number 9) is difficult to prove in the situation at Saga University. Here, it seems that students are given the assignment to read at least 60,000 words and then are left on their own to complete the assignment or not. It is unknown whether or not teachers do activities in class which incorporate the use of ER and coordinate it to other activities such as listening, speaking, or writing. Also, referring to TTPTER (4), what students want to read something that is not represented in the graded readers?

Negative aspect number two is (2) As with most technology, there are software glitches and crashes. In this day of the increased use of technology, specifically computers, cellphones, tablets, and the internet, there is also the increased chance of servers crashing and software glitches. In the literature, many researchers report that the problems have hampered learning or disrupted accurate grading. Hunt (2014), also reported that students using iOS or Android applications with similar management systems to Moodle Reader often experience glitches. Gogan, Sirbu, and Draghici (2015) reported in using Moodle there is an "…increased risk of the occurrence of technical problems (Internet Server overload) and being unable to make changes without the administrator." Finally, Boskovic et al (2014) reported that students often have problems initially logging in which could be bothersome. In any case, if these negatives occur, both teachers and students, who are dependent on this technology to grade and be graded, are put in the position of either having to wait, provide ways to make up grades, or perhaps substitute other activities.

The third negative aspect (3) Most ER research does not use control groups, thus comparisons to non-ER groups are spurious. In reading most of the research, it was found that those who were major proponents of ER and thus wanted to provide the experience to all of their students, or those instructors who were just trying ER in several classes

apparently failed to also include a control group of those students of approximately equal ability to compare the ER students to. (It is unknown if this is the case in the research done at Saga University.) For example, Lin (2010) has criticized many previous ER studies for lacking control groups. Here at Saga University, the only study the author encountered thus far had a control group, but that group was mixed in the same class with students of the ER group, so basically it is unknown what effect the "mixing" had on the research.

Negative aspect number four (4) Many proponents of ER tend to ascribe the positive results of their research to ER only. In the case of this negative aspect, the evidence is purely anecdotal. However, there are more than a few cases where researchers mention in the concluding sections of their papers that one of the limitations on their research is that they could not know if the positive results they attribute to ER were also attributable to other variables which could have helped the students improve. These other variables could be activities the students did on their own such as going to English movies, listening to music in English, and reading English texts in other classes. In the case of the ISAC program at Saga University, the gains could also be attributed to an increase in the number of English classes the students have to take. Also, there is anecdotal evidence implying that many of the positive results in ER research can be ascribed to a few "outlier" students who fell in love with reading and thus read an amount way above the amount of an average student.

For negative aspect number (5) Some researchers claim that ER is not sufficient on its own to provide the entire L 2 lexicon, there is a great debate that still continues. The debate is mostly between the ideas of researchers Cobb (2007) and Parry (1997) versus those of McQuillan and Krashen (2008). Both groups agree that ER provides good lexical input, but while Cobb and Parry doubt the sufficiency of ER in attaining a high enough vocabulary level to be able to reach native speaker levels, McQuillan and Krashen say that in over 2 years an English language learner can learn over one million-plus words, far more than what is required in say, a college environment. Cobb (2008) countered that the "million-plus" figure is only based on learners reading oversimplified texts (i.e. graded readers). Thus, the idea that ER can prepare a student for the rigors of a regular English university is far-fetched.

Negative aspect number six (6) Students are able to cheat on the Moodle Reader quizzes, is also one based on anecdotal evidence derived from the author overhearing or noticing several conversations between teachers for whom their students had been sharing Moodle reader quiz scores amongst themselves. For example, student A takes a quiz and passes it, but A shares the correct answers or notes with student B or perhaps even C and D and so on. Even though the questions are randomly generated, the student who passed could conceivably guide the other students while they are taking the quizzes. Thus, students who

have not read a particular book may get credit for reading a book because they were able to receive guidance from another student. Apparently, major incidents like this can be easily picked out (or are automatically flagged on Moodle reader?) but what of the ones in which only a couple of students share answers but continue to do it over a long period? In both cases, the students are not really doing ER, but just trying to pass the class. At least one other researcher has stated that cheating occurs, for example, Scully (2013) has speculated that there were "quizzes done without books being read" and that possibly "cheat sheets" were being circulated amongst the students.

Which leads to negative aspect (7) Students often do not have enough time or motivation to complete ER assignments. Students often have lots of time pressure to complete assignments even without ER. So, imagine a student who has a regular class load, plus at least three to five extra ISAC classes, homework in each class, is a member of a club or circle, and who almost inevitably gets a part-time job. Imagine if this student has an ER requirement on top of all that. This will certainly encumber the student's already busy schedule and may lead to the behavior exemplified in negative aspect (6).

Negative aspects eight and nine are related. (8) ER may not be a match to many students' individual preferred learning style or learning strategy and (9) ER may not be a match for the new culture of non-readers, are both concerned with the students' preferred learning strategies. These days, the terms learning strategy or learner strategy has evolved into the phrase "self-regulation" in which a learner governs their own learning. In either case, the learner has "thoughts and actions, consciously chosen and operationalized, to enable them to carry out a multiplicity of tasks." (Cohen, 2011) Thus, in both negative aspects 8 and 9, learners who may be required to do extensive reading, may not enjoy it or may not even do it because it is not their preferred way of learning. Perhaps intertwined with that is the problem where students today who are not used to reading long texts of any kind because of the "internet culture," may feel hard pressed to read even a graded reader. It could be argued that these students would not be able to adapt to a rigorous academic program overseas anyway, but still these types of students are generally left out of the discussion in ER research.

The details of negative aspect number (10) Requiring ER using the combination of graded readers and Moodle Reader and requiring a certain amount of books or words to be read might not be considered "reading for pleasure," can be referred back to the discussion of negative aspect (1). Does requiring students to read a certain amount of words per semester constitute reading for pleasure? Is that the essence of pure ER? The proponents of ER learning would say that students may not feel that ER is pleasurable at first, but that they

will develop a love for reading through ER later. To this author, anecdotal evidence from students has shown otherwise.

As has been discussed, there are many students who have a demonstrated positive effect by using ER, but there are some who just prefer classroom learning. Thus, negative aspect (11) There are some students who prefer to be taught, should be considered. Yamashita (2013) discussed the effect of ER on reading attitudes and found that even though most students experienced an increased intellectual benefit from ER, there were still some students who felt that it was the teacher who should be guiding their learning. Yamashita further states that "This implies that teachers should not take the extreme view that the ER approach is always superior in cultivating positive feelings toward reading and improving excitement about learning for all kinds of readers."

Negative aspects (12) and (13) both relate to the responsibility of the teacher in the classroom. Lee, et al (2015) states that caution needs to be used when using the results of ER studies to make policy decisions. Their study revealed that though students may learn some grammar as a kind of "afterthought" or incidentally by doing ER, classroom instruction on specific grammar points is still required. This basically echoes the belief that Day has stated (Tabata-Sandom, 2016) that an instructor needs to be a guide and support for the students' learning. A lack of modeling, guidance, and instruction illustrates the problem of negative aspect (13) Despite the advances in record-keeping by using Moodle Reader, there is still a greater demand on a teacher's time and organization. If teachers are asked to employ ER, then perhaps an entire syllabus or curriculum will have to be updated to support ER in various ways. Teachers will still have to teach grammar (and culture, listening, speaking, writing, etc.), but teachers will also be asked to answer student questions related to the graded readers, be asked to help fix glitches in the Moodle reader system, have to meet with other instructors to check for cheating, and perhaps even model how to do ER for the students. This involves a rearrangement of a teacher's time and responsibilities, increasing the time spent on ER related activity and decreasing the time spent on other teaching activities in the classroom, on grading, on research, and perhaps even interfering with other reading the teacher wants to assign. In addition, the use of ER may even reduce the amount of time spent on the more communicative aspects of a language curriculum. Given time and further research, it is hoped that future applications of ER will give the learner chances to activate not only one half of the passive forms of communication (reading), but also the three other ways (listening, reading, and writing).

Conclusion and Suggestions

To sum up, in presenting the 13 negative aspects of ER, this writer is in no way against ER even with graded readers. The detailed discussion of the list of negative aspects in fact shows that ER is still a successful method of learning. However, there is doubt as to how it is employed and even more doubt if it is forced upon unwilling teachers and of course, unwilling students. Even though there are only 13 negative aspects discussed in this article it is possible there are other unfavorable aspects of ER that have not been covered. The discussion of some of the negative aspects show that ER has to be used in a balanced way, mostly by increasing the teacher's role. Other aspects also show that the research concerning ER needs to be improved. Control groups need to be used, definitions need to be tightened, and data needs to be confirmed. In addition, student needs (time, self-regulation, preferences in learning) and teacher needs (time, self-expression, freedom in curriculum and lesson development) should be considered. Hopefully further research (with the improvements suggested above) will yield not only better results (fewer negatives but even more positives), but results which help show the best way of implementing ER.

In view of the specific situation here at Saga University, the author feels that surely ER can continue to be used, but that perhaps teachers who are familiar with the graded readers and Moodle reader should spearhead its use. Teachers should not be forced to incorporate ER into their syllabus until they are familiar with the system, are supportive of it, and can model it to their students. On the other hand, if teachers do not want to use ER either because they are not familiar with it or they have other ways of giving students the proper lexical input, they should not be forced to utilize it in their classes. In addition, if the ISAC students in particular are required to do ER and do it for two years, teachers who know the system well and are proponents of the theory behind the practice, should teach the classes ER is a requirement for. Furthermore (this suggestion is ISAC program specific), it is recommended that if ER is used that the classes be made of up both the lower and upper levels of ISAC at the same time. This prevents uneven exposure to the method (and students complaining that while they had to do ER, other students in another class at the same level did not). This may entail using ER in the ISAC lecture classes which are also open to non-ISAC students. Perhaps the most important suggestion is this: If using ER is deemed to be so important, particularly for ISAC students, perhaps an additional class called Integrated Reading should be added to a revised ISAC curriculum. This class would be able to utilize all of the tenets of "pure" ER, both in class and out of class and the instructor would be able to both model and encourage the student during class time. To conclude, if these suggestions are taken under

consideration, surely the ISAC program and the continued implementation of ER by using graded readers and Moodle reader will improve.

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