

# 15 Extensive Reading, Vocabulary Development and Attitudes to Learning English

*Sharifa Saif Al-Sheedi*  
*Batinah North Region*

## 1 INTRODUCTION

This study examines the effect of extensive reading on both learners' vocabulary development and their attitudes to learning English. I was motivated to do this study because, over the years, reading was one consistent difficulty I had noticed in my learners in General Education classes. Influenced by the work I did on the BA TESOL related to the teaching of reading, I was interested in finding out whether extensive reading - given its focus on reading for pleasure without teacher intervention - might support learners' development as readers of English.

## 2 EXTENSIVE READING IN LANGUAGE LEARNING

### 2.1 What is Extensive Reading?

Nuttall (1996: 127) defines extensive reading (ER) as "...the private world of reading for our own interest". Day & Bamford (1998) see ER as reading texts rapidly for real-life purposes of enjoyment and information. They state that the reader's attention should be focused on the meaning and content of the text rather than on the language. An extensive reading program (ERP) is

a supplementary class library scheme, attached to an English course, in which pupils are given the time, encouragement, and materials to read pleasurable, at their own level, as many books as they can, without the pressures of testing or marks. (Davis, 1995: 329)

### 2.2 Characteristics of ER

Day & Bamford (1998), Prowse (2002), and Robb (2002) identify a number of characteristics of ER. It can be done in the classroom by setting aside a period of time for silent reading or out of the classroom by allowing learners to borrow books

and read them at home. Also, a variety of reading materials must be available for learners to choose from (Macleod 2002; Davis, 1995). The concept of choice is fundamental here, as in ER, which Krashen (1993) calls 'free voluntary reading', learners choose what to read but can also decide not to continue a book if it fails to interest them. It is also important in ER that learners are reading for pleasure, enjoyment and general understanding; there are no tests or comprehension questions after reading. Another characteristic of ER is that learners should not require dictionaries very often - i.e. the texts should be easily understandable.

### **2.3 Benefits of ER**

Several benefits of ER are identified in the literature. Firstly, ER promotes reading skills development. It encourages learners to read a variety of material and builds up their ability to deal with longer texts. This allows learners to be "more positive about starting new texts", more engaged with what they read and better readers even in other subjects (Davis, 1995: 330). Day & Bamford (1998) also state that all studies they reviewed on the effect of ER showed gains in reading ability. ER can also foster the development of healthy reading habits (Renandya, Rajan & Jacobs, 1999).

Secondly, ER develops learners' language skills. It can consolidate previously learned language and enhance learners' knowledge of grammar, text structure, and vocabulary (Yu, 1993). Vocabulary can be learned incidentally through ER, and in fact it has been claimed that "incidental learning of words during reading may be the easiest and single most powerful means of promoting large scale vocabulary growth" (Nagy & Herman, 1987, cited in Day & Bamford, 1998: 17). Additionally, Krashen (1984), Davis (1995) and Day & Bamford (1998) reviewed a number of studies and found that learners who engaged in ER showed an overall improvement in writing skills and increased confidence and fluency in speaking.

Thirdly, ER promotes more positive attitudes towards studying the language in general and reading in that language in particular (Day & Bamford, 1998; Yamashita, 2004). Numerous factors, of course, influence learners' attitudes to language learning and reading; however, there is evidence from several studies that ER is likely to produce positive attitudes towards reading and increase motivation to study English. Attitudes toward the L2 culture and people as well may be influenced by ER, especially if learners tend to read about the target culture and people. The flexibility of ER also gives learners the freedom to follow their own interests in reading, and this may develop positive attitudes to reading. Furthermore, the non-assessed and private nature of ER may also help learners feel more positive about it.

Finally, ER contributes to learners' personal growth. It helps readers to use thinking skills more effectively and to develop "a wider knowledge of the world and an increased understanding of other people" (Davis, 1995: 330).

### **3 METHOD**

#### **3.1 Research Questions**

As noted earlier, this study examined the impact of ER on learners' vocabulary knowledge and attitudes towards English. The specific research questions I addressed were:

1. To what extent do learners make use of an extensive reading programme (ERP)?
2. Is learners' vocabulary knowledge better after a period of ER than it was before?
3. Do learners' attitudes to English and reading English change following a period of ER and, if so, in what ways?

#### **3.2 Data Collection**

The study was conducted over a period of two and a half months with a Grade 4 General Education class. There were 26 learners in this class (14 boys and 12 girls) and they were mostly 10 years old. This was their first year of learning English. I set up a classroom library which contained familiar stories such as Arab folk tales; I also included stories from the Basic Education curriculum. Learners were given time to borrow books and I kept records of the books that were being borrowed. Data to examine the impact of this ERP on the learners were collected through a questionnaire and tests.

##### **3.2.1 Questionnaire**

Questionnaires allow us to collect quantitative or qualitative information about people's interests, habits, opinions or attitudes. Two questionnaires were used in this study; one was about attitudes to learning English, the second about attitudes to reading in English. Each questionnaire contained 12 Likert-scale items (see findings below). The questionnaires, which were in Arabic, were administered twice - once before the ERP and again at the end.

##### **3.2.2 Tests**

I administered a vocabulary test at the start of the ERP and twice at the end. The first test contained twelve unknown words. The first post-test was the same as the pre-test; the second post-test contained 12 words all from the books that had been borrowed.

## 4 FINDINGS

### 4.1 Frequency of Borrowing

Records were kept of how many books the learners borrowed during the ERP. On average, the learners borrowed 21.23 books, with the maximum number borrowed being 31 and the minimum 8. Sixteen learners borrowed more than 20 books, eight borrowed between 10 and 19, while two borrowed fewer than 10.

### 4.2 Questionnaires

Figure 1 compares pre- and post ERP responses to the attitudes towards learning English questionnaire by showing the number of learners agreeing with each of the 12 statements on this instrument.

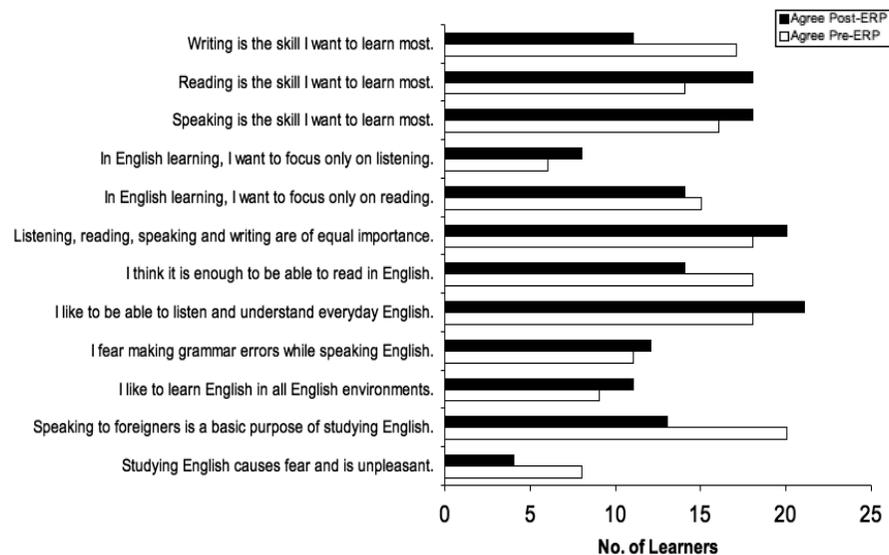


Figure 1: Attitudes to reading English - before and after ERP

Overall, learners' attitudes were stable, though there were some changes. For example, after the ERP fewer learners said they felt that learning English causes fear and is unpleasant. After the ERP, more learners also said that they like to be able to listen to and understand everyday English. More learners, too, said that reading is the skill they want to learn most. Interestingly, though, after the ERP the number of learners who agreed that communicating with foreigners is a basic purpose of learning English decreased from 20 to 13.

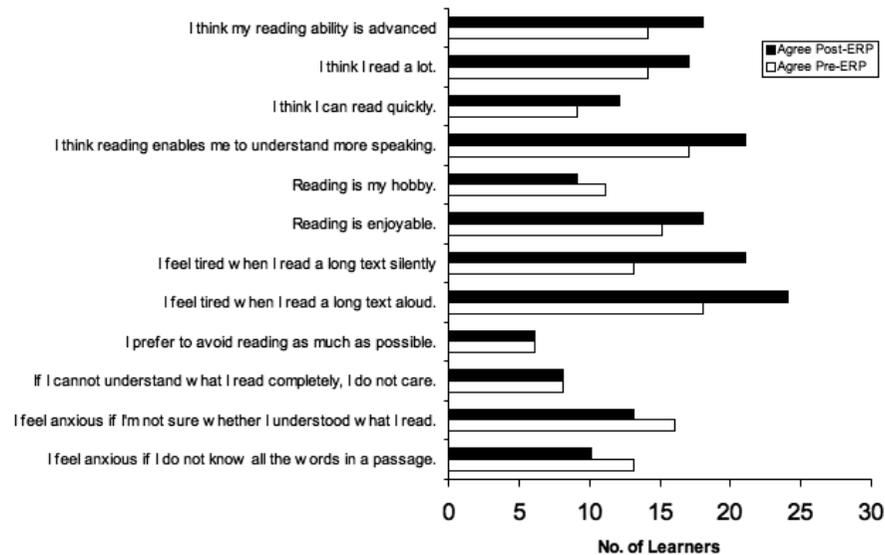


Figure 2: Attitudes to learning English - before and after ERP

Figure 2 compares pre- and post ERP responses to the attitudes towards reading English questionnaire by showing the number of learners agreeing with each of the 12 statements on this questionnaire. After the ERP, the number of learners who said they felt anxious when do they do not know all the words or understand the text was less than it was before; at the same time, though, there was no change in the number of learners who said they did not care if they did not understand completely and who said they preferred to avoid reading if possible. The biggest differences in the two questionnaires were on the two items about reading long texts (aloud and silently); in both cases, after the ERP more learners said that reading long texts was tiring. Additionally, after the ERP more learners agreed that reading is enjoyable, that they can read quickly, and that they can read a lot.

### 4.3 Tests

Table 1 summarizes the results of the vocabulary tests used in this study.

Table 1: Scores out of 12 by 26 learners on three vocabulary tests

Learner	Pre-Test	Post-Test 1	Post-Test 2	Learner	Pre-Test	Post-Test 1	Post-Test 2
1	3	7	5	14	3	5	1
2	6	8	5	15	6	6	6
3	6	7	7	16	8	9	8
4	5	5	2	17	3	5	3
5	3	4	4	18	6	5	3
6	10	8	10	19	6	8	8
7	3	5	7	20	3	6	10
8	4	7	6	21	6	4	2
9	6	12	9	22	4	8	6
10	4	9	9	23	3	6	6
11	7	12	12	24	6	4	2
12	4	7	2	25	9	9	10
13	6	7	8	26	1	8	3

The average scores for each test were 5.04 for the pre-test, 6.96 for the first post-test and 5.92 for the second post-test. The class thus performed better on both post-tests than they did on the pre-test, with the first post-test being that where they did best.

## 5 DISCUSSION

I will now discuss each of my research questions in turn.

### 5.1 Learners' Use of the ERP

My first question asked about the extent to which the learners actually engaged with the ERP. To answer this question I kept records of how many books the learners borrowed during the study (which, as noted above, lasted two and a half months). I thought that 40 books would be a reasonable number to expect individual learners to borrow during this period; none borrowed this many and the average was actually quite lower at just over 21 books. Nonetheless, with a total of 552 books borrowed by the class during the study, it is reasonable to conclude that the learners did engage with the ERP.

### 5.2 Learners' Knowledge of Vocabulary

The second research question related to learners' knowledge of vocabulary and how the ERP may have influenced this. Overall, the class did better on the post-ERP vocabulary tests than they did on the pre-test. Also, learners who borrowed more books also tended to score more on the tests. It is important to note that these results point to a trend rather than to a definite relationship, and that there were exceptions; some

learners who borrowed many books did not show improvements in their vocabulary scores; other learners who borrowed fewer books showed progress.

### **5.3 Learners' Attitudes to English and Reading**

The final research question focused on learners' attitudes to English and reading. The comparison of the pre- and post-ERP questionnaires produced results which are somewhat difficult to interpret. In the questionnaire about attitudes to English, there were few significant differences in the pre- and post-ERP responses. Perhaps one change of note is that, after the ERP, the number of learners who said learning English was a negative experience was halved compared to before the ERP. This might point to more positive attitudes in the learners; however, at the same time, the notable drop in the number of learners who said that communicating with foreigners is a basic purpose of studying English may point to less positive attitudes. Overall, I cannot conclude that after the ERP, learners' attitudes to English were significantly more positive than they were before.

In terms of how the learners felt about reading English, the post-ERP results do point to some changes in their attitudes. After the ERP, more learners agreed that reading is enjoyable, that they can read quickly, and that they can read a lot. However, these positive results must be considered against the findings which show no change in the number of learners who said they did not care if they did not understand a text completely and who said they preferred to avoid reading if possible. The number of learners who felt that reading long texts was difficult also increased after the ERP. So, once again, any claims about the positive impact of the ERP on learners' attitudes to reading in English must be made cautiously.

### **5.4 Limitations**

Several limitations of this study need to be acknowledged. The main one is that I cannot make any claims about the direct impact of the ERP on learners' knowledge of vocabulary and attitudes to English and reading. Any changes in these variables which I discovered after the ERP may have been influenced by other factors outside this study. The vocabulary tests I used could have perhaps been more extensive in order to assess learners' knowledge of a wider range of words and, additionally, the fact that learners borrowed books does not necessarily mean that they read them. Some interviews with learners would have thus allowed me to explore what precisely they did with the borrowed books.

## **6 CONCLUSION**

Nuttall (1982, cited in Yu, 1993) claims that "the best way to improve one's knowledge of a foreign language is to go and live among its speakers. The next best way is to read extensively in it". This study was motivated by a belief in this claim and I feel that, despite somewhat ambivalent results, the ERP I experimented with here did have a positive effect on my learners. This study has encouraged me to continue exploring the use of ER with my learners; by providing continued opportunities for them to read widely in English I am allowing them to see that reading can be a source of pleasure and at the same time supporting their learning of the language more generally.

## REFERENCES

- Davis, C. (1995). Extensive reading: An expensive extravagance. *ELT Journal*, 49, 329-336.
- Day, R. & Bamford, J. (1998). *Extensive reading in the second language classroom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Krashen, S. D. (1984). *Writing: Research, theory and applications*. New York: Prentice Hall.
- Krashen, S. D. (1993). *The power of reading: Insights from the research*. Eaglewood, Colorado: Libraries Unlimited.
- Macleod, L. (2002). Extensive reading as a part of the curriculum. In Troudi, S., Riley, S., & Coombe, C. (Eds.). (2002). *EFL challenges in the new millennium*. UAE: TESOL Arabia.
- Nuttall, C. (1996). *Teaching reading skills in a foreign language*. Oxford: Heinemann.
- Prowse, P. (2002). Top ten principles for teaching extensive reading: A response. *Reading in a Foreign Language*, 14, 142-145.
- Renandya, W.A., Rajan, B. R. S., & Jacobs, G. M. (1999). Extensive reading with adult learners of English as a second language. *RELC Journal*, 30, 39-60.
- Robb, T. (2002). Extensive reading in an Asian context - an alternative view. *Reading in a Foreign Language*, 14, 146-147.
- Yamashita, J. (2004). Reading attitudes in L1 and L2 and their influence on L2 extensive reading. *Reading in a Foreign Language*, 16, 1-19.
- Yu, V. (1993). Extensive reading programs: How can they best benefit the teaching and learning of English? *TESL Reporter*, 26(1), 1-9.