The Effects of Extensive Reading on Adult Reading Behavior and Proficiency in an Intensive English Program

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Extensive Reading (ER) has been included in EFL instruction for decades, but it has yet to become a regular feature of ESL curricula. The ever-growing number of positive reports from practitioners and researchers indicates that ER can play a vital role in language learning in all contexts. Although the implicit learning ER promotes is difficult to empirically establish as causal, research continues to seek evidence for the theory-based claims of ER's efficacy. This paper presents results of a two-year investigation of an ER course in a university-based intensive English program in the US. Analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data from over 200 pre-matriculated ESL students reveals an increase in motivation and positive attitudes towards reading in English and significant gains on some of the proficiency measures; thus, supporting the ongoing inclusion of ER as a regular component of ESL curricula.

Extensive Reading (ER) has not been widely implemented in ESL adult language learning contexts, although for decades it has been well-received in many EFL contexts. The argument that adult learners in an ESL context have access to unlimited English language resources and interlocutors has been used to distinguish teaching and learning language in SL and FL contexts. Yet, it is not uncommon to find that ESL learners who share the same first language typically spend most of their time out of class with each other, particularly when their proficiency in the L2 is limited. Also, with easy access to L1 media today, many of our learners get very little L2 input or interaction outside the classroom. Additionally, academically-bound ESL students are increasingly diverse in both their L1 and L2 literacy experiences. For these reasons, our students need more time for reading in English.

ER is well-supported as a means of second language acquisition by theory and research. Whether from the perspective of fluency before accuracy development (Ellis, 2004; Grabe, 2004; Hudson, 2007; McGowan-Gilhooly, 1991), the role of implicit learning (Ellis, N., 1995; Nation, 2001), or research on the impact of ER on a range of language proficiencies (Elley, 1991; Elley and Mangubhai, 1983; Flahive and Bailey, 1993; Janopoulos, 1986; Mason and Krashen, 1997; Nation, 1997; Takase, 2008, 2009; Tsang, 1996; Waring, 2009; Waring and Takakei, 2003), ER is an excellent means of providing the volume and frequency of language input necessary for second language acquisition. For these reasons, an ER course was implemented in an intensive English program (IEP) in the United States. This paper presents the initial results of a mixed-method analysis of the effects this ER course is having on the reading behavior and proficiency of a cohort of students.

The IEP Context

The IEP at Indiana University is designed for pre-matriculated adult learners, most of whom expect to pursue degrees at U.S. universities. The English for General Academic Purposes curriculum is delivered in seven levels of instruction, each lasting seven weeks. Since the program includes true-beginners, students typically do not have sufficient proficiency to engage in ER until Level Four. In this level, students have five class hours daily and an equal amount of homework is expected. The classes are made up of no more than 15 heterogeneous-L1 speakers of English.

There are a total of approximately thirty-three 50-minute periods of ER in each seven-week session. Of these, 27 are dedicated reading days. The students are evaluated on a pass/fail basis for attendance and the completion of the non-reading assignments such as a reading log, three or four journal entries, and a self-evaluation. Although we were convinced of the value of ER before we started, we engaged in a study to see if and how our particular instantiation of ER benefitted our learners.

Study Design

The research activity has been motivated by one research question: Will ER benefit our learners, and if so, in what ways? As Waring (2001) has clearly revealed, ER research is fraught with difficulties because of its very nature, and this was certainly true in our context. First, the course is very short, and the same students cannot be tracked over long periods of time because they do no advance as a cohort. Second, the inherent focus of ER on large amounts of reading without regular comprehension checks precluded adding tests to investigate development of specific language features such as vocabulary or syntax. Third, the expected value of the course was such that it was unethical to withhold it from some of the sections of Level Four students, thus eliminating the possibility for a control group. We were able to collect data from pre-and post-scores of a reading diagnostic test (EPER, 2007), the regularly administered Institutional Testing Program (ITP) paper-based TOEFL and the IEP Placement Test. We also gathered copies of student produced classroom materials.

Results

Quantitative Data

The EPER Placement/Progress Test was administered within two days of the beginning of the IEP session and again within 4 days of the end of the session. The test is made up of four cloze passages with a total of 74 possible answers. The score and related level letter the students receive indicates their intensive reading level. According to Day and Bamford (1998), the learners should begin their ER with books that are at least two levels lower than their test level. As you can see in Table 1, it is extremely difficult to find texts easy enough for learners who test into Level A and B. Learners read at least 10 "books" at one level before progressing to the next. In spite of how few words, cumulatively, students beginning with books easier than Level A read, the results of the pre and post EPER Diagnostic/Placement tests indicate that those who started with lower scores made greater gains than those who started with higher scores. Nonetheless, students at all levels showed significant improvement on the EPER Placement/Progress Test and almost half of them (43%) improved by at least one EPER level. Although they all made progress, those who began in Levels A and B showed nearly twice as much improvement on average as those who began in Levels C and D.

Table 1. Paired Sample T-test of Pre-Post EPER Test Scores by Level

Starting Level	n	Pre-EPER Test		Post-EPER Test		Average Gain
		M (min-max)	SD	M (min-max)	SD	
A	17	18.2 (7-25)	5.71	29.2 (19-42)	6.93	11*
B	16	29.3(26-32)	2.06	37.7 (32-46)	4.01	8.3*
C	100	40.3 (33-45)	3.62	46.6 (30-60)	5.98	6.6*
D	82	50.8 (46-59)	3.71	54.3 (42-64)	4.71	5*

*p<0.05

Note. Only a subset of scores was available from the 291 students who signed consent forms.

The IEP Placement Test that is given before and after every session includes multiple-choice reading, listening, and grammar sections and a timed written essay. The students are placed into a level on the basis of a cumulative score of all parts of the test, meaning there is proficiency variation in each skill. As a result, the reading scores of the students in this study fall into all seven levels of the program although most of the scores place students in Levels Three through Five (see Table 2). The groups which show the most improvement are those with scores between 12 and 20, or those students who are not quite on level in their reading proficiency. Taken all together, though, there is a statistically significant improvement on the reading section of the IEP Placement test (see Table 3).

Table 2. IEP Placement Test Reading Scores (2009-2011)

Level	Test Cut Off Scores	Students' Initial Placement Scores	Students' Post Placement Scores	% Students Above Initial Placement Score	% Students Above Level 4
Level 1	0-11	8	4	0.00%	0.00%
Level 2	12-15	32	33	59.40%	0.00%
Level 3	16-19	54	44	46.30%	22.20%
Level 4	20-22	53	46	47.20%	47.20%
Level 5	23-25	45	51	31.10%	53.30%
Level 6	26-29	21	28	9.50%	76.20%
Level 7	30-35	8	7	0.00%	75.00%
Above	36-40	0	0	0.00%	0.00%
Total	40	222	222	38.70%	38.30%

Table 3. Paired-sample T-tests for Pre- and Post-IEP Placement Test Reading Section

	n	M	SD	Sig.
Pre	222	20.3	4.92	
Post	222	20.9	5.15	5.13*

$p<0.05$

It was not possible, however, to see a significant improvement in the scores of the reading section on the ITP paper-based TOEFL (see Table 4). Since this test is not required when entering the IEP, and since more students enter the IEP in Level Four than in any other, there were only 122 students of the 291 possible who had TOEFL scores from the end of the previous session and the end of the session in which they participated in the study.

Table 4. Paired-sample T-tests for Pre- and Post- ITP TOEFL Reading Section

	n	M	SD	Sig.
Pre	122	40.9	4.97	
Post	122	39.9	6.18	-0.1

Qualitative Data

Classroom artifacts including journals, reading logs, book checkout lists, and self-evaluations were collected. To date, only a portion of the journals have been analyzed for recurrent themes. Nonetheless, several themes have emerged from the data thus far. Students overwhelmingly come to enjoy ER and recognize the value of more reading in English. They are also quite surprised by how "easy" the texts need to be for them to read fluently with good comprehension. The journal entries also indicate that students have

had very little exposure to complete English texts and for some students in their first language as well. Overall, the students indicate desire to continue ER in the future, but this is unsubstantiated other than by the fact that many students retake the ER Elective offered for Level Six and Seven students.

Conclusions

Most of the quantitative and qualitative data reveal that our ER program is benefitting our students at least in their general reading proficiency and in their appreciation of reading in English. More specifically, the data suggest that ER is particularly beneficial for the weaker readers in Level 4. The non-significant results of the ITP TOEFL may reflect the small number of reading scores included in the analysis, but more likely, the results reflect the difficulty of detecting slow, incremental implicit learning by standardized tests. While it would be more satisfying to see similar improvements across all levels of proficiency and all the test measures, we are pleased that this course appears to level the playing field of the Level 4 cohort and brings a greater percentage of students to readiness for the next level.

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