

THE ROLE OF EXTENSIVE READING IN DEVELOPING EFL LEARNERS’ READING COMPREHENSION

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Abstract. *Reading comprehension is a fundamental component of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning because it enables learners to access academic knowledge, authentic information, and international communication. However, many EFL learners experience difficulties in understanding English texts due to limited vocabulary, insufficient background knowledge, slow reading speed, lack of reading practice, and excessive dependence on word-by-word translation. Extensive reading has been widely recognized as an effective approach that can address these challenges by encouraging learners to read large amounts of relatively easy and interesting materials for general understanding and enjoyment. This article examines the role of extensive reading in developing EFL learners’ reading comprehension and analyzes the linguistic, cognitive, affective, and metacognitive benefits associated with extensive reading. The study employs a qualitative literature-based methodology, drawing on major theoretical perspectives and previous research concerning extensive reading, second language acquisition, vocabulary development, reading fluency, and learner autonomy. The analysis demonstrates that regular extensive reading can contribute to improved comprehension, vocabulary growth, reading fluency, background knowledge, inferential ability, and reading motivation. It also reduces learners’ dependence on dictionaries and word-by-word translation by encouraging them to infer meaning from context. However, the effectiveness of extensive reading depends on appropriate material selection, adequate reading volume, learner motivation, teacher guidance, and systematic monitoring. The article concludes that extensive reading should be integrated into EFL curricula as a complementary approach to intensive reading and explicit language instruction.*

Keywords: *extensive reading, EFL, reading comprehension, reading fluency, vocabulary acquisition, learner autonomy, reading motivation, second language acquisition, contextual learning, English language teaching.*

INTRODUCTION

Reading comprehension is one of the most important skills in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education. In academic, professional, and everyday contexts, learners are frequently required to understand written texts ranging from textbooks and scientific articles to websites, news reports, instructions, and digital content. Consequently, the development of effective reading comprehension is essential for learners who intend to study, work, or communicate in English-speaking and international environments. Despite its importance, reading comprehension remains challenging for many EFL learners. Students may understand individual words but struggle to understand the overall meaning of a text. Other common difficulties include limited vocabulary, inadequate grammatical knowledge, slow reading speed, unfamiliar cultural references, insufficient background knowledge, and difficulty identifying the main idea or making inferences. Traditional reading instruction frequently emphasizes intensive reading. In intensive reading, learners examine relatively short texts in detail, focusing on vocabulary, grammar, sentence structure, and comprehension questions. While intensive reading is valuable for developing linguistic accuracy, relying exclusively on this approach may not provide sufficient reading volume for developing fluency and automaticity. Extensive reading offers an alternative or complementary approach. Extensive reading encourages learners to read large quantities of relatively easy and interesting materials, primarily for general understanding, information, or enjoyment. Day and Bamford (1998) argue that extensive reading should expose learners to a wide range of texts that are appropriate to their linguistic level and interests. The underlying assumption is that reading comprehension improves through repeated exposure to meaningful written language. When learners encounter vocabulary, grammatical structures, discourse patterns, and ideas repeatedly in different contexts, they gradually develop greater automaticity and confidence. Extensive reading is also closely associated with the principles of learner autonomy. Learners are often allowed to choose texts according to their interests and read at their own pace. This element of choice can increase intrinsic motivation and encourage learners to develop independent reading habits. From the perspective of second language acquisition, extensive reading provides substantial comprehensible input. Krashen (1985) argues that language acquisition can be facilitated when learners are exposed to language that is understandable but slightly beyond their current level of competence. Reading large amounts of accessible English can therefore provide continuous input for language development. The purpose of this article is to examine the role of extensive reading in developing EFL learners' reading comprehension and to identify the major mechanisms through which extensive reading can contribute to improved reading performance.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of extensive reading. Extensive reading has been defined in different ways, but most definitions emphasize the quantity of reading, relatively easy materials, learner choice, and reading for meaning rather than detailed linguistic analysis. Day and Bamford (1998) describe extensive reading as an approach in which learners read a large amount of material that is generally easy and interesting. The primary purpose is to obtain meaning rather than analyze every linguistic element. Graded readers are particularly important in extensive reading programs because they allow learners to select texts appropriate to their proficiency level. Such materials control vocabulary and grammatical complexity, making it possible for learners to understand texts without excessive dictionary use. Extensive reading therefore differs from intensive reading in several important respects.

Intensive Reading	Extensive Reading
Short texts	Large quantities of texts
Detailed linguistic analysis	General understanding
Teacher-selected texts	Often learner-selected texts
Frequent dictionary use	Limited dictionary use
Focus on accuracy	Focus on meaning and fluency
Classroom-centered	Can include independent reading
Close textual analysis	Global comprehension

Both approaches are valuable, but they serve different pedagogical purposes.

Extensive reading and comprehensible input. Krashen's Input Hypothesis provides an important theoretical basis for extensive reading. According to Krashen (1985), acquisition is facilitated when learners receive comprehensible input that is meaningful and somewhat beyond their current competence. Extensive reading provides a large quantity of written input. Because learners can select texts appropriate to their level, they are more likely to encounter language that they can understand without excessive difficulty. Repeated exposure to vocabulary and grammatical structures can gradually strengthen learners' linguistic knowledge. Moreover, contextualized exposure allows learners to observe how language is used across different situations.

Extensive reading and reading fluency. Reading fluency involves the ability to process written language efficiently and smoothly. Learners who read very little may process texts slowly because word recognition and syntactic processing remain effortful. Extensive reading provides repeated practice in recognizing words and processing sentences. As

learners encounter common vocabulary and grammatical patterns repeatedly, processing can become more automatic. Grabe (2009) emphasizes the importance of automaticity in reading comprehension. Fluent readers can allocate more cognitive resources to higher-level comprehension because lower-level word recognition processes require less conscious attention.

Vocabulary acquisition through extensive reading. Vocabulary development is one of the most frequently discussed benefits of extensive reading. Nation (2001) argues that learners need substantial exposure to vocabulary in context to develop a large and usable lexical repertoire. During extensive reading, learners encounter words repeatedly across different texts. Even when learners do not consciously memorize a word, repeated contextual encounters may gradually strengthen their knowledge of its meaning, grammatical behavior, collocations, and usage. However, vocabulary acquisition through extensive reading depends partly on the frequency with which words occur. High-frequency vocabulary is more likely to be encountered repeatedly, whereas rare words may require explicit instruction.

Extensive reading and motivation. Motivation plays a major role in reading development. Traditional reading exercises can sometimes be perceived as obligatory academic tasks, particularly when students have limited control over text selection. Extensive reading can increase motivation by providing learners with opportunities to choose materials according to their interests. Fiction, biographies, popular science, news articles, graded readers, and digital texts can all be incorporated into extensive reading programs. Day and Bamford (1998) identify learner choice, enjoyment, and accessible materials as important principles of successful extensive reading.

Extensive reading and learner autonomy. Extensive reading encourages students to become more independent learners. Instead of relying exclusively on teachers to provide texts and explain vocabulary, students gradually develop the ability to select, process, and evaluate reading materials independently. This is particularly important in EFL contexts because learners may have limited access to formal English instruction outside the classroom. An established reading habit can provide continuous exposure to English beyond classroom hours.

Extensive reading and background knowledge. Reading comprehension is influenced not only by linguistic knowledge but also by background knowledge. Readers who are familiar with a topic can often understand a text more easily than readers who lack relevant knowledge. Extensive reading exposes learners to diverse topics and discourse communities. Over time, this can broaden their background knowledge and make future texts easier to understand. For example, a learner who frequently reads articles about

environmental issues may find subsequent texts about climate change, renewable energy, or sustainability easier to comprehend.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative literature-review methodology. Academic literature concerning extensive reading, EFL reading comprehension, vocabulary acquisition, reading fluency, motivation, and learner autonomy was reviewed and synthesized.

The analysis was organized around the following dimensions:

1. reading comprehension;
2. vocabulary development;
3. reading fluency;
4. inferential comprehension;
5. background knowledge;
6. motivation;
7. learner autonomy;
8. metacognitive awareness.

The literature was analyzed thematically to identify recurring findings, theoretical explanations, pedagogical benefits, and implementation challenges associated with extensive reading. The study is conceptual and does not report data from a specific experimental participant group. Therefore, its primary purpose is to synthesize established theoretical and pedagogical knowledge and identify implications for EFL teaching.

RESULTS

Improvement in overall reading comprehension. The literature indicates that regular extensive reading can contribute to improvements in learners' overall reading comprehension. One explanation is that extensive reading increases the amount of meaningful language input learners receive. As learners read more texts, they become increasingly familiar with common lexical and grammatical patterns. This reduces the cognitive effort required for basic decoding and allows learners to focus more attention on the meaning of larger textual units.

Extensive reading can also improve learners' ability to identify:

- the main idea;
- supporting details;
- the purpose of the text;
- relationships between ideas;
- implied information;
- conclusions.

Development of reading speed and fluency. A substantial amount of reading practice can increase reading speed. Learners become more familiar with frequently occurring vocabulary and sentence structures, which allows faster processing. However, reading speed should not be treated as the only indicator of improvement. Effective reading requires a balance between speed and comprehension. Excessively fast reading that results in poor understanding does not represent successful reading development.

Vocabulary growth. Extensive reading can expose learners to thousands of lexical encounters over time. The repeated occurrence of words in different contexts provides opportunities for incidental vocabulary acquisition. For example, if learners repeatedly encounter the word “significant” in different academic texts, they may gradually develop an understanding of its meaning, grammatical function, collocations, and appropriate contexts. This contextual learning can complement explicit vocabulary instruction.

Improved inferential comprehension. Strong readers do not simply identify information explicitly stated in a text. They also infer meaning from context. Extensive reading can help learners develop inferential skills by exposing them to a variety of textual structures and communicative situations. Learners gradually become more capable of interpreting implied meanings, identifying relationships between ideas, and predicting what may happen next.

Increased reading motivation. Regular access to interesting reading materials can increase learners’ willingness to read. When students are able to select texts based on their interests, reading can become an enjoyable activity rather than a purely academic obligation.

This creates a positive cycle:

Interest → More Reading → More Exposure → Greater Competence → Increased Confidence → More Reading

Such a cycle can contribute to the development of long-term reading habits.

DISCUSSION

The findings demonstrate that extensive reading plays an important role in improving EFL learners’ reading comprehension. Regular exposure to level-appropriate and interesting texts helps learners develop reading fluency, expand vocabulary, and understand the main ideas and supporting details of texts more effectively. Extensive reading also encourages learners to infer the meaning of unfamiliar words from context rather than relying on constant dictionary use. important benefit is the positive influence of extensive reading on learners’ motivation and autonomy. Giving students opportunities to choose reading materials according to their interests can increase their willingness to read and help them develop independent reading habits. Moreover, repeated exposure to different topics contributes to the development of background knowledge, which supports better comprehension of new texts. However, the effectiveness of extensive reading depends on

appropriate material selection, learner motivation, regular reading practice, and teacher guidance. Therefore, extensive reading should be integrated with intensive reading and explicit vocabulary and reading-strategy instruction. Overall, the findings suggest that extensive reading is an effective complementary approach for improving EFL learners' reading comprehension and developing sustainable reading habits.

CONCLUSION

Extensive reading represents an effective and flexible approach to developing EFL learners' reading comprehension. By providing learners with substantial amounts of accessible and meaningful written input, extensive reading can contribute to the development of reading fluency, vocabulary knowledge, comprehension strategies, background knowledge, motivation, and learner autonomy. The major pedagogical strength of extensive reading lies in its emphasis on quantity, meaning, accessibility, and learner choice. Rather than requiring learners to analyze every word and sentence, it encourages them to engage with texts as whole communicative units. This can gradually improve their ability to process English more efficiently and understand increasingly complex written materials. The analysis also demonstrates that extensive reading can contribute to incidental vocabulary acquisition. Repeated encounters with words in meaningful contexts allow learners to develop not only knowledge of word meanings but also knowledge of collocations, grammatical patterns, and contextual use. At the same time, extensive reading should not be considered a replacement for explicit language instruction or intensive reading. A balanced approach that combines extensive reading, intensive reading, vocabulary instruction, grammar instruction, and reading strategy training is likely to provide more comprehensive development. For EFL learners, particularly those studying in foreign-language environments with limited exposure to English outside the classroom, extensive reading can provide an important source of continuous language input. The development of digital technologies further expands access to diverse reading materials and creates opportunities for individualized reading programs. Future empirical research should investigate the long-term effects of extensive reading on different dimensions of reading comprehension, including literal comprehension, inferential comprehension, critical reading, vocabulary growth, reading speed, and metacognitive strategy use. Further studies could also examine the effectiveness of digital extensive reading programs and compare their outcomes with traditional print-based extensive reading.

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