

The Effectiveness of an Extensive Reading Program in Developing Saudi EFL University Students' Reading Comprehension

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Abstract

The present study explored the effect on an extensive reading program on the reading comprehension of Saudi EFL university students. The sample of the study consisted of 54 students randomly chosen from King Saud University and assigned to an experimental and a control group of 27 students each. Pre- and posttest data were collected within a three months period. Both groups, the experiment group and the control group, were taught by the researcher. The researcher assessed the effect of extensive reading on the reading comprehension of the participants. The findings showed that the experiment group outperformed the control group in reading comprehension. This supported the positive effect of extensive reading on EFL learners' reading comprehension. Implications and suggestions for further research are reported.

Keywords: Extensive Reading Program, Reading Comprehension, Saudi EFL University Students, Reading Skill

Cite as: Al-Nafisah, K. I. (2015). The Effectiveness of an Extensive Reading Program in Developing Saudi EFL University Students' Reading Comprehension. *Arab World English Journal*, 8 (1).

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.24093/awej/vol6no2.8>

Introduction

Reading is of paramount importance for SL/FL learners (Birjandi & Noroozi, 2008), as it is the basic avenue through which they learn the target language. Being a good reader is critical if one wants to be successful in their professional career (Bakir, 2004). It is quite difficult to manage in today's information technology world without good reading abilities. Another reason for the significance of possessing a good reading ability is its positive reflection on academic success. Researchers have found a strong correlation between reading and academic success. In other words, proficient readers are more likely to do better in school than less proficient readers. From a pedagogical point of view, reading comprehension is of great significance in second and foreign language classrooms. In this respect, Lee (1987) pointed out that reading comprehension plays three roles in foreign language curriculum: (a) it supplies the basis for interactive conversation and oral activity; (b) it provides the context necessary for presenting grammatical structure and vocabulary; and (c) it is an important skill which requires further promotion as the skill of speaking, listening, and writing. Omaggio (1993) also asserted that reading comprehension is important in the communicative classroom because authentic materials are often used in such classes.

Reading used to be viewed as a passive skill since the reader, unlike the speaker and the writer, does not produce language. This traditional unrealistic view has recently been replaced with a view of reading as an active process that involves the reader in interpreting and extracting information (Benettayeb, 2010). To make sense of what is read, readers need to use both their background knowledge and textual knowledge. They need to interact with the text and read beyond the lines to understand the arguments presented (Chastain, 1988). This demanding nature of reading has been asserted by many scholars. According to Harris (2000), the message in the print is by no means readily available. Rather, it is created by the interaction between the writer and the reader as participants in a communicative situation. To Green (2005) reading is a thinking process that entails the reader to use multiple skills to gain information from the text such as inferring, questioning, predicting, and drawing conclusions.

Reading is not a single skill. Rather, it is a combination of multiple skills and processes. Proficient readers use many complex skills/strategies simultaneously and interactively in order to be successful. For example, they read with a purpose in mind, use strategies that they have tested and found useful in the past, monitor their comprehension, and adjust their strategy use to fix any comprehension breakdown. They also, as confirmed by Zainal and Husin (2011), apply a number of word attack strategies to interpret the meaning of words to the extent that they are needed to achieve the purpose for reading.

Two main approaches are used in the teaching of reading: intensive reading (IR) and extensive reading (ER). ER, if used properly, can complement IR and lead to better reading performance in the FL context. ER has received theoretical support from views that place considerable emphasis on input in SL/FL acquisition, particularly Krashen's input hypothesis (1985) and reading hypothesis (1993). As defined by Richards and Schmidt (2002, pp. 193–194), ER means "reading in quantity and in order to gain a general understanding of what is read. It is intended to develop good reading habits, to build up knowledge of vocabulary and structure, and to encourage a liking for reading." It also allows students to practice strategies they learn in skill-based instruction and to experience authentic material (Sheu, 2004).

The positive effect of ER on language learning in general and reading performance in particular has been supported by many researchers. Krashen (1985), for instance, places considerable emphasis on reading as an input providing source. For him, reading and listening are the two main avenues for providing what he calls comprehensible input. Reading is even of more significance than listening in FL contexts that some researchers (e.g., Kourougo 1993) describe as input-poor environment:

“...contexts where unconscious acquisition caused by exposure to an abundant second language input outside the classroom ... In many such contexts succeeding is not a matter of catching what is taught, but rather a question of how to overcome the perverse effects of poor teaching, contagious peer interlanguage and all the adverse conditions ...” (p. 169)

This theoretical claim has been supported by a survey study conducted by Elley (1991) who reviewed a number of studies and found that effects of ER spread to other language skills rather than reading. ER also increases knowledge of vocabulary (Nagy & Herman, 1987), which has a positive reflection on overall language ability. Finally, ER, as confirmed by Kembo (1993), can develop learners' confidence and ability in facing extended texts. It is therefore safe to say that the use of ER in foreign language teaching and learning not only benefits reading proficiency but also the overall language proficiency as well.

Researchers identified a number of conditions that an ER program should meet in order to bring about the desired benefits. These conditions (Day & Bamford, 1998; Hedge, 2000) include, among others, getting access to a variety of interesting materials, reading a large quantity of material, being free to choose or change books, reading at one's own pace for pleasure or information, reading in a tension-free environment, and having the chance to experience real-life reading.

Research findings about the effect of ER on FL learners' reading ability are inconsistent. A large number of studies reported a positive relationship between ER and reading performance (e.g. Elley & Mangubhai, 1983; Hafiz & Tudor, 1989; Elley, 1991; Pilgreen & Krashen, 1993; Cho & Krashen, 1994, 1995a, 1995b; Constantino, 1994). In fewer studies, on the other hand, ER did not affect reading performance positively (e.g. Lai, 1993; Robb & Susser, 1989; Gao, 2004). This means that the use of ER in FL settings still needs research attempts.

ER does not receive the due emphasis in Saudi EFL classrooms for several reasons. First, the Saudi society, like any other Arabic society, does not have a solid reading culture, even in the mother tongue. Second, ER is not emphasized in English teaching syllabuses. Third, ER lacks recognition among English language teachers who have little or no experience in how to apply ER. Reading instruction at all educational levels in Saudi Arabia is only focused on intensive reading, i.e., close study of vocabulary and grammar, which is not reading at all (Alderson & Urquhart, 1984; Robb & Susser, 1989). For this reason Saudi university students experience learning difficulties because they have not developed an ability to read fluently outside the classroom in their pre-university education. It would be a good contribution if ER is used to complement IR in Saudi EFL classrooms. The present study therefore aimed to explore whether ER would enhance Saudi EFL university students' reading comprehension.

Statement of the problem

From the researcher's personal experience and observation, many professors at King Saud University complain about EFL students' inability to comprehend a reading passage effectively. Saudi EFL students also complain about being unable to read efficiently. The researcher also notices that most students get low grades in their reading exams. Therefore, there is a need to investigate this problem (EFL students' inability to comprehend a reading passage effectively) that faces those who work in the field of English language teaching at the university level in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The use of ER can be a solution to this problem. Accordingly, the present study aimed to explore the effect of ER on Saudi EFL university students' reading comprehension. In other words, the study addressed the following question: *"Can an ER program be successfully implemented at universities in Saudi Arabia for improving the students' reading comprehension?"*

Significance of the study

It is common for teachers to use different techniques in the language class to help their students improve their language skills. The use of ER to improve reading comprehension is widely recommended in the educational literature and its role in the foreign language classroom has been the concern of many teachers and scholars (Abou Baker, 1996; Khater, 2002; Helal, 2003; Bakir, 2004). In the current environment of research-based practices, many educators may be skeptical about allowing the use of a new educational tool until the effects of that tool have been clearly documented through quantitative research. The present study investigates the effectiveness of an ER program in developing the reading comprehension of Saudi EFL university students, which is an issue previous studies conducted in Saudi Arabia, did not tackle fully. To the best knowledge of the researcher, this is the first attempt to determine whether or not Saudi EFL university students' reading comprehension significantly improves when they are exposed to the ER program. Therefore, it is hoped that:

1. It will help researchers involved in the educational process gain insights into ER and its effect on reading skill.
2. It may encourage further research, which in turn, may lead to the enrichment of the field of ER and its effect on reading comprehension in general, and language teaching and learning in particular.
3. It will help teachers to better understand ER and integrate it into their classroom routine in general and in the reading class in particular.
4. The findings of this study may sensitize students to the importance of reading to improve their reading performance.
5. The findings of the study may help students to see the difficulties in reading that they may face if they do not have the habit to read and could motivate them to read more.

Objectives of the study

Nabeel (1994) highlights the unpleasant experience of reading in FL classrooms, claiming that the announcement of a reading assignment elicits moans and groans from students as they envision the long time it will require and the laborious task of looking up words in the dictionary. What makes matters worse is that after all the time and efforts; students fail to comprehend the text. It is, therefore, highly recommended that students be taught and trained on how to improve their FL reading. This can be achieved, in part, by introducing ER as an integral

part of the university curriculum. However, the use of ER in the Saudi context has not been satisfactorily researched. Hence, the present study attempts to investigate the effectiveness of an ER program in developing the reading comprehension of Saudi EFL university students.

Delimitations of the study

The generalizability of the findings of this study may be limited by the following:

- This study is restricted to two groups of students at the College of Languages and Translation at King Saud University.
- The findings are bound by the time limit for the period in which the study was conducted.
- Females were not included in the present study.

Review of related literature

Vast research explored the effect of ER on a large number of variables pertaining to reading and to other language skills. This effect proved to be significant for some variables and insignificant for others. Counter-intuitively, findings concerning the effect of ER on reading comprehension are inconsistent. Hayashi (1999) used ER with a number of Japanese EFL university students over a period of 10 months. A TOEFL test was used to assess the effect ER. Of all the test sections, reading comprehension displayed the largest improvement. Bell (2001) studied the effect of extensive versus intensive reading on the reading comprehension and reading speed of a sample of elementary language learners in Yemen. Both groups improved reading comprehension and reading speed. However, improvement was greater for the ER group. Hitosugi and Day (2004) incorporated an ER program based on Japanese children's literature in a course at the University of Hawaii. This ten-week program improved students' scores on a traditional measure of reading comprehension. It also improved students' attitudes toward and motivation for learning Japanese. A good contribution of this study is that researchers provided a detailed account of issues they encountered when introducing ER into the course. This account can illuminate researchers in future attempts of using ER. Yamashita (2008) examined the differential effect of ER on different aspects of FL ability. General reading ability and lower-level linguistic ability were the dependent variables. Improvement from a pretest to a posttest was found to be significant for reading ability, but not for linguistic ability.

Results of the above mentioned studies revealed a positive effect of ER on FL reading comprehension. Other studies, on the other hand, did not report such a positive effect. Lai (1993) experimented with IR using a large number of students (338 in the conventional reading group and 345 in the ER group) from eight secondary schools. Only one experimental group achieved a significant improvement in reading comprehension amongst the five schools. Commenting on the results, the researcher stated that reading a quantity of books "for global understanding didn't seem to enhance reading comprehensive effectively" (p. 29). Similarly, Robb and Susser (1989) investigated the effect on reading comprehension of instruction utilizing ER and skill training. Students in ER group read a large volume of material (641 pages of text), whereas students in the skills group read from a textbook with 269 pages. A comparison was then conducted concerning students' getting the main idea, understanding important facts, guessing vocabulary from context, and making inferences. The ER group outperformed the Skills group only in reading speed. No significant differences were found between the two groups in any of the reading comprehension skills. This same finding was reported in a study conducted by Gao (2004) who examined the effect of ER on high school Taiwanese students' reading

comprehension, reading speed, the motivation to read English texts and learning attitude. Students in the ER group did not achieve better gains in reading comprehension in comparison with students in a condition that lacked ER. The researcher therefore concluded that ER does not lead to obvious or measurable improvements in reading comprehension.

Other variables seem to be more affected by ER than reading comprehension. Hafiz and Tudor (1990) investigated the effect of an ER program on, among other things, Pakistani primary school pupils' accuracy of using lexical item. The findings showed that students achieved statistically significant gains in their vocabulary and writing. The contention that students learn to write through reading was supported. Mason and Krashen (1997) investigated the effectiveness of a one-semester ER program on Japanese university students' linguistic competence, reading and writing skills. Findings revealed statistically significant gains and positive attitudes in students' reading ability and writing skill as a result of the ER program. Al-Sadder (1998) investigated the relationship between ER and students' English language proficiency in Nablus city, Palestine. A significant relationship was found between the extent to which students read extensively and their language proficiency. A similar result was reached in a study conducted by Bakir (2004) who reported a positive effect of ER on EFL learners' attitudes towards learning English. Finally, Damanhuri (1999) studied EFL students' attitudes towards English ER materials allocated for them by the Ministry of Education in governmental schools. The findings of the study revealed that students didn't have positive attitudes towards reading extra texts outside school. The students indicated that the materials used are not interesting and their language is not easy to understand. This asserts that students' preferences and choices should be considered in ER conditions.

Based on the literature survey, the researcher found out that numerous studies were conducted and several programs were introduced in the Western countries, while very few ones were carried out in the Arab world to investigate the effectiveness of ER in developing students' reading comprehension. The larger number of the reviewed studies showed that ER programs have a positive effect on reading comprehension. The present study is similar to the reviewed studies in the general aim of investigating the effectiveness of ER in developing the reading comprehension of Saudi EFL university students. However, the effect of ER on Saudi EFL university students has not received much attention in the literature. This fact urged the researcher to conduct the present study.

Method

Participants

A convenience sample of 54 male students at King Saud University in the second semester of the academic year 2013-2014 participated in the study. They were randomly assigned to experimental and control groups of 27 students each. The experimental group received an ER treatment, whereas the control group was taught according to the conventional method, i.e. close study of vocabulary and grammar. The experimental group students were exposed to the ER program through three 50-minute periods a week for three months. The control group students were not exposed to the ER program during the course of the treatment. Both groups took a reading comprehension pretest immediately before starting the experiment and took the same test as a posttest immediately after the experiment.

Instruments

In order to answer the question of the study, the researcher prepared an ER program and a reading comprehension test. The ER program consisted of four units. Each unit has three lessons including reading activities to be performed by the students. Reading material relevant to students' interests and abilities were used. The program included narrative, argumentative, descriptive, scientific, and expository texts. The researcher selected the material on the basis of the students' level. The proposed program was then evaluated by a jury of four professors of evaluation and assessment and TEFL at King Saud University. Based on the remarks of the jury, the preliminary version of the program was modified to suit the level of the students. The program that was conducted during the second semester of the academic year 2013-2014 consisted of an introductory classroom period and four units. Each unit took three weeks. This means nine 50-minute periods. Therefore, the program took 36 classroom periods over a period of three months. The introductory classroom period was used to introduce students to the program, its aims, and the reading skills they are going to develop. The importance of using ER programs in developing reading comprehension was also explained. During that period, each student in the experiment group received a copy of the program.

To assess the effect of the proposed ER program on students' reading comprehension, the researcher developed a 40-item-multiple choice reading test. Test items had 4 choices, only one of which is correct. The students were instructed to answer the questions by circling the correct choice. Test items covered such elements as vocabulary, pronouns, grammatical constructions and implied meanings. A correct answer was given 2.5 points and a wrong answer was given 0. The total score of the test is therefore 100. The time interval between the pretest and the posttest was 12 weeks; a period long enough to minimize the effects of the pretest on the posttest. The test was designed and administered by the researcher. The usability of the test was tested through a pilot study of 17 students who were excluded from the sample. The reliability coefficient of the test was calculated using Cronbach Alpha and was found to be 0.93. The test was also given to the same jury (who evaluated the ER program) to elicit their views as to the accuracy, clarity, and appropriateness of the instrument. Then the test was reviewed and modified according to their recommendations.

Data Analysis

The data obtained from the instruments were coded for statistical treatment. The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS, version 15) was used for statistical analysis. An Independent-Samples t-test was used to measure gain scores of both groups from pre- to posttesting. A One-Way Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) was used to determine the differences between the two groups on the posttest after eliminating any possible differences between them on the pretest.

Results

The study aimed to evaluate the impact of an ER program on the reading comprehension of Saudi EFL university students. This section represents findings of the study, discussion of the findings, and recommendations.

The study aimed to answer the question "Can an ER program be successfully implemented at universities in Saudi Arabia for improving the students' reading comprehension?" That is, the study compared the relative effect on students' reading comprehension of ER and conventional reading instruction based on close study of vocabulary and grammar. The researcher

hypothesized that the students who were taught through the ER program method would show better achievement in reading than those who were taught through the conventional method. This hypothesis was tested at the 0.05 level of significance.

An independent t-test was carried out to determine if there were differences between the two groups on the pretest. This statistics is presented in Table 1:

Table 1. Means, standard deviations and t-values for the mean differences between two groups on the pretest

Group	N	M	SD	t-value	Sig.
Control	27	16.84	4.83	1.76	.87
Experimental	27	16.76	4.04		

Table 1 shows that the difference between the achievement of both groups on the pretest is not statistically significant at $\alpha = 0.05$. Thus, the two groups were homogeneous prior to the experiment.

Another independent-samples t-test was conducted to determine if there was a statistically significant difference between the two groups on the reading comprehension posttest. Table 2 presents this statistics:

Table 2. Means, standard deviations and t-values for the mean differences between two groups on the posttest

Group	N	M	SD	t-value	Sig.
Control	27	17.21	3.75	5.32	.018
Experimental	27	29.58	2.36		

Table 2 shows that there is a statistically significant difference at $\alpha = 0.05$ between the achievement of the experimental group and that of the control group on the posttest in favor of the experimental group. This indicates that ER has a positive effect on students' reading achievement. The mean score for the experiment group on the posttest was 29.58 while that of the control group was 17.21.

In spite of the fact that the difference in reading comprehension of the experimental and the control groups on the pretest was not statistically significant, a one-way ANCOVA was carried out to eliminate initial differences. This data is shown in table 3 below:

Table 3. Results of the test of between-subjects effects

Source	Sum of Squares	df	Means of Squares	F	Sig.
Pretest	7834.111	1	7834.111	267.558	0.000
Group	408.907	1	408.907	13.965	0.000
Error	3367.204	115	29.280		
Corrected Total	16987.167	118			

Table 4 shows that there is a statistically significant difference between the experimental and the control groups on the posttest. The achievement of the experiment group, measured by the difference between the pretest and the posttest, was significantly higher than that of the control group.

The findings of the study are consistent with the studies conducted by Hafiz and Tudor (1990), Schmidt (1996), Mason and Krashen (1997), Al-Sadder (1998), Damanhuri (1999), Hayashi (1999), Bell (2001), Wong (2001), Bakir (2004), Hitosugi & Day (2004), Sheu (2004), Yamashita (2008). All of these studies showed that using ER has positive effects on FL proficiency in general and on reading comprehension in particular. The improvement that the experimental group achieved in reading comprehension is attributed to using the ER program.

Furthermore, the differences between the two groups may be attributed to many other reasons. First, using the ER program in the reading classes is a novelty. This novelty may have encouraged the students to deal with it enthusiastically, which may have been reflected in better reading comprehension achievement. Second, reading many different texts and doing many reading activities helped the students develop healthy reading habits and at the same time paved the way to promoting the reading comprehension performance through the consistent exposure to the meaningful content of the texts. The conditions provided by the ER program promoted total attention that led to greater understanding of the content, which in turn led to improving reading comprehension performance. Third, training students via the ER program encouraged them to use the skills they learned when reading, which surely leads to develop their reading comprehension performance. Fourth, it is sure that Saudi EFL students knew enough about reading skills, but they lacked the opportunity to put them into real practice. Once they were taught the definitions of each skill and its sub-skills and were provided with enough activities and encouragement, they were able to apply them successfully. Fifth, using the ER program was effective in motivating the students to read a wide variety of texts, which in turn, improved their reading comprehension performance. Sixth, the program was useful in motivating the students to read on different genres (narrative, argumentative, descriptive, scientific, and expository texts) which increased their reading proficiency. Seventh, the reading passages that students were exposed to offered them a good opportunity to see how a main idea is developed through out a passage. Moreover, they offered the students a range of vocabulary to be used later on in their reading tests. Besides, the students were able to accumulate necessary ideas and information for reading comprehension through reading the passages. Eighth, integrating the ER program in reading instruction was an important factor that minimized the feeling of boredom and kept them active all the time. Ninth, training students via the ER program encouraged them to use critical thinking in dealing with reading texts, which surely has the potential to develop their reading comprehension performance. Tenth, the use of the ER program (which provided the students with abundant exercises and encouragement) enabled the students to apply the reading skills they had in their repertoire successfully, which in turn, led to better reading comprehension performance. Finally, it can be concluded that exposing students to an input-rich and enjoyable environment will increase their knowledge of language and their eagerness to learn will develop naturally (Hedge, 1985).

Implications

In light of the findings of the present study, it can be concluded that the use of ER in the classroom tends to make learning more interesting. ER programs can promote motivation. Moreover, the findings of this study suggested that integrating ER programs into reading

instruction is effective for enhancing students' performance and provides a positive learning experience.

This study represents a preliminary effort to empirically examine the effect of ER on Saudi EFL university students' reading comprehension. Further research is needed for a thorough understanding of this issue and for the confirmation of its findings. This is especially true when conducting research with more variables than those in the present study. It is also recommended that this study be replicated with a larger number of participants and over the whole semester or the whole year. In addition, it would be interesting to compare results across levels of proficiency as well as gender. Researchers are further recommended to study the effect of ER programs on school students' reading comprehension. In addition, further studies might describe what teachers should do with ER in their own classrooms. It is also recommended that another study be conducted to investigate the effect of the program on the learning of other language skills such as oral skills. Research in this area should identify the needs of both language learners and instructors and the role that effective ER education and integration can play to meet learners' needs. Finally, universities, ministry of education and other educational institutes are recommended to make use and benefit from the ER program of this study as well as similar ones when designing their curricula. Finally, it can be concluded that the beneficial effects of ER have been investigated by numerous studies, but we will need to focus more specifically on disparate components of L2 abilities and make comparisons among them in order to understand how and how quickly different aspects of L2 ability develop (or do not develop) as a result of ER.

Acknowledgement:

The author is thankful to the Deanship of Scientific Research, College of Languages and Translation Research Center at King Saud University for funding this research. Further, he is thankful to students who participated and helped in this study and gave him insightful and meaningful results.

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