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The Role of Extensive Reading in Improving General English Proficiency

Muhammad Rifqi Syamsuddin

rifqimuh9@gmail.com

UIN Alauddin Makassar

Abstract

This paper investigates the benefits of implementing extensive reading (ER), supporting techniques or approaches of ER as well as the practical aspects of ER in English as a foreign language (EFL) context. The method used in this study was integrative literature review which was proposed by Torracco (2005). The literature related to ER, its supporting techniques or approaches and the practical aspects was reviewed comprehensively. The results of this study indicate that ER can increase students' general reading proficiency, reading rate, reading strategies, motivation, attitude, vocabulary, speaking and writing skills. In other words, it can improve general English proficiency. On the question of supporting techniques or approaches, Task-Based (TBL) approach and The Lexical Approach (LA) can be used to support ERP. Another important finding was that there are several practical aspects that can be considered when practicing ERP such as using graded readers, classroom library and reading circles. Hence, in order to help improve English language teaching, these findings can contribute in several ways to our understanding of ER and provide basis for implementing ERP in EFL context.

Keywords: Extensive Reading, Graded Readers, Reading Comprehension, Reading Rate, Reading Speed

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1. Introduction

Reading in a foreign language is sometimes challenging especially for students learning English as a foreign language including in Indonesia. Alderson (1985) postulates two reasons why students are poor in reading in a foreign language. It may be because of the lack of reading ability in their first language, or the students' knowledge of the target language is insufficient. He further explains that to deal with these two problems, teachers need to improve students reading ability in their L1 as well as enhance their L2 competence. In addition, Cowan (as cited in Alderson, 1985), contends that incorrect reading strategies can lead to the lack of reading foreign language ability. Furthermore, Uljin (as cited in Alderson, 1985) claims that the lack of conceptual knowledge plays a pivotal role in comprehending foreign language reading. Nation (2009, p. 49) emphasises the importance of reading by stating "as a source of learning, reading can establish previously learned vocabulary and grammar, and through success in language use it can encourage learners to learn more and continue with their language study." Thus, English teachers need to address these problems to improve their students' reading ability. One way of improving students' reading ability is through extensive reading programme (ERP). This essay will advance the idea that Extensive Reading (ER) can improve general English proficiency. In order to advance these issues, this paper will first explore the benefits of ER. This will be followed by the supporting techniques or approaches that can be used to support ERP. This paper will conclude with the practical aspects of ERP in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context.

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*Corresponding author
rifqimuh9@gmail.com

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2. Purpose of the Study

This article aims at providing a comprehensive review of extensive reading in improving general English proficiency. Extensive Reading (ER) refers to the act of reading a lot of easy and enjoyable books Macalister (as cited in Harmer, 2015). Given this purpose, the research questions that will be investigated in this article are:

1. What are the benefits of implementing Extensive Reading (ER) in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context?
2. What are the techniques or approaches that can support Extensive Reading Programme (ERP)?
3. What are the practical aspects of Extensive Reading Programme (ERP)?

3. Methodology

The method used in this study was integrative literature review. Integrative literature review is a research form which can be used to review, criticise, and synthesise literatures that represent a topic in an integrated way to generate new frameworks and perspectives (Torraco, 2005). The researcher used Monash University extensive database such as ERIC, ProQuest and A+ Education to obtain the literature related to ER. The keywords used to obtain the literature were extensive reading, reading fluency, reading comprehension, reading rate and graded readers. The researcher used staged review in reviewing the literature. Staged review is reading the review of abstracts initially and then conduct an in-depth review (Torraco, 2005). The criteria for retaining the literature was focused on ERP in EFL context while literature of ERP in English as a Second Language (ESL) context was discarded.

The literature and research focusing on the implementation of ER in EFL context were used in this comprehensive review. They were reviewed, analysed and synthesised especially the benefits of ER in EFL context, the supporting techniques or approaches as well as the practical aspects of ER. This study will provide insight on the benefits of ERP implementation in EFL context, the supporting techniques or approaches as well as the practical aspects of ERP. Therefore, the researcher will elaborate these three points in the following chapter of this study.

4. Discussion and Findings

4.1 Extensive Reading

Extensive reading is when learners read in quantity (Jacobs & Renandya, 2015). Before explaining further about ER, I will firstly explain the distinction between extensive reading (ER) and intensive reading (IR). Day (2016) has differentiated between EI and IR in many ways. Firstly, in ER, students only need to have overall understanding while in IR students must fully understand the texts. Students also need to read a lot of easy books in ER while limited difficult texts are preferred in IR. Thirdly, students read the texts fluently in ER while in IR students will read word by word. Also, while ER is a meaning-focused activity, IR tends to be an L1 translation activity. Fifthly, students also do not study grammar directly while students learning by IR focuses on the use and rule of grammar. Furthermore, ER has no comprehension questions while IR has many. Additionally, there are no direct strategies teaching in ER while IR has direct strategies teaching. Finally, students can ignore unknown words in ER while the use of dictionaries in IR is essential. Thus, it is obvious that ER and IR are totally different in many aspects.

ER is an approach which focuses on asking students to read for pleasure which is mostly done outside the class. Macalister (as cited in Harmer, 2015, p. 319) simply defined ER as “the reading of lots of easy, enjoyable books.” In addition, the book that the students read should be interesting to them and within their reading comfort zone or easy to read. Furthermore, students can stop reading the book they are reading if the book is too difficult or not interesting (Bramford & Day, 2014). Finally, Davis (1995, p. 335) emphasises the importance of ER. He stated that “any ESL, EFL, or L1 classroom will be the poorer for the lack of an extensive reading programme of some kind, and will be unable to promote its pupils’ language development in all aspects as effectively as if such a programme were present.”

According to Bramford and Day (2014), there are 10 principles of ER which need to be adhered by teachers who intend to implement ER including:

1. The reading material is easy.
2. A variety of reading material on a wide range of topics is available.
3. Learners choose what they want to read.
4. Learners read as much as possible.

5. Reading speed is usually faster than slower.
6. The purpose of reading is usually related to pleasure, information, and general understanding.
7. Reading is individual and silent.
8. Reading is its own reward.
9. The teacher orients and guides the students.
10. Teacher is a role model of a reader (Bramford & Day, 2014, pp. 2-3).

The next section of this article looks at the benefits of implementing ER including the increase in general language proficiency and reading rate, reading strategies, motivation, attitude, vocabulary, speaking and writing.

4.2 The Benefits of Extensive Reading

4.2.1 Increase in General Language Proficiency and Reading Rate

With respect to general language proficiency and reading rate, Iwahori (2008) examined high school students' reading rate in Japan through ER. She used comics and graded readers as resources. She found that her students' reading rate and general language proficiency improved after comparing the pre-test and post-test score. Similarly, Bell (2001) examined two learner groups' comprehension and reading speeds. While one group is exposed to intensive reading, the other one is exposed to extensive reading. The former was given short texts to study and then followed by comprehension questions while the latter were asked to read graded readers. The results showed that the extensive reading group achieved faster reading speed as well as scored higher in reading comprehension. In the same vein, Taguchi, Takayasu-Maass, and Gorsuch (2004) investigated the differential impact of assisted repeated reading and extensive reading through qualitative and quantitative analysis. The research indicated that both strategies could improve students' reading rate. In addition, one study by Sheu (2003) examined a second-grade junior high school class in Taiwan. There are a control class and two experimental classes. The control class was instructed in a standard intensive reading while the experimental classes were given freedom to read graded readers books. The results showed that the experimental classes were far better in reading rate and general language proficiency. Thus, it is evident that students' general language proficiency and reading rate can increase through ERP.

4.2.2 Increase in Reading Strategies, Motivation, and Attitude

Regarding reading strategies, motivation and attitude, Nishino (2007) conducted a longitudinal case study on two students of a middle school in Japan. They were asked to read English books extensively. After two and a half year of study, the result showed that both students used various reading strategies and their motivation to read increased. In the same vein, another longitudinal study of extensive reading programme by Ratnawati Mohd and Ismail Sheikh (2003) in three secondary schools in Malaysia. The results showed that the students gave positive attitudes towards the programme. Similarly, Takase (2003) examined 220 female students in a high school in Japan. He used questionnaire and interviews to collect the qualitative data. The results showed that the students favoured reading English books after participating in the programme. Another positive attitude towards ER is also found by Robb and Susser (1989) who investigated freshmen in a Japanese college. Therefore, based on the findings above, it can be concluded that ERP can also improve students' reading strategies, motivation as well as their attitude.

4.2.3 Increase in Vocabulary, Speaking and Writing

As far as vocabulary concern, Horst (2005) examined 21 ESL learners in an ER programme. They could choose the books which they were interested in. It was proven that the learners could improve their vocabulary. In the same vein, Cho and Krashen (1994) examined Korean and Spanish students. They were asked to read *English Sweet Valles* series books in their free time for several months. The results showed that it not only expanded students' vocabulary but also speaking ability and understanding spoken English. In addition to vocabulary, writing skills can also be improved. Furthermore, Park (2015) used survey and interview towards eighty-four students of EAP writing class in intermediate level which are divided into control and treatment group. He wanted to find out the positive effects of ER toward writing development. After conducting pre-test at the beginning and post-test at the end of the programme, the results showed

that the treatment group scored higher writing achievement than the control group. Similarly, Lai (1993) examined 226 subjects in Hong Kong secondary school grades 7-9. They participated in summer reading programme for four weeks. They were provided with graded readers. The results showed that the programme can improve the students writing development, reading comprehension and reading speed. Finally, Hafiz and Tudor (1990) investigated an extensive reading programme conducted in 90 hours using graded readers in Pakistan. They found that the students' writing proficiency and vocabulary improved. Based on finding above, it can be concluded that ERP can also elevate students' vocabulary, speaking and writing ability.

The following section of this article offers supporting techniques or approaches in implementing ERP including Task-Based Learning (TBL) and The Lexical Approach (LA).

4.3 Techniques / Approaches Supporting Extensive Reading Programme (ERP)

Implementing extensive reading programme in EFL context can also be supported by other teaching approaches. The following is a brief description of approaches that can support ERP.

4.3.1 Task-Based Learning (TBL)

One of the approaches that can support ERP is Task-based learning (TBL). TBL is an approach which focuses on the completion of tasks in learning the language. It is supported by Willis and Willis (as cited in Harmer, 2015, p. 60) who stated that "the basis for language development is the learner's attempt to deploy language for meaning." Since most of the reading in ERP is done outside the classroom, the teachers need to maximise task-based activities in the classrooms which is related to the students' reading outside the classrooms. Thus, it is suitable to apply TBL to support ERP programme.

4.3.2 The Lexical Approach (LA)

Another suitable approach that correlates with ER is the Lexical Approach (LA). LA is an approach which primarily focuses on lexis such as phrases, collocations, idioms on a text instead of focusing on grammar teaching. In relation to ER, students can pay more attention to several new phrases that they read in their reading and they can use it later in their productive skills like writing or speaking. As far as literature concerned, Boers, Eyckmans, Kappel, Stengers, and Demecheleer (2006) examined 32 students who are in English major. The experimental group was exposed to authentic listening and reading and were asked to notice word combinations from the listening and reading while the control group was taught grammar traditionally. The results showed that the experimental group could improve their speaking proficiency. Similarly, Maftoon and Ziafar (2014) investigated students' willingness to communicate (WTC) through the lexical approach. They used quasi-experimental research with pre-test and post-test. They found that LA could improve students' WTC. Finally, Pereyra (2015) conducted a six-week experiment towards seven intermediate EFL students. He investigated how extensive reading affect the students' lexical chunks acquisition. He used questionnaire and interview to gather the data. The data showed that the students gave positive attitudes towards this experiment. However, Nation (2009) warns teachers not to make students using lexical approach overshadow students' reading for pleasure. Based on findings above, we can argue that LA can also help ERP, especially in lexical acquisition.

The next and final section of this article will discuss the practical aspects of ERP which include the use of graded readers, classroom library, reading circles and several other activities.

4.4 Practical Aspect of Extensive Reading Programme (ERP)

There are several considerations that need to be considered before practicing ERP in classrooms including graded readers, classroom library, reading circles and others.

4.4.1 Graded Readers

One of the most important practical aspects that can support ERP is by assigning students graded readers. By definition, graded readers can be defined as narrative texts specially written for ESL or EFL learners (Bassett, 2016). She further explains that several aspects need to be considered before choosing graded readers including lexical grading and headwords, structural grading and headwords as well as accessibility and readability. Furthermore, Hu and Nation (as cited in Nation, 2009) give a standard for students to at least know 95 to 98 percent of the words from the books that students read.

However, there is some criticism regarding the use of graded readers. It is said that graded readers are not authentic and simplified. Day and Bramford (as cited in Nation, 2009) did not deny the criticism, but they argued that there are also a lot of well written graded readers. Day (2016) has responded towards the criticism by contending that people learn to read first and then read to learn. As far as simplicity concerned, Day also responded this criticism by arguing that authentic books are not always well written. Furthermore, he also criticised the use of authentic materials in language teaching. He said that authentic materials are too difficult for a beginner and intermediate students. Also, they can also discourage students to learn. On the other hand, Nation (2009) also supports the use of simplified texts in ERP. Thus, despite the criticism about the authenticity, the use of graded materials and simplified texts is highly recommended especially for elementary to intermediate students.

4.4.2 Classroom Library

Another practical aspect that can be done in ERP is by building a classroom library. Bullard (2016) recommends to create classroom libraries to support extensive reading. There are several benefits of classroom libraries. Firstly, students can have more contact with the English language beyond the classroom. Students will also become more motivated to read. Thirdly, it can also increase students' autonomy. Finally, the access towards reading materials become easier (Bullard, 2016). In addition to the physical library, Bullard also recommends online library. Therefore, they can also read the e-books on their devices more easily whenever and wherever they want.

4.4.3 Reading Circles

Reading circles or literature circles can also help students practice their reading, writing, speaking and listening. At the beginning of the reading circles, the students will take important notes based on what they read. Later, the other group members may ask their friend about their story and further discuss the story. Furr (2016) call this process as 'the magic of reading circles. In addition, he also suggests some roles like a discussion leader, summariser, connector, word master, passage person and culture collector (for a more advanced class) in the reading circles. This is very useful for students when they have finished reading the book, they can be grouped and assigned with such tasks depending on students' level.

4.4.4 Other ways of supporting Extensive Reading Programme (ERP)

Finally, Nation (2009) suggests three ways of supporting ER. They are glossing, computer-assisted reading and elaboration. Glossing is the use of margin in a graded reader which provides the meaning of a word in L2. This is better than using a dictionary which can disrupt reading and take longer time. Secondly, computer-assisted reading is the use of the application in a computer which can help students find the meaning of a word by only clicking the unknown word. This way is also still better than looking up to a dictionary since students do not need to open a dictionary. Finally, elaboration is the rewriting of unknown words, but they are still parts of the text to give more comprehension in case students do not know the meaning of a word.

Bowler and Parminter (2016) suggests several to activities support extensive reading. They are the role of teachers as the leader in the classroom who pre-teach vocabulary, asking questions and telling students how to manage their reading, the provision of the audio version of a book, using various photocopiable tasks, the use of learning management system (LMS) and using 'in-book' tasks. Firstly, the role of a teacher as the leader is essential since it can make the students fully understand what they are going to do and achieve. As far as the use of audio book concerned, I strongly recommend this activity since it not only makes the reading more understandable, but it can also improve students' listening ability. Thirdly, the use of various photocopiable tasks is also important to vary the activities to avoid students' boredom. Subsequently, LMS usage is very helpful in managing as well as monitoring students' progress. However, since LMS like Moodle is commonly used in university level, I will prefer the free and simple LMS like Google Classroom or Edmodo for primary and secondary schools.

Bowler and Parminter (2016) further suggests using class readers which are the use of the same graded readers in the class. However, I think this is not effective since every student has different interest and each student also has different reading abilities. Also, Nation (2009) encourages teachers to give awards to their students after completing, for instance, five or ten books to motivate their students. Finally, Broughton, Brumfit, Flavell, Hill, and Pincas (2003) suggest three ways to encourage extensive reading. Firstly, there should be various titles. Secondly, there is a class library system. Finally, teachers are also encouraged to use the school library.

All in all, there are a lot of activities that can be implemented in ERP. It depends on teachers to choose which activities that suit best to their students depending on the condition and level of their students in implementing ERP.

5. Conclusion

To conclude, extensive reading programme is one of teaching method that can be implemented in English language teaching since it has a lot of benefits. Also, the combination of task-based learning (TBL) and the lexical approach (LA) makes ER more effective in language ang teaching process inside and outside the class. Furthermore, there are also several practical aspects that can be implemented in ERP such as using graded reader, classroom library and reading circles and several other activities. Thus, it is highly recommended to implement in EFL classrooms specially to improve students' general English proficiency and other skills. In further studies, it is suggested that there should be more research on the effectiveness of extensive reading when it is combined with other approaches like task-based learning (TBL) or the lexical approach (LA) in increasing students' general proficiency.

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