

Effects Of Extensive Reading On Writing In Terms Of Vocabulary

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The role of extensive reading in building vocabulary continues to receive considerable attention in first and second language research and pedagogy. This article uses the extant research and results from a classroom-based inquiry to explore the role of extensive reading on vocabulary development. In addition to reviewing the literature, this article suggests that teachers of language learners should purposefully include extensive reading in the language classroom.

My curiosity with vocabulary acquisition started when I was teaching at Bilkent University, Turkey as an English instructor and as a member of the Faculty Academic Support Team. Our mission was to provide content specific academic writing support to certain departments in the university. One of our objectives was to develop a list of subject specific vocabulary related to our students' fields. Our end goal was to make sure that the students were introduced to the most common vocabulary that they were going to encounter in their academic texts in their freshman year. In order to build a corpus vocabulary list, we first studied Nation's (1998) academic word lists. We also scanned student course books to identify academic words that appeared often and incorporated those words into our lists. Later, the lists we compiled became teaching tools in our courses. In my subsequent work at a U.S. university, I interacted with international and immigrant students in classes and collected information on the students' command of English vocabulary, using Nation's academic word list as reference.

Having gained some experience and interest in vocabulary growth research, I decided to conduct an inquiry into vocabulary study in a class I was teaching several years ago. ENGL106 is a mainstream composition course, which all undergrads at my university are mandated to take. The student enrollment of my section consisted

of domestic and international undergraduate students. The students' English language proficiency varied from native English-speaking students with a full command of English to beginning intermediate English learners who were native speakers of other languages. I wanted to investigate practical ways to help my students compose better quality essays in the composition course, and I endeavored to help my students develop essays which were not only composed to meet the word limit of an assignment, but also reflected command of language and richness of the lexicon of the language constituting a meaningful whole. I wondered how I could support students in improving the quality of their writing. Could the content be richer in terms of vocabulary by providing students with input in the form of extensive reading related to the assignment topic?

I aimed to find out if students' vocabulary use would be the same or any different in terms of content if they completed an extensive reading text related to their topic before they wrote the essay. I assumed that reading an extensive text would influence students' choice of words. Furthermore, I hoped that some of the vocabulary input students were exposed to through the extensive reading text would appear as productive output in the essays they later composed. I anticipated that this would contribute to an increase in the variety of words students use in making their writing and content richer.

In this article, I describe what I learned from the research literature related to extensive reading and vocabulary development. I combine these findings from the literature with what I learned about extensive reading and vocabulary from my work with composition students in ENGL106.

WHAT IS EXTENSIVE READING?

Building vocabulary by extensive reading has been a focus of attention in first and second language pedagogy. Susser and Robb (1990) claim, however that "extensive reading procedure while often used, has attracted comparatively little research interest" (para. 6). Therefore, it is important to explore and build upon the research base that examines the influence of extensive reading on readers in terms of language, vocabulary, and writing development. Extensive reading has been defined in many ways in literature. It has been called "pleasure reading," "sustained silent reading," or "uninterrupted sustained silent

reading” (Susser & Rob, 1990, para. 7; see research cited in Krashen, 1985, p. 91; Krashen, 1988; Vaughan, 1982, p. 69). My own working definition of extensive reading builds on Susser and Robb’s work (1990) and is in accordance with Grabe and Stoller’s (2002) definition. Grabe and Stoller (2002) state that extensive reading is reading that involves long texts and that exposes learners to “large quantities of material within their linguistic competence” (p.259). In this definition linguistic competence is understood to be subconscious knowledge one has of the rules governing speech in their first language (L1) or second language (L2; Brown, Malmkjaer, & Williams, 1996). In other words, learners should be exposed to lengthy texts that they are able to comprehend. I choose this definition because in academic contexts, students do not always read to get pleasure from texts but to be informed about their fields, learn about concepts in a scientific and academic way, and to learn jargon and advanced vocabulary.

While extensive reading requires texts to be lengthy, there is no clear agreement on what lengthy or extensive means. According to Susser and Robb (1990), different scholars have defined extensive reading in varied ways. For example:

- (a) “thirty pages an hour” (Hill & Thomas, 1988, p. 50);
- (b) “three pages an hour” (Matsumura, 1987, p. 120);
- (c) “an hour per evening” (Krashen, 1981, p. 105);
- (d) “five hours by a specified date” (Bowen, Madsen, & Helferty, 1985, p. 239);
- (e) “an hour of extensive for every hour of intensive” (Williams, 1986, p. 44).

These widely variant examples reflect the lack of consensus in the field related to the construct of extensive reading.

RELATED LITERATURE

Researchers in the field of language and vocabulary acquisition in L1 and L2 are interested in the extent to which and how vocabulary acquisition can be facilitated through reading and comprehensible input. Entrenched in this inquiry is the assumption that most of our vocabulary will be learned through reading or, more specifically, comprehensible input especially in foreign and second language teaching (Waring & Nation, 2004). While scholars continue to further

explore how reading contributes to vocabulary growth, Horst (2005) has claimed that research in the field can be viewed in two strands: studies on incidental vocabulary acquisition and studies on acquisition through extensive reading (p.3).

Practitioners may wonder if it is really necessary to determine if reading contributes to one's vocabulary growth, because it's obvious that it does. For example, Meara (1997, quoted in Waring 2001) claimed such explorations are as futile as "putting seeds in a pot only to confirm that they will grow into flowers" (p. 13).

While I concur that such explorations will likely confirm the obvious, perhaps Meara and others have overlooked the significance and goals of those explorations. The fact that reading contributes to vocabulary growth is obvious, but how and in what ways it contributes is vital as this line of inquiry can reveal pedagogical aspects of language learning and teaching.

Traditionally, the definition of reading has included both intensive and extensive reading. Intensive reading is reading that focuses closely on the linguistic text itself and the practice of particular reading skills. Whereas extensive reading, first coined by Palmer (1963 & 1964) involves long texts or large qualities of materials. Extensive reading also involves global or general understanding with the intention of getting pleasure from the text. Related to this, extensive reading is based on the idea that reading is individualized, so students should choose the books they want to read (Blair, Susser, & Robb, 1990, para. 10).

In terms of vocabulary development, both intensive and extensive reading play important roles as they both "build learners' vocabulary, introducing them to words and language chunks that may not be included in short texts, and giving them a sense of common word partnerships"

(Blair, nd). Extensive reading has become popular among practitioners as it not only it enhances reading skills but also language, writing and vocabulary skills.

While much has been written on extensive reading, the body of literature, especially that which includes experimental research, is relatively limited. Ponniah (2011) claimed that "reading is a powerful source for the acquisition of vocabulary in a second language context, but more than that, it is hypothesized that reading, with no explicit vocabulary learning, can result in *incidental* vocabulary development" (p.135). In other words, the more we see words in the text, the more

exposure we have to the words, and the more acquisition of vocabulary takes place.

Incidental Acquisition Hypothesis Studies

In the extant research, some studies suggest that the Incidental Acquisition Hypothesis contributes to vocabulary growth, and other studies suggest that the Comprehensible Input Hypothesis contributes to vocabulary growth. In practice, of course, the outcomes related to these two hypotheses are not mutually exclusive.

Paul Nation (1997), a linguist and researcher dedicated to the field of vocabulary and vocabulary acquisition, suggested “vocabulary learning is not an all-or-nothing piece of learning for any particular word, but that it is a gradual process of one meeting with a word adding to or strengthening the small amounts of knowledge gained from previous meetings”

(p. 3). This statement suggests that when learners repeatedly see the same content words and vocabulary in a text, they will be able to recognize it, acquire, and even produce it. A body of studies documented how learners incidentally gain vocabulary knowledge from each meaning focused reading of a text as a result of extensive reading. Nation (1997), for example, synthesized experimental studies that examined the language learning benefits of extensive reading and summarized the language learning benefits of extensive reading of texts prepared for native speakers and non-native speakers.

The Book Flood Studies

The “Book Flood” studies supported Nation’s findings. These Book Flood studies involved ‘flooding’ classrooms in South Pacific, Singapore, Sri Lanka, and South Africa with interesting storybooks and getting the students to interact frequently and productively with stories in a second language (Elley, Cutting, Mangubhai, & Hugo, 1996). The aim of the Book Flood studies was to observe the effects of comprehensible input in the form of reading for pleasure and how it contributed to growth in second language. These studies involved learners’ spending a lot of time read texts they chose. Overall, these studies documented the positive effects of extensive reading. According to Elley and Mangubhai (1981), the Fiji Book Flood study, one of the earliest studies conducted to see the effects on reading texts that students enjoyed, showed significant improvements in many

language skills including word recognition, oral repetition, reading comprehension in language use, knowledge, and academic performance as a result of extensive reading (Nation, 1997). Though the study did not measure vocabulary growth, Nation (1997) noted the improvement observed in all the skills suggested vocabulary growth.

In another study, also Nagy, Anderson, and Herman (1985) also found positive outcomes for extensive reading. The study measured how many unfamiliar words students acquired while reading authentic text. The subjects were 57 eighth-grade students with average or above reading ability who read either an expository or narrative text of 1000 words. After reading, the participants completed two vocabulary assignment tests, a multiple choice test, and an individual interview in order to see if students could remember the meaning of the 15 target words in the reading. The findings indicated that incidental reading contributed positively toward vocabulary growth as students tended to remember words that were repeated in a longer text. In light of the findings, the researchers suggested that long term vocabulary production and growth occurred through natural reading experiences, also known as incidental learning, involving authentic and motivating materials in L2 settings.

The Clockwork Orange Study

The Clockwork Orange Study (Saragi, Nation, & Meister, 1978) analyzed vocabulary growth in connection with word frequency. In this study, Saragi, Nation, and Meister (1978) asked adults to read Burgess' novel *Clockwork Orange*. The novel contained 241 Nadsat words from a Russian based slang. These words were repeated an average of 15 times each. The participants were not asked to remember or learn the words. After finishing the book, the participants were given a multiple-choice test of comprehension and literary criticism. Results showed that considerable vocabulary acquisition had taken place, without direct instruction. The content words that appeared in the text also appeared in the output that aligned with the statements of Incidental Acquisition Hypothesis.

Comprehensible Input Hypothesis Studies

Krashen (1989) defines Comprehensible Input as “an essential environmental ingredient and a richly specified internal Language Acquisition device” (np) that makes a significant contribution to

language acquisition. The more comprehensible the input, whether it is aural or written, the more it will lead to more language acquisition. In accordance with what Comprehensible Input Hypothesis assumes, Krashen (2004) also emphasized the role of reading on vocabulary development. Krashen noted that this claim was consistent with the Input Hypothesis, which states that we acquire language by understanding messages. Therefore, free reading would help improve reading, writing, grammar and vocabulary. Findings from his review (Krashen, 2003) indicated that learners acquired vocabulary and spelling through reading. Reading led to improvement in L1 and L2 literacy development. It is important to note, however, that some scholars in the field (e.g., Shanahan, 2004; Stahl, 2004) criticize Krashen's work.

The studies described above indicated that extensive reading has benefits on vocabulary growth, yet the research base that specifically measures and documents vocabulary growth is limited. Elley and Mangubhai's (1987) study findings indicated that extensive reading contributed to an improvement in language and corroborated Nation's claim by showing that extensive reading also improved receptive and productive skills. The researchers claimed that in the Book Flood studies students' writing improved dramatically after two years. Students' reading, listening, and oral language skills improved, too, as documented by increased language knowledge and English structures. Word recognition, vocabulary knowledge, and grammar were reported to improve. However, the vocabulary knowledge measure did not include total vocabulary size or vocabulary growth. Nonetheless, these studies were evidence that extensive reading activities contributed to language learning and acquisition.

More Studies in Favor of Extensive Reading

Tsang (1996) also claimed extensive reading contributed to vocabulary growth. His study compared the effects of an enriched syllabus which included extensive reading and writing assignments on English descriptive writing performance at different form levels. Tsang examined students in three different English programs and found that the regular plus extensive reading program was reported to be significantly more effective than the regular plus mathematics and regular plus frequent writing programs. In the area of content and language use, the extensive reading program was the only one of the

three programs that was significantly effective in vocabulary growth and the quality of writing.

In a study with elementary students, Gardner (2004) analyzed the lexical differences between narrative and expository reading materials and explored how these differences could affect children's potential vocabulary acquisition through reading. His lexical data indicated high numbers of register-specific words at all levels of vocabulary. The high numbers were observed at the more specialized levels where there is a higher potential for sustained vocabulary growth. This finding indicates that vocabulary growth will potentially be higher in higher levels of vocabulary acquisition. Gardner also examined qualitative differences in narrative and expository types. In his findings, Gardner (2004) noted, "All reading is not the same. This finding counters the claims present in the Incidental Acquisition Hypothesis, which supports free and wide reading. For general incidental word acquisition, narrative provides a "less lexical demanding text for the reader. Narratives provide fewer word types than expository text. Large scale vocabulary growth is more likely to occur in expository text due to its academic and technical word use" (p.24).

INQUIRY IN ENGL106

As I learned more about extensive reading and vocabulary development through the literature, I wanted to explore how extensive reading worked in my own classroom. I chose to explore this topic through the writing of 10 students in my ENGL106 composition course. Five of the 10 students wrote an essay on "TV makes you smarter" as homework. They sent the essay to me via e-mail. I asked the other five students to read an extensive article on "TV makes you smarter," write an essay on the topic, and then send the essay to me via e-mail. Once I received the 10 essays, I compared the essays in terms of number of words and selection of content in order to determine if providing an extensive reading appeared to contribute to students' word choice in the essay they produced.

Extensive Reading and Student Essays

I used the Vocabulary Analysis Program Compleat Lexical Tutor VocabProfile to analyze the students' language output on the essays. The program allowed me to tally the content words used in

the extensive reading selection and the content words used in students' essays and to compare quantity of words used across the two groups of students. I found that, overall, the students who had been asked to read the extensive article produced essays with more content words than did students who had not read the extensive article. Not only did the students who read the article produce more content words, but these students also included a broader range of content words in their essays.

The findings from my classroom-based inquiry suggest a connection between students' exposure to a long reading, or extensive, text and the use of a broader range of vocabulary. This is important because the output in which more content words are used productively from the reading text indicates comprehensive reading input has likely contributed to students' using more variety of words, thus making the essay and the content richer. This inquiry corroborates the idea that comprehensible input contributes to incidental vocabulary acquisition.

CONCLUSION

In this literature review I suggest the importance of extensive reading on L1 and L2 vocabulary growth as well as on language and literacy development and academic skills. The constant repetition of words in an extensive text has the potential to lead the learner to pick up words subconsciously that will subsequently contribute to vocabulary growth and better writing in terms of vocabulary and content. The findings of my classroom inquiry supported this hypothesis. Students who had completed the extensive reading not only produced more content words from the extensive reading text but also demonstrated a richer variety of words in their writing than the students who did not read the text.

Instructors of language learners should consider including extensive texts in their language classrooms. The extensive texts should be within the linguistic capacity of the students and care should be taken in ensuring the texts are neither too easy nor too difficult for each individual language learner. In L1 language courses, extensive reading could be integrated into the course by exploiting long authentic materials with a lot of reading such as newspaper articles, magazine articles, blogs, websites, readers, relevant chapter books. In L2 language courses, the same materials can be used yet the difficulty level of the materials should be carefully monitored so that it benefits the L2 learner. For formal

content instruction, content reading texts can be used. Exposure to and interaction with longer texts and repeated exposure to vocabulary not only help learners with vocabulary growth but also will help them improve their language and writing skills. Instructors should also make use of different genres as a variety of genres provide students with a fuller range of vocabulary. For instance, while narrative texts may help with general incidental word acquisition, expository texts offer greater academic and vocabulary gains (Gardner, 2004).

Nation (nd) has stated that other than these benefits extensive reading also has affective benefits since learners get to enjoy the language and value their practice of English (p.1). Research supports wide benefits of extensive reading, yet the benefits may not be observed in a short period of time. The potential for long-term benefits are so great that every language instructor should consider increasing or highlighting the important skill of reading in the language acquisition process.

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