EXTENSIVE READING: ITS EFFECTS TO LEARNERS' GENERAL LANGUAGE COMPETENCE

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Abstract: This study explores the objectives, effects, and drawbacks of a semester-long Extensive Reading program among Thai university students. The extensive reading program was piloted as a means to develop reading fluency and general language competence. Participants are emerged in constant reading and get familiar with long English texts to improve reading proficiency. Twenty-five students from Thai university participated in this semester-long project in order to enhance their English communication skills through reading. Students were required to read at least 3,000 headwords each week in 10 consecutive weeks following graded reading materials as a standard set for this program. Also, they were required to submit a weekly book report and give oral report on an alternate basis. Students read books based on the chosen genres starting with beginner to fluent level. Several positive impacts were observed including improvement on the reading ability and fluency as well as development in reading habit. Despite some drawbacks, student feedbacks showed the program motivated the participants and served as a springboard to develop communication skills in English.

INTRODUCTION

In most EFL classes, reading is given greatly importance due to the fact that it is an important source of language learning. Having EFL learners surrounded with large amount of reading materials and images around allow them to recognize meaning from the texts and further facilitate learning the complex nature of second language. Research shows educated native speakers of English learn most of their vocabulary through reading. Likewise, non-native speakers could have the same benefit of acquiring such knowledge by reading effectively. Reading will definitely bring their minds in the immense nature of the language, its uses and functions that will make learning much easier.

Language instructors begun to consider teaching reading as a forefront of educational agenda by creating systematic reading program to challenge readers and motivate them to become better readers. The emergence of reading programs such as extensive reading, readers' theaters etc. gain positive impact on the overall language improvement of the students. Students showed encouraging result in terms of their reading ability and improved reading habit as well as increased knowledge in vocabulary, semantics and syntax. Breaking out from traditional pedagogy initially focusing on mastering the rules before reading freely and extensively to exposing them to rich, relevant language that can heighten motivation to read has expanded to improve learners' reading skills more holistically.

Meanwhile, several reading researches conducted with Thai high school and university students revealed that Thai students have difficulties in reading in English (Jamornmarn & Ruangtakul: 1995; Sutta: 1994; Wiruhayan: 1987; The Department of Educational Techniques: 1995; Rattanapinyopong: 1983). The reading problem faced by most EFL learners is the difficulty to recognize the meaning of the words in context (Asraf and Ahmad (2003). This is due to lack of knowledge on vocabulary and sentence structure with reading texts (Adunyarittigun, 2002) and lack of appropriate reading strategies (Chuenta, 2002). Similarly, from the study conducted among Thai students revealed that they had problems in three areas of the reading test particularly sentence structure, vocabulary and reading comprehension (Chawwang,2008). Readers who faced of such difficulties obstruct their reading success.

The extensive reading program was launched to overcome reading problems faced by Thai university students and improve the overall language ability. More specifically, with less-regard-to- reading sort of culture, students tend to impede learning and expand their knowledge besides classroom learning. This could hinder students'

opportunity to explore the overall facet of learning a second language through making use of vast source of information available in and outside the premises of school.

The present study explores the objectives, effects, and drawbacks of a 10-week long Extensive Reading program among Thai university students. The Extensive Reading Program was piloted in the second semester of 2014-2015 as a means to examine further and develop the project in the following years as well as to provide opportunity for students to build up reading habit and expand their knowledge and awareness of life from the story books. This project aimed to foster student's reading fluency, develop a reading habit and build their vocabulary, increase comprehension skills, interpretation and motivation through reading English fiction and non-fiction story books. Students were required to read at least 3,000 headwords each week in 10 consecutive weeks following graded reading materials as a standard set for this program. Also, they were required to submit a weekly book report and do an oral report on an alternate basis. Students read books based on the chosen genres starting with beginner to fluent level; however depending if they felt ready to read higher level graded books.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Second language acquisition occurs in the process of input and interaction. Krashen (1981) believes that a person acquire both learning and acquisition of second language through "intake" of formal and informal environments. The wide range of information in and out of the classrooms cultivates knowledge in the use of a target language in a broader dimension. As an advocate of input-hypothesis in second language acquisition and learning, Krashen states that "*learners progress in their knowledge of the language when they comprehend language input that is slightly more advanced than their current level*". By supplying "*comprehensible input*" that learners are ready to intake not insisting language acquisition to occur and expect immediate transfer of language could rather take in effect. Reading is a form of supplying meaningful "input" to acquire new language. Elley (1991) states that through reading, significant positive effects on learners' vocabulary, grammar, and writing are observed. Readers constantly immerse in a complex cognitive processing of new ideas to get meaning from the texts. It involves interaction between the readers and the texts for comprehension and interpretation. Papalia (1987);Hosenfeld (1979) believe that under normal circumstances, readers use strategies while attempting to grasp the meaning of the texts; however the comprehension skill level varies depending on the level of the reader's interest on the given passage. Also, to further the reading ability, ESL teachers should provide among the readers the opportunity to interact with each other and share what they discover from the chosen topics. Instructors act as an aid to facilitate discussion, unlock difficulties in vocabulary etc. and demonstrate the interpretation of the texts using various reading strategies. In this way, acquiring skills in second language given in a contextualized meaningful environment as well as more favorable condition to learners in terms of choosing the topic etc. brings positive effect on the reader's overall language skill.

In view of the latter principles, extensive reading passed both criteria by not only providing a vast quantity of linguistic input (Bochner and Bochner,2009) but also a low-level of anxiety environment because it promotes reading for pleasure at their own "level" (Krashen, 1981). Extensive reading as defined by the renowned advocate of this study states that it is "*an approach to the teaching and learning of second language reading in which learners read large quantities of books and other materials that are well within their linguistic competence*" (Day & Bamford, 1998, p.9). Students choose the reading texts that they enjoy reading at their comfort level for overall understanding (Day and Bamford, 2002). The way to learn reading is to read and read more and because materials are not difficult, students become motivated to read thus resulting improved language ability. Through extensive reading, students can increase their vocabulary, enhance writing skills and oral fluency and develop good reading habits (Richards & Schmidt, 2002).

There are numerous benefits of extensive reading. From the "book flood" study conducted by Elley (1991), the most notable result found was the improvement of the student's writing skill. Overall findings shows increase in the *language use*, *language knowledge* and academic performance. It develops positive attitude towards learning the target language and motivation to study the language (Bamford, 2004).

METHODOLOGY

The participants of this study were 25 Thai university students enrolled in the second program of Intensive English course during the school year 2014-2015. They are from international program where all major courses are taught in English. The entire English program is run throughout the course of two semesters to improve the students' four skills in English at greater rate. Students come from mixed English language ability and are divided into two levels. Reflecting on the result of the placement test given at the start of the program, students' level of reading skill is found to be low. In the process of implementing extensive reading program, students were required to read graded books weekly and must read 3000 headwords within the course of 10 weeks.

Each week students chose from our mini library stocked with all levels of graded books from fiction to non-fiction genres. Each were provided data sheet to write in every books they borrowed including the number of headwords. All participants started at elementary level and progressed to higher level whenever they felt ready to do so. To avoid cheating, students were required to write a book report and a short summary of each book read throughout the week. During regular classes, students were given 30 minutes to read silently however if some were not able to finish they can take it home. The following day, students were picked randomly to give an oral report and short discussion as well.

This research used quantitative and qualitative method to describe the effects and drawbacks of the extensive reading project among Thai university students with mixed abilities. The researcher utilized systematic data recordings to track students' readings per week including information about the title and level of the books borrowed and specific and number of headwords per book to quantify data accordingly. Qualitatively, the researcher used observation and diary to record every session that constituted to the overall language abilities of the participants Also, students were asked to give feedbacks on the strengths and weaknesses of the project at the end of the program in the form of questionnaire and individual interviews. The findings and data suggest students' response toward the overall organization of the project and how they incorporate and appreciate the project for their development in their reading skills.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Learning Objectives

At the beginning of the project, teacher conducted a class orientation on how to go through the project stating the objectives and learning expectations. Basically, this project aims to increase the reading fluency and overall language ability of the students. In order to facilitate these, teacher provides graded books that contain easy-to-understand level of vocabulary words to encourage poor readers. Graded books have six levels from beginner to most fluent level.

Beginner   Red (up to 300 headwords)

Elementary   Orange (up to 800 headwords)

Intermediate   Yellow (up to 1500 headwords)

Upper Intermediate   Green (up to 2400 headwords)

Advanced   Blue (up to 4500 headwords)

Fluent   Black (non-graded material)

Students were required to read 3000 headwords per week starting from beginner level up to fluent level. In ten weeks, they were required to read from each level with total 30,000 headwords. The data below shows that all levels except for level 6 students were able to read and level 5 got the highest average. The average for each student read 24,916 headwords in ten weeks which has a total percentage of 83.05%. The objective to require students to read 30,000 words was not achieved 100% however, 83.05% is not bad.

Average Headwords Students Read

Book Levels	Total Books	Total Headwords	Average
Level 1	356	103,200	**4,128**
Level 2	94	55,100	**2,204**
Level 3	159	185,200	**7,408**
Level 4	3	2,400	**96**
Level 5	95	277,000	**11,080**
Level 6	0	0	**0**

Total Headwords 622,900	24,916 headwords/ student	**83.05%**

Addressing Reading Problems

At the onset of this project, students were required to start beginner/starter level books and expected to read at least up to advanced level. As students progress, it was observed that they experience reading difficulties particularly on understanding vocabulary and ability to comprehend texts. To address this problem, students went series of reading interventions. Reading interventions used were pair-reading and oral reading in class. Those better readers are paired with poor readers to act as a helper/model so to assist reading problems. Also, teacher modeled reading using think-aloud strategy to unlock students' reading difficulties and provided reading exercises in class to facilitate students' reading comprehension skills. Towards the end of the project, as students were constantly exposed to the language, their vocabulary and level of comprehension increased. This not only has a great impact on their reading but also on the quality of writing and speaking.

Observations on the Students' Speaking

Extensive reading helped students improve their speaking skills. They tend to speak more during group sharing and discussion about interesting stories they read. Students used new words to describe particular scenes and share opinions about the characters and the plot of the stories. During class reporting, when students were asked to share about the most interesting book they read in a week, they showed a high level of confidence and excitement. Some days we spent an hour or so discussing some points in the story, its relevance to life and discuss moral lessons. Some tried to convey their stories in English, however it couldn't be avoided that a help in translation was needed. Low level students tend to rely on their friends for translation especially for difficult words. Later though, they become more involved in discussion and their level of confidence was getting better. Thus, extensive reading has a great impact to improve the students' speaking ability.

Observations in the Students' Writing

Throughout the course as students required to write a summary of the readings and comments, their writing skills has greatly improved. The researcher used a book review rubrics as an instrument to assess students' writing improvement. The rubric is limited to evaluate students' writing according to the following three domains which include writing a summary, mechanics and spelling. From the table as shown below, there is a 30% overall improvement in their writing between pre and post writing scores. Many researches prove the established link between reading and writing. Through reading, we get exposed to the language and use them in writing and speaking (Hoey, 2005). Additionally, the "comprehensible input" extensive reading provides for readers establishes their knowledge about the language; its form and functions. Thus the way to learn the language is to get a massive and repeated exposure to its context.

Percentage of Students' Writing Improvement

Writing Output	Pre	Mid	Post
Percentage (Actual/Perfect Score)	31%	46%	61%
Variance	0%	15%	30%

CONCLUSIONS

The aim of this study is to explore the learning objectives, its effects and drawbacks of extensive reading using graded books to the overall language competence of second language learners. Extensive reading has proved to develop the vocabulary, reading, writing and speaking skills (Elley, et.al). Although there were drawbacks especially on the early part with regards to word recognition and vocabulary, however it was seen as a way of learning new words essential in reading.

Numerous learning outputs in using extensive reading evident throughout the project. Firstly, students regard reading as an important skill for academic success. They realized their need to increase their work knowledge and improve their English in general. By reading, they can gain useful vocabulary and improve their reading speed. And since, students determine their choice of what books to read, learning becomes fun and easy. Secondly, extensive reading has a positive effect on the reading motivation. All stated that their reading habit has increased better compared their previous experience in English classes. They tend to read more books they enjoy reading and read much more and more. Gains in extensive reading truly encompasses beyond learning the language objectively. Finally, students develop English skills through teacher giving of feedbacks and interventions to address reading problems. Reading problems that include students' lack of comprehension and retention, poor vocabulary and poor context reading skills can be addressed with teachers' support. During the reading period, students cannot sustain reading when they encounter difficult words in a context and obstructs their understanding. So, the teacher keeps an eye of the students and provides scaffolding to address problems right on. The benefits of extensive reading push students become effective readers and efficient in the target language.

Extensive reading using graded books is one of the many ways to introduce ER in ESL classes. It is important that the books are up-to-date and enough for all especially on the genres that students are interested to read. However, it is as useful if students perhaps can choose readings like articles from different contents to read and share in the class. They can choose topics that they see online or read from books according to their interest. As long as you keep students read with excitement and motivate them to read more in English can be a good tool to achieve the goal.

We are aware of the effort it requires teachers to prepare and organize extensive reading in an ESL classroom but it is worth the effort to see the result to the students.

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