

# Using Extensive Reading to Improve First Year Students Learner Autonomy

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**Abstract—** Extensive Reading (ER) has been a hot topic among the scholars all over the world due to the benefits it brings to students' study. It is often argued to improve learner autonomy, vocabulary learning, writing, attitude towards reading and so forth. This paper reviews the literature relevant to the above issues and indicates the challenges of implementing Extensive Reading into the language classrooms.

**Index Terms—**Extensive Reading, learner autonomy, vocabulary learning, attitudes

## I. INTRODUCTION

Learner autonomy is one of the most important aspects in mastering a language so how to learn autonomously has been a hot topic. In fact, many researchers have thoroughly investigated the tactics so that English learners can gain more autonomy. One of them, Extensive Reading (ER) is regarded as an effective method to enhance autonomous learning. As far as the researcher is concerned, ER is not widely implemented in Vietnamese context and his university. Besides, his students have not had much time learning English since they left high school and they still apply the learning styles at high school into the new environment. Hence, they appear not to learn autonomously. Thus, he is thinking of using ER in his classes to improve students' autonomy in learning.

ER has been widely researched on plenty of aspects and become "a valuable, almost expected tool" (Nelly, 2009, p. 31). Most research indicates undeniable benefits of ER towards learners despite that to implement ER is not so easy (Susser & Robb, 1990; Greaney, 1996). The key issues investigated under the umbrella of ER mainly focus on the effects of ER on the aspects of learning English including vocabulary, attitude to reading, writing and challenges of ER application in classroom.

Therefore, in this writing, features of ER will be clearly presented, followed by discussion of aforementioned issues related to autonomous learning with ER and then the research question will be expressly stated.

## II. KEYS TERMS

### A. Extensive Reading

In terms of definitions and characteristics of ER, there are quite a few ones.

Bamford and Day (1985) call ER "real-world reading but for pedagogical purpose" (p. 5), meaning that students have chances to read something real and relevant to themselves but through it, the educators' goal can be reached. However, it is merely the researcher's guess and this definition needs explaining more.

Davis (1995) considers ER a way to give learners time, encourage them, let them read as many materials as possible in pleasure, within their levels and without washback effects. These statements about ER appears to be appropriate and easy to understand and perhaps, they are the useful references for the researcher.

From a broader outlook, Maley (2009) provides a careful definition of ER. Accordingly, ER is reading for pleasure and information regularly, in a vast amount of materials and a wide range of topics with student's choices of books and a fast speed. The researcher do not totally agree with Maley saying that they need to read in a fast speed because when they read for pleasure, the speed depends on their level. In conclusion, the following characteristics are identified by the researcher in this study:

- ✚ Read a large quantity of books and texts and the variety of topics are chosen by teacher
- ✚ Read pleasurable at their own rate and level
- ✚ Read the materials they choose

### B. Learner autonomy

Learner autonomy was the concept which Holec (1981) first regarded as the ability of a person to be responsible or control his/her own study. He added that it was not something inborn but gained through the learning experiences. From the broader view, Little (1991) and Sinclair (2000) defined learner autonomy as the ability to reflect critically, make decisions and act independently.

Generally, it can be concluded that learner autonomy is the individual's capacity of looking after his/her own learning independently and responsibly.

### III. DISCUSSIONS OF THE KEY ISSUES

#### A. Influence of ER on learner autonomy

The influence of ER on learner autonomy has been thoroughly discussed among the scholarly world. There have been a variety of studies to find the answer to it (Imrie, 2007; Channuan & Wasanasomstithi, 2012; Fujigaki, 2012; Mede, İnceçay, & İnceçay, 2013; Castillo & Bonilla, 2014)

Fujigaki (2012) conducted a study to examine the important role of reading speed towards reading fluency and learner autonomy through a course of ER by utilizing questionnaires, interviews, group discussions and teacher observation on classes with 15-22 students in five years in succession. The author argued that after the course, all the participants improved their reading speed and believed that they became more autonomus in learning.

Sharing the same viewpoint, Mede, İnceçay and İnceçay (2013) employed five students' written reflections and semi-structured interviews from those students and two instructors to investigate their belief about the effects of oral book reporting on their autonomy through Extensive Reading. It was revealed that ER had positive impacts on their autonomy whose roles were to enhance awareness, raise students' responsibility of learning and boosting skills and improve intrinsic motivation in learning languages.

Agreeing with the other researchers on the same field, Castillo and Bonilla (2014) carried out an action research on 6 students in grade 9 in Colombia to find out how effective three reading strategies were to improve the learners' reading comprehension and autonomy. By using a self-assessment checklist, three questionnaire, a post-lesson self-evaluation and a reading achievement test, the authors indicate that learner autonomy was developed among the participants, demonstrated by decision-making process for their own study, completing assignments, being more motivated and aware of reading.

The researcher is convinced that when students are free to choose what interests them to read, they feel comfortable and more motivated to learn and discover the language. Therefore, their learner autonomy will be enhanced.

#### B. Influence of ER on vocabulary learning

The hotly debated issue about ER is likely the influence of ER on vocabulary learning; as a result, numerous studies have attempted to find out it (Pigada & Schmitt, 2006; Pazhakh & Soltani, 2010; Rashidi & Piran, 2011; Yamamoto, 2011; Tiryaki & Tütüniş, 2012; Atılğan, 2013; Chen et al., 2013; Senoo & Yonemoto, 2014) mostly in Asian countries (Iran, Taiwan, Turkey and Japan). Obviously, the studies discover positive impacts of ER on vocabulary learning. To the researcher's knowledge, in recent years, the position of ER in vocabulary acquisition has been strengthened so it is nearly impossible to find someone disagreeing with these positive effects.

To be more specific, Pazhakh and Soltani (2010) after the research on 80 intermediate adult male students from Iran conclude that both lower-intermediate and upper-intermediate experimental group show improvement in vocabulary learning compared to the control ones due to the wide range of reading during ten weeks and they "learnt new vocabulary from guessing meaning from the context and by using the dictionary" (p. 395).

Notably, Rashidi & Piran (2011) compare the effects of ER and IR on vocabulary learning among two groups of 120 intermediate and advanced Iranian students. It reveals that both ER and IR yield benefits towards students' vocabulary depth and size but intermediate group with IR and advanced group with ER indicate the better performance than others in vocabulary size. It means that lower-level groups seem to do better with IR whereas ER is likely to be a more effective way to boost vocabulary learning among more advanced groups because of their autonomy and high proficiency. Nonetheless, one criticism is that materials for groups are different; as a result, learners' achievement is different so it sounds to be difficult to make comparisons but the systematic and well-organized tests for assessment should be highly appreciated.

Approaching the issue differently, Tiryaki and Tütüniş (2012) work on a research with 100 elementary university students who lack motivation in learning English in Turkey. Surprisingly, the results should be noticed that ER offers lowly motivated and low level students a wider range of words and higher motivation for learning and reading through better marks at the end of course.

In the researcher's opinion, the study by Tiryaki and Tütüniş (2012) is probably the reference to his Vietnamese context due to some similarities. Firstly, participants are non-major in English. Secondly, their English is not really good so their current level may be elementary. Last but not least, they are reluctant to English and think English is not important at all.

#### C. Influence of ER on attitudes towards reading

How ER influences attitudes has become more popular among the ER studies (Pazhakh & Soltani, 2010; Fernandez, 2013; Yamashita, 2013; Senoo & Yonemoto, 2014; Lee et al., 2015; Ro, 2016). Generally, they argue that ER has positive impacts on learners' attitudes or even "foster a love for reading" (Yamashita, 2013, p. 259) and the researcher sees no opponents of this point again.

Specifically, Pazhakh and Soltani (2010) indicate that assisted by ER, participants are bound to cultivate more positive attitudes toward reading and they may suggest it to their mates. One strong point of this study is comparing and contrasting with the others' results to strengthen their findings and prove they are linear. The researcher highly appreciates this way and probably refers it. However, a weakness is the simplified selection of materials (five stories) and students just read one per two weeks. That looks too easy for intermediate learners and may make unreal evaluation.

This view is consistently supported by Fernandez (2013) in an action research claiming that students perceive ER in a very positive way and show their willingness to participate in another ER program with various intriguing topics and free material choices. Nevertheless, one apparent failure is that the questionnaire heavily focuses on the areas showing positive impacts without mentioning whether there are any dissatisfactory aspects.

A multiple-case study by Ro (2016) shares the same idea with systematic quantitative and qualitative analyses and sound reasoning, maintaining that after the course, both extrinsic and intrinsic motivations are enhanced despite different extent of increase among cases. The paper might have been more valuable if the author had concentrated on the core point of students' perception and motivation, excluding teachers' behavior.

The researcher holds conviction that if students cultivate an upbeat attitude towards reading, they will read texts more effectively. The more effective reading is, the more success they gain in vocabulary learning. In the context of Vietnam, it is strongly believed that the story will be the same.

#### D. Influence of ER on writing

Several attempts have been made to investigate the influence of ER on writing (Kirin, 2010; Ahmadi, 2012; Al- Mansour & Al- Shorman, 2014; Mermelstein, 2015; Salehi et al., 2015). One of the criteria to assess writing performance is lexical source. To the researcher's way of thinking, if vocabulary is enhanced through ER, it will partially contribute to improving writing skill.

With 48 students from Saudi Arabia and several reading and writing tests, Al-Mansour and Al-Shorman (2014) plausibly argue that although there is no significant difference in pretest's results, the experimental group reveals the better achievement in post-test than the control group, meaning that ER helps improve their writing performance based on the list of criteria. Notably, the reasons for writing improvement are also thoroughly discussed, which makes it more persuasive. The problem with the study is that students only have 50 minutes of ER in class without reading time at home mentioned. This view is advocated by Mermelstein (2015) who finds out that the treatment group in Taiwan shows higher achievements than the control one in all six scales (organization, content, vocabulary use, spelling and fluency). In another analysis, the former group still does better than the latter in five scales except for organization.

However, Kirin (2010) highlights in the study on Thai university students that ER and writing do not seem to be closely connected because unlike the low group, the high counterpart with larger reading amount does not show a statistical rise in writing scores. The author reasons out why the findings are not in line with others' (language input or output, proficiency and implementation of ER). In Kirin (2010), what impresses the researcher is that students are mostly in low level so they may find the course difficult and not pleasurable as ER suggests and consequently the low ability to remember and apply words into writing.

From my perspective, if students are intermediate or advanced enough, ER may work effectively in helping them enhancing writing but it should be taken into consideration in Vietnamese context that most of non-major freshmen have a low English proficiency so it may be challenging in using ER for the same reasons outlined by Kirin (2010).

#### E. Challenges in implementing ER into classrooms

Beside the distinct advantages, ER has been taken into account because of its challenges.

Al-Homoud and Schmitt (2009) indicate difficulties in applying ER in classrooms in Saudi Arabia despite its obvious benefits. Firstly, it is the course's length, maybe too short to evaluate effectiveness. Secondly, students are not proficient enough even though the materials are not too difficult. Thirdly, they do not have a chance to read a lot due to the lack of materials or input. Lastly, it is students that are inactive readers themselves.

Basically agreeing with these points, Archer (2012) discusses challenging conditions for ER implementation in Mexico including students' level influenced by educational

background and the regions where reading is not essential, leading to poor reading habits.

Being linear with the above, the article by He and Green (2012) reporting on Shenghai high schools proposes study burden, change in teachers' roles and classroom culture into the list of difficulties. "The integration of ER into the curriculum increases teachers' risk of not knowing the standard answers to questions asked by students" (p. 35), He and Green (2012) reckon. But it could be overcome by open sharing and discussion. Moreover, students study more subjects with more homework and tests so they have almost no time reading something extensively.

The researcher is increasingly convinced that every coin has its two sides. Beside enormous benefits to vocabulary learning, ER poses quite a few challenges when implemented in Vietnam generally and in the researcher's classrooms particularly. It is about student's reluctance, poor motivation, reading habits, lack of materials and short duration of courses.

## IV. CONCLUSION

Given some limitations, the studies vigorously support the use of ER to enhance students' vocabulary, attitudes towards reading and writing performance. They conduct their studies on different age groups from high school to university students; from low-level ones to advanced ones but their similarity is ER's positive impacts on students. Despite full awareness of the challenges of ER implementation, the researcher would try this method as a new way to promote learning. There are three main reasons for that. Firstly, it is the ER's undeniable effects on students' learner autonomy. Secondly, at my university, nobody has ever applied ER into teaching, normally merely intensive reading because they cannot control their students' work and they want to focus on comprehension and skills so that students can do the best in exams. Thirdly, there is very little literature of ER in Vietnam and at my university. Therefore, the researcher would use ER in his classrooms and investigate students' response towards using ER to improve their autonomy. In brief, the objective is to elucidate the question: **How do students respond to the use of Extensive Reading to improve learner autonomy in my classroom?**

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