

The Impact of Reading for Pleasure on Georgian University EFL Students' Reading Comprehension (IBSU Case)

Ramazan GOCTU*

Abstract

Reading is one of the most significant skills, particularly for EFL students. Many students today do not have the reading skills needed to do effective work in their courses. This paper explores reading for pleasure, its importance and impact on reading comprehension. Pleasure reading helps students to communicate, listen and, most importantly, to express themselves freely and it also allows them to acquire specific language skills. That is why reading for pleasure is definitely important. An experimental study using reading for pleasure was carried out at international Black Sea University for eight weeks with 42 English Philology freshman students. The experimental group was given texts for their selection: newspaper articles and graded readers on various topics which students were interested in, while the control group has just read the reading excerpts and texts which are given in their course book. The duration of the experiment was 8 weeks. Pre- and post-tests were implemented to determine the degree of improvement of students' reading comprehension skills. The experimental group showed better improvement of comprehension skills. The study demonstrated a measurable positive effect of reading for pleasure on students' language acquisition.

Keywords: Language acquisition, pleasure reading, reading comprehension

Introduction

As Floris & Dvina (2015) state in their study, the importance of reading in foreign language acquisition is indisputable. Reading is a source of information, clarifying inaccurate points, solution of problems, and it is a target of language (vocabulary and grammar) acquisition, culture awareness and academic success. Krashen (2004) states that spending much time on reading is more fruitful and beneficial than the time spent on teaching vocabulary. As it is mentioned in his book, spending time on reading motivates students more than spending time on retelling texts or learning the words by rote memorization. Even in the native language students who read extensively have a richer vocabulary, use words more accurately according to their meaning shades, collocation ability and register. If a student does not purposefully revise the studied words in order to maintain them in the long-term memory,

* Ph.D., International Black Sea University, Tbilisi, Georgia.
E-mail: rgocutu@ibsu.edu.ge

spending time on memorizing words may be in vain. This can be prevented by reading regularly and in large enough amounts. During the reading process students encounter randomly in the text the words that they have studied. Reading recurrently permits to maintain the words in the long-term memory. While coming across unfamiliar vocabulary in the reading text, the student has to find out their meaning, either by application of meaning elicitation strategies or with the help of a dictionary. Thus, reading both supports the acquisition of new vocabulary and helps retain previously learned vocabulary. This is very important as vocabulary plays a vital role in students' comprehension and acquisition of a foreign language. Without an adequate number of words, language learners will not be able to comprehend or use the second language (L2). Researchers argue that vocabulary is the foundation of other skills, a core component of language development (Kazerooni, Saedi & Parvaresh, 2011).

Reading for pleasure can provide learners the language input they need for further development because through extensive reading learners are constantly exposed to foreign language. Those learners who are always engaged in the target language application stand a better chance of learning. Moreover, extensive reading develops the overall competence of learners. When learners gain overall competence, their ability to use the language skills improve as well.

Language learning is a hard task. Foreign language learners cannot easily develop their language skills unless they are constantly involved in the learning process. Yet, pleasure reading enables learners to be engaged in the learning process which occurs subconsciously, without stress or special effort and is a major factor in language learning which can help learners develop their language proficiency. Extensive reading, being stress-free and having cognitive value, can increase motivation of learners to master the target language. When learners read more and begin to understand, their attitude towards foreign language learning will become more positive as well. They will have self-confidence to accomplish more.

Pleasure reading provides a learning environment for learners where they can learn the target language in a natural way. Students are engaged in reading not because they have to, but because they satisfy their need in getting information and simply in having a good time. On the other hand, through a significant amount of reading learners see the relationship between words and sentences and understand how words work in sentences. Realizing this relationship will enable learners to use the language effectively. Extensive reading develops learners' reading strategies and improves their comprehension. Reading can provide comprehensible input which learners need for language proficiency. Moreover, world knowledge of learners increases via reading, and imagination of learners develops as well. Extensive reading enhances personal growth of learners. Reading materials provide learners with information about culture. When learners have sufficient information about culture, their understanding of other people develops and learners become mature.

Reading for Pleasure or Extensive Reading

Krashen (1989) indicates that reading alone will enlarge encounters with new words, providing learning occasions by inference. The learner encounters unfamiliar words in particular contexts, which will enable the learner to infer the meaning and formulate those words' definitions.

According to Dubin & Olsain (1977), the benefits of reading for pleasure as:

- Students develop an ability to gain pleasure and also satisfaction from reading on their own in the language they are learning.
- They are open to the language in a more natural and less structured way. In other words, they get different unpressured feeling on the structure of the language since they read for pleasure, and not for a grade or any other assessment.
- Pleasure reading has also effect on other language skills such as writing and speaking.
- Extensive reading, or reading for pleasure, will help the students comprehend more and also continue to use the language after the instruction.

Moreover, reading for pleasure helps students in the development of other language skills (listening, writing, and speaking), which, in turn, permits them to be successful in their EFL examinations. Krashen (2004, p. 10) stated in his book, " the amount of free reading reported is also a very good predictor of performance on the TOEFL examination, the test of academic English that international students take, that assesses their competence in listening comprehension, grammar, and writing, in addition to reading comprehension. The relationship between free reading and TOEFL scores has been demonstrated by studies done with those taking the test abroad (Gradman and Hanania, 1991)".

Reading for pleasure can be considered as extensive reading, Extensive reading is mostly implemented outside the classroom. It is conducted for pleasure, and comprehension is checked by summaries.

While reading, purposes and strategies are also important in terms of comprehension. Davidson (2005) indicates in his book that, if you are reading a story or a novel for pleasure, you only need to work as hard as you like. However, if your teacher gives you an assignment that is related to a specific subject or a topic and if your teacher will assess you on this material, detailed comprehension is very important. You have to work hard and use many of your strategies in order to understand and remember what you have read.

Both extensive and intensive reading develop language skills. The difference is how they do it. Reading for pleasure aims at developing reading fluency rather than detailed comprehension, so language materials used for it may contain unfamiliar words, but desirably not more than one or two such words per page, to let the learners enjoy the process of reading instead of turning it into a hard job. Learners are supposed to read for general understanding, thus easy and enjoyable texts (such as humorous and adventure stories, sports reports, etc.) are preferred in extensive reading. Language acquisition occurs in the process of reading naturally. Pleasure reading is

implemented for pleasure, therefore, the more learners read, the more fluency they gain. If you read a lot, your knowledge of convention and grammar and vocabulary is acquired, not learnt, in other words, it is subconsciously observed, kept in your cortex and becomes part of you.

Opposite to this, in intensive reading, using Krashen's terms, language learning or consciously working on the language elements through rules, explanations and drills occurs. The main goal of intensive reading is to develop language skills through reading, hence, learners are supposed to read texts involving challenging language items.

Researches show the value of both intensive and extensive reading, especially emphasizing the value of extensive reading. Guo (2012) study held with 50 freshman EFL students in Taiwan during one semester confirmed the positive relationships between extensive reading and vocabulary. Nakanishi and Ueda (2011) held a one-year-long research with 89 Japanese university students majoring in human science. It showed a considerable increase in reading comprehension skills as result of extensive reading intervention (before it students did only intensive reading). Mukundan, Mahvelati & Nimehchisalem (2012) found that a four-week program of intensive reading helped 30 16-year-old Malaysian students having problems with English language learning considerably improve their English skills (mean results grew from 49.5 to 79.17).

Methodology

In this experimental research, in order to find out the impact of reading for pleasure on EFL student's reading comprehension, a quantitative research design was implemented with control and experimental groups. Experimental and control groups were chosen from Faculty of Education and Humanities Philology Department (International Black Sea University). The duration of the experiment was 8 weeks. During that time the students of the experimental group were doing reading for pleasure, while the students of the control group did not do any reading for pleasure and had usual intensive reading classes. Both groups were given a pre-test and post-test in order to determine the level of improvement of their reading comprehension skills. The tests were of the same format, volume and difficulty level. They involved reading comprehension questions.

Student needs

Students' interest area was investigated preceding the experiment via direct talk to the students. In compliance with the topics of students' interest areas, the materials corresponding to their language level and their interests were selected, like detective short stories, texts related to current developments in technology, virtual reality games, pop-culture, pets, horoscopes, etc. During the experiment, the experimental group students were free to choose any topics they want, so that the reading they did was not only extensive (large in volume), but also pleasurable.

Participants

Totally 42 English Philology freshmen students participated in this experiment. Participation was on a volunteer basis. Students were placed to the experimental and control group at random, 21 students in each group. Students' age were between 18 to 20 years old. Based on the Unified National Admission Exam, their level of English skills should have been B1, however, as they received a scope of grades, from 35 (the barrier that Faculty of Education and Humanities has, compared to the lower national passing standard) to 100, in reality their skills' level ranges from A2 to B2. By the beginning of the second term their skills level became more even, and the weaker students more or less caught up with their more successful peers. The average level in both groups, as the pre-test showed, was practically the same (78 and 77 points). The standard deviation, while calculating the mean scores, was 9.88 and 10.83, which is within norm (the groups were not too heterogeneous), and, what is important, that these numbers show that the distribution of stronger and weaker students was approximately the same.

Procedure

At the beginning of the 2nd semester, subjects in both experimental and control groups were given a Reading pre-test.

After pre-test:

In the experimental group, the benefits of reading for pleasure and the focus of the project were explained to the students. In class no reading occurred, only discussions of the read materials were held. To reduce the difference between the materials studied by the groups, some reading matter for the experimental group was chosen from the same textbook which was used by the control group (on condition that it corresponded to their interests and tastes). Students who read the same materials or at least materials on the same topics were joint in the same discussion groups. Extensive reading was done out of class. Initially some students were reluctant both to read and to take part in the discussions. Gradually, realizing that their more involved in the extensive reading process peers really enjoyed it and gained interesting knowledge, also not wanting to lag behind their group mates, the reluctant students began to be more involved in both extensive reading and the discussions.

In the control group students were just studying the texts which are in the reading book called Real Reading 3 (Creating an Authentic Reading Experience). They also fulfilled the activities dealing with learning vocabulary and grammar as well as reading comprehension, speaking and writing tasks based on the reading texts.

Results and Discussion

Performance test results were analyzed using SPSS version 18 programme. The mean and standard deviation of the responses were calculated. As illustrated in Tables 1 and 2, prior to the intervention the results of the Pre-test indicated that both control and the experimental groups obtained almost similar mean scores for their performance.

Results of the Control Group

As it is indicated at the Table 1, students' pre- and post- test results are almost same. While there is a subtle increase on several students' post-test results, the majority of the group- members' post- test results either were same or a little lower. This change affects the average results with just one point (initial mean is 78.29 and final – 79.48).

Table 1. Test Results of Control Group Descriptive Statistics

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Pre-test	21	78.28	9.87999
		57	
Post-test	21	79.47	10.23533
		62	
Valid N (listwise)	21		

Results of the Experimental Group

Table 2. Test Results of Experimental Group (Descriptive Statistics)

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Pre-test	21	77.33	10.82743
		33	
Post-test	21	84.95	11.05204
		24	
Valid N	21		

As it is explicitly displayed in Table 2, post-test mean result of experimental groups was 84.95, while their pre-test mean result was 77.33. There is significant change in their post-test (by 7.62 points). These results confirm the hypothesis of the research – pleasure reading better stimulated the development of reading skills via motivation and language acquisition through incidental encounters than intensive reading by purposeful working on language elements.

Comparison of Control and Experimental Groups

As seen in Tables 1 and 2, the initial mean results in the two groups were almost the same (77.33 in the experimental group and 78.29 – in the control group), the post-test results reveal better improvement in the experimental group (the control group mean post-test result is 79.48, however, the average post-test result of experimental group is 84.95).

Chart 1. Comparison of Control and Experimental Groups

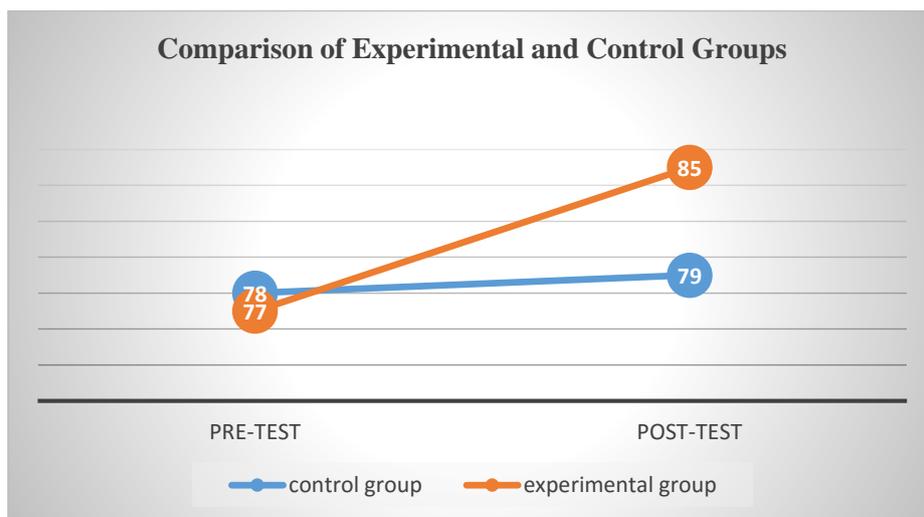


Chart 1 explicitly shows us the difference between the control and the experimental group. Although pre-test mean result of experimental group was less than control group's result, after the implementation of the pleasure reading, the experimental group got significantly higher scores than the control group. However, we cannot say that the intensive reading classes were useless – the control group students maintained the level of skills and even – although insignificantly – increased them. We may say that both kinds of reading contribute to reading skills' development, but the contribution of pleasure reading is greater.

The obtained results are in agreement with the studies discussed above (Gradman and Hanania, 1991; Guo, 2012; Nakanishi & Ueda, 2011; Mukundan, Mahvelati & Nimehchisalem, 2012).

Limitations of the Study

One of the limitations of the research study is its small sample size with 2 groups (42 participants), which may not be representative for all the EFL students in Georgia. Future studies with a larger group of students may be needed to confirm the consistence of the study. The survey was just implemented in one private university placed in the capital of the country (International Black Sea University). For the further study, it is desirable to include some other universities from different parts of region.

Conclusion

Reading for pleasure creates positive attitudes towards learning a foreign language. When learners read large amounts of materials, they develop automaticity. Besides, they improve meaning construction.

This research examined the effects of pleasure reading on EFL students' reading comprehension. The study demonstrated a measurable positive effect of reading for pleasure on students' language acquisition. From the analysis of pre-test and post-test results of the experimental group learning reading extensively and the control group learning reading intensively, it is possible to see that both groups benefitted from learning, however, extensive reading (although it was not done in class with teacher explanations and feedback) yielded a more significant improvement of reading skills than intensive reading.

Observation on the study process made it clear to the researcher that students who were in the experimental group enthusiastically concluded the given tasks during the research. In the meantime, extrinsic motivation switched to intrinsic one after the implementation of the experiment. During the experiment, experimental group students were actively engaged in the process; they were reading at home, at their free time. They had a chance to skim or read it slowly, they sometimes they skipped long passages, etc. Namely, they read however and whatever they wanted. Observations on the control group revealed that not all students were equally motivated and engaged. Some were bored. Some were motivated by the desire to pass the exam only (extrinsic motivation).

While reading for pleasure, especially EFL students, do not only learn new words or grammar structures but acquire the language naturally and holistically. Also diverse and free range of materials urge students to read more and more. During pleasure reading, learners meet unfamiliar words and structures and through making predictions, learners develop their lexical and grammatical knowledge.

The researcher recommends teachers who are teaching English as a foreign language to apply reading for pleasure projects in their classes. Pleasure reading not only develops language knowledge of learners, but also communicative skills.

References

- Davidson, C. L. (2005). *Solving the Mystery of Reading*. New York: Pearson Education, Inc.
- Dubin, F., & Olsthain, E. (1977). *Facilitating Language Learning: A guidebook for EFL/ESL Language Teachers*. New York McGraw: Hill International Book Company.
- Floris, F. & Dvina, M. (2009). Study on the Reading Skills of EFL University Students . *TEFLN Journal*, 20, 1, 37-47.
- Gradman, H. & Hanania, E. (1991). Language learning background factors and ESL proficiency. *Modern Language Journal*, 75(1), 39-51.



- Guo, S-c. (2012). Using Authentic Materials for Extensive Reading to Promote English Proficiency. *English Language Teaching*; Vol. 5, No. 8, 196-206.
- Kazerooni, S. R., Saeedi, M., & Parvaresh, V. (2011). Does reading literary texts have any impact on EFL learners' vocabulary retention? *Canadian Social Science*, 7(2), 117-128.
- Krashen, S. (1989). We Acquire Vocabulary and Spelling by Reading: Additional Evidence for the Input Hypothesis. *The Modern Language Journal*, 440-464.
- Krashen, S. (2004). *The Power of Reading: Insights from the Research*. Portsmouth, Connecticut: A division of Reed Elsevier Inc.
- Mukundan, J., Mahvelati, E.H., & Nimehchisalem, V. The Effect of an intensive English Program on Malaysian secondary school students' language proficiency. *English Language Teaching*, 5, 11, 1-7.
- Nakanishi, T. & Ueda, A. (2011). Extensive reading and the effect of shadowing. *Reading in a Foreign Language*, 23, 1, 1-16.