EXTENSIVE READING USING GRADED READERS

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ABSTRACT

Extensive Reading is particularly absent in tertiary education in Malaysia especially in public universities in the East Coast. This study explores the influence of ER on the students' reading performance and identifies the relevance of ER in increasing students' proficiency. ER was embedded into a 14 week course among a sample of 125 undergraduate students enrolled in various English core university subjects. Edinburgh Project in Extensive Reading (EPER) was used as a guide in the selection of graded readers as well as the use of placement tests. Results indicated that students did significantly better in the post-test than in the pre-test.

Keywords: Extensive reading, graded readers, EPER, ESL learners, reading fluency.

1. INTRODUCTION

Research has reported beneficial effects of extensive reading in the teaching of reading for English as a Second Language (ESL) learners such as reading speed and comprehension (Bell, 2001), vocabulary (Horst, 2005; Pigada and Norbet, 2006) and grammar (Yang, 2001). Claims that extensive reading could lead to significant improvements in learner’s reading speed and the role of graded readers program has proposed this study. According to Richards and Schmidt (2002) extensive reading means reading in large amounts to gain a general understanding of what is read to build up knowledge of vocabulary and structure which will encourage a liking for reading.

According to the Malaysian National Library (2006), the amount of reading has not increased in the past ten years. This was reflected by a survey conducted with a sample of 60,441 respondents, where literacy rate has slightly decreased from 93 percent in 1996 to 92 percent in 2006.

Since one of the approaches to encourage reading is through extensive reading, it is vital to incorporate extensive reading in English courses. A recent study indicated “without incorporating extensive reading as part of a program, the students might not read English books on their own” (Mohd Asraf and Ahmad 2003, p. 4). To be successful, extensive reading needs to be integrated as part of the language curriculum and not as a ‘stand-alone’ component.

This study was designed to explore the difference between students’ pre and post test scores and identify the relevance of extensive reading in increasing student’s proficiency in English. Below is the research hypotheses employed in this study:

1. Placement/ Progress Test E (PPT E) scores will be higher than the Placement/ Progress Test B (PPT B) scores.
2. Extensive Reading Test Version 2 (ERT V2) scores will be higher than the Extensive Reading Test Version 1 (ERT V1) scores.

1.1 Overview of Extensive Reading

The principles underlying ER allow students to read a large amount of texts according to their linguistic ability and at their own pace. Reading is solely done to get overall meaning and the act of
reading is for enjoyment and information. Students are encouraged to stop reading if the materials are not interesting and are too difficult. So, in order for ER to be successful, the theoretical framework of ER is important. Below are ten principles highly recommended to be used by Day and Bamford (2002);

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 rather 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. The teacher is a role model of a reader.

Studies have shown that students’ will benefit immensely when they read a lot. They become more confident readers, increase listening and speaking skills, become better writers, and increase their vocabulary. Additionally, they become highly motivated to learn the new language (Day and Bamford 2002). According to Waring (2008 in Cirocki, 2009), students’ will become fluent readers when they are able to read quickly for meaning which will then enhance their proficiency in the new language.

1.2 Rationale of Using Edinburgh Project on Extensive Reading (EPER)

Edinburgh Project on Extensive Reading (EPER) was established in 1981 by the Institute for Applied Language Studies University of Edinburgh but is now handed over to Extensive Reading Foundation (ERF). ERF is a non-profit, charitable organization which aims to support and promote ER. One of its many purposes is to maintain a bibliography of research on ER and in setting up ER programs.

EPER publishes two types of tests namely placement/ progress test (PPT) and Extensive Reading Test (ERT). They are two different tests and are used in different ways. The two main purposes of placement/ progress tests are to place students in a reading program and to monitor student’s progress. For the placement/ progress tests EPER has versions A, B or E consisting of parallel versions 1 and 2 for each set.

Extensive Reading Tests on the other hand, is used to ensure whether the student is reading fluently at that level and ready to move to the next level (EPER, n.d.). The tests consist of the 8 EPER levels namely levels A, B, C, D, E and X. Each of which also consists of parallel versions 1 and 2.

Additionally, with its years of research into ER, EPER has come out with its lists of graded readers consisting of a variety of publishers. These graded readers are classified according to eight levels of difficulty. Hence, since reading enjoyment is the most important factor in the ER programs, it is clear that EPER has considered the motivational factor through the use of graded materials.

1.2 Graded Readers

Hill (2008) described graded readers as books that are specially tailored for English learners with the use of limited lexis and syntax. Moreover, it is argued that graded readers create an environment where students’ progress to reading unsimplified materials. As known, beginners lack interest in reading unsimplified materials because it is difficult (Waring, 2008). So, in order for learners to progress to read unsimplified materials, students should be exposed to books that are of increasing level of difficulty. Hence, graded readers are written at different difficulty levels by varying the use of language, grammar, vocabulary and plot (Waring, 2008).

According to Claridge (2012), the major publishers namely Penguin Readers, Cambridge Readers, Oxford Bookworms and Macmillan Readers publish fiction series. This is because it is believed that fictional series are texts that develop learner’s fluency. Moreover, all four publishers believed that the culture and acceptance of topics of the graded readers depends on the learners needs. Therefore, Macmillan Readers and Penguin Readers produce books that reflect teachers and librarians opinions about what they perceive as the most influential in the market while Oxford Bookworms and Cambridge Readers provide series in the sensitive areas.

Until today, there are various graded readers used by researchers in the attempt to incorporate ER into their teaching. For example, Yamashita (2008)
study on 38 Japanese university students used 500 English graded readers from varying publishers such as Penguin, Oxford and Cambridge. These students were allowed to select their own titles to read. Similarly, for a study conducted by Iwahori (2008), 107 graded readers were used among high school students. These books consisted of English graded readers from publishers such as Oxford University Press, Macmillan and Pearson Longman.

Additionally, Walker (2011) used the same comprehensive database of graded readers developed by EPER that is used in this study. In this database the graded readers are from H to X and her students were assigned to read 16 to 96 pages in those novels.

1.3 Introducing ER into an ESL course

With the immense benefits of ER in mind, there is a need to incorporate or embed ER into ESL courses especially in tertiary level as ER is absent. One of the many reasons of this is because the curriculum in a way does not tailor to fit ER programs into the ESL course. However, as Macalister (2008) remarks, with proper guidelines and a distinctive belief that extensive reading will have an abundant benefit on learning a new language incorporating ER may prove to be successful. Thus, by incorporating ER in the ESL classroom, it is hoped that it can gauge the students’ intuition to read more and increase their level of motivation towards English.

ER cannot stand alone; it is a reading project where all the language components need to be incorporated together. By integrating ER into ESL classroom, it is the best way to ensure the success of the project. According to Green (2005), in order to ensure the success of extensive reading, it needs to be integrated as seamlessly as possible with the language components embedded in the curriculum. “It is a fundamental misconception to see it as a ‘stand-alone’ component” (p.308).

Implementation of ER may differ from setting to setting, the action research project done by incorporating ER as a component in a pre-university study English for Academic Purposes programme is one of the successful story where it has been carried out in a university in New Zealand. The ER project in the EAP programme ran smoothly where students were frequently encouraged to read in their own time, and to read as much as possible but at least two graded readers a week, with reminders of opportunities to renew books. The students mostly had no trouble to bring along their graded reader every day, nor to return and renew their readers (Macalister, 2008). This proves that ER can have a place in an EAP programme. The very concrete reason to incorporate ER into the classroom is that students might not read if ER was implemented only as recommended or as extra-curricular activity. Thus, by incorporating ER in the lesson, it will lead to the satisfaction of the students themselves. This was further proven by Morgado (2009), which highlighted how students have increased their vocabulary, reading skills as well as their confidence in the new language. This shows that students do have a good and positive impact towards ER and perhaps would be grateful to be a part of the program.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Participants

The participants selected were 125 undergraduate students enrolled in the core university subjects in Universiti Malaysia Pahang; English for Academic Communication (Level 1), English for Technical Communication (Level 2) and English for Professional Communication (Level 3). The students ranged between the ages of 19-23 years old consisting of different race and gender. Students were stationed in two different campuses in the east coast which are located in Pekan and Gambang, Pahang.

2.2 Data Collection

The study was embedded as part of a 14-week course of the core English subjects in Universiti Malaysia Pahang. The class met twice a week for 4 hours but time spent on Extensive Reading was approximately 30 minutes each week. However, a rigid time allocation for ER was not required because of the syllabuses that need to be covered in each core subject taught by the instructors.

Pre-tests (PPT B) was administered at the beginning of the course, in week two. ERT version 1 was administered in week three. Based on the individual results obtained by students in PPT B, students were given the opportunity to choose
whichever novels they wanted to read provided that it is of their reading level or one level above their reading level (i.e. E and D, C and B or A and X).

Approximately 344 English graded readers from Macmillan Readers, Cambridge English Readers, Oxford Bookworm Series and Penguin Readers were equally given to four instructors to distribute among their students. The number of books from each publisher is illustrated below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Publishers</th>
<th>No. of books</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Macmillan Readers (MR)</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cambridge English Readers (CER)</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oxford Bookworms Series (OBS)</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Penguin Readers (PR)</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>344</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2.1: Graded Readers

Students read novels outside of class time and were encouraged to do ER exercises adapted from Extensive Reading activities for Teaching Language (Bamford & Day, 2004) in and outside of class time. Only five main activities were used by each instructor and a minimum of 4 novels were read by the students throughout the semester. Students were encouraged to change titles every 2 weeks. However, there were also students who enjoyed the activity and read a maximum of 20 novels throughout the semester, changing titles every week and taking 2 titles at every change. Post-tests were administered in the 13th (PPT E) and 14th week (ERT V2). Hence, the tests reflect improvements after 11 weeks.

3. RESULTS

3.1 Placement and Progress Tests Results

Table 3.1 shows that the p-value associated with the statistic of contrast —Sig. (1-tailed) is 0.000. Since the p-value is less than 0.05, therefore, at a 0.05 significance level, we have enough evidence to conclude that the result of the tests has increased after the reading program. There is a significant increment after the treatment among the students.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student's scores for PPT B - Student's scores for PPT E</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Sig. (1-tailed)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>-3.640</td>
<td>124</td>
<td></td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.1: Progress test Results Compared to Placement test Results

3.2 Extensive Reading Test Results

Table 3.2 shows that the p-value associated with the statistic of contrast —Sig. (1-tailed) is 0.0035. Since the p-value is less than 0.05, therefore, at 0.05 significance level, we have enough evidence to conclude that the result of the extensive reading tests has increased after the reading program. There is a significant increment after the treatment within the group.

Table 3.2: Extensive Reading Test Version 1 Compared to Extensive Reading Test Version 2 Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student's Scores for ERT V1 - Student's Scores for ERT V2</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Sig. (1-tailed)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2.731</td>
<td>124</td>
<td>.007</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4. DISCUSSION

This analysis suggests that extensive reading improved student’s performance in both Placement/Progress tests and Extensive Reading Tests. Throughout the semester, the 125 students in this group whose data was included in this analysis read 4 novels on average. Similarly to a study done by Margado (2009), students did significantly better on the post-test than the pre-test which suggests that Extensive Reading had a positive impact on the students’ reading comprehension. This in relation suggests extensive reading impacts not only on reading comprehension but also on writing, listening and speaking because students know more vocabulary (Day and Bamford, 2002).

In addition, significant improvements can be seen through students’ achievement after participating in the reading activities. Here, level of students’ mastery of grammar and vocabulary is better. In another study, Hafiz and Tudor (1989) agreed that, comparison of pre-and post-treatment tests in reading and writing indicated that subjects had improved significantly in both skills, though particularly in writing.

Additionally, with various types of novels provided, it will be able to inculcate positive reading habits among students. This was proven when there were students who read up to 20 novels within one
semester, showing that they have more confidence and interest to read more. Morgado (2009) agreed that, various novels they read will also expose the students to build vocabulary, reading comprehension, strengthen their reading skills and improve their confidence. Moreover, the use of English graded readers is seen to have reflected on the improvements made whereby students will progress to a higher level from the level they started with. Thus, it is timely to look into embedding extensive reading into an ESL subject at tertiary level with the use of graded readers, provided that instructors understand the proper procedures and objectives of extensive reading.

REFERENCES


