

Chapter 53

A Study on Extensive Reading in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

As practicing university teachers, the authors have noticed that students tend to focus exclusively on syllabus reading materials, ignoring reading for pleasure outside the classroom. Rarely taught in ordinary university classes, extensive reading skills may play an important part in the foreign language teaching and learning process. Given these facts, the authors decided to pilot an extensive reading program at the academic level, the ultimate aim being to implement it in the future. Therefore, the purposes of the chapter are to discover students' attitudes towards extensive reading and to assess the results of the pilot as reflected in their opinions with a view to conceiving a large-scale future reading program. The study attempts to shed light on the issues triggered by the introduction of such a program into the curriculum of philological students, being mainly concerned with the practical side of the phenomenon and highlighting the interdependence between the findings and the latest theories in the field.

INTRODUCTION

There is a widely spread consensus among researchers and practising teachers that extensive reading programs are an important tool for teaching English as a second language. But, in spite of its tremendous contribution to the development of students' language skills, the difficulties entailed by the implementation and monitoring of such programs diminish teachers' enthusiasm about integrating them in the instructional process, especially in higher education.

As to university students, they tend to limit their reading activities to the topics of the syllabus, perceiving reading as a compulsory task that can ensure school success and not as a pleasant free-time activity. In other words, students are more interested in extrinsic rewards rather than in being intrinsically

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motivated readers. As Cambria & Guthrie (2010: 17) put it, ‘students who read only for the reward of money, a grade or a future job are not the best readers’, their major purpose being the reward itself and not learning. On the other hand, reading for enjoyment is a necessary but not sufficient condition to increase students’ motivation for extensive reading. As the same authors point out (2010: 16), motivation includes ‘the values, beliefs and behaviours surrounding reading for an individual. Some productive values and beliefs may lead to excitement, yet other values may lead to determine hard work.’ This determination, the two authors explain, consists in three factors that propel students to read, that is, interest, dedication and confidence, meaning the combination between reading for pleasure and a planned effort to reach the intended success.

Using the internet as a source for reading may help teachers develop students’ intrinsic motivation within a well-organized reading program. It is a fact that students resort to the internet on a regular basis with various purposes: to communicate with their friends, to look for information they are interested in, to enjoy themselves etc. Whatever the reason, they will always turn to the internet as a first choice. Tempted by its tremendous advantages (rapidity, accessibility, huge stock of information etc.), most learners prefer doing their research more on the web and less in a traditional library. Under such circumstances, changing the internet into a tool for developing students’ reading skills cannot but contribute to the success of an extensive reading program.

Taking into consideration the power of the internet to motivate students to read, the paper aims to find and evaluate students’ attitude towards extensive reading. It also assesses the impact on students of a pilot program based on web resources analysing the results, identifying the difficulties involved by such a program, and trying to find solutions that may help the implementation of an extensive reading program into the curriculum of philological students in the future.

BACKGROUND

The general framework of the research on the implementation of an extensive reading program in higher education was provided by two categories of studies, their principles being applicable to reading no matter the medium, printed material or web resources.

The first category includes theories dealing with the effectiveness and positive effects of extensive reading on both cognitive and affective levels (Horst, 2005; Farrell, 2009; Nakanishi, 2015), whose synthesis of benefits is suggested by Nakanishi (2015: 9): ‘the freedom students have to choose books, the degree of autonomy enjoyed by the students, and the motivation to continue reading’. Moreover, the academic environment seems to be ideal for the application of an extensive reading program because, as Nakanishi (2015: 10) highlights, ‘the effect of extensive reading increases with older participants (...), who tend to learn language explicitly drawing on their analytical skills.’ The second category refers to the extensive reading activities described by Bamford & Day (2004) who offer a wide variety of useful ideas for an extensive reading program, including complex activities by means of which ‘teachers must take into account the effect of a class activity and a reading material not just on students’ ability to read, but on students’ self-images as readers, and on their feeling toward reading itself.’ (Day & Bamford, 1998: 166).

Generally, extensive reading of printed material or online resources implies the same cognitive processes as intensive reading does, presupposing an interactive model that consists in ‘constructing meaning from text through the use of both bottom-up and top-down strategies and skills’ (Şahin et al., 2014: 65,

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