

Chapter 56

A Case Study on Extensive Online Reading in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

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. In addition, the pilot was continued with postgraduate students two years later. 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 Humanities 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.

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INTRODUCTION

In the digital age, the traditional manner of reading printed materials competes with reading online books and other web resources. As a matter of fact, it is not the medium, either printed or virtual, that matters, but the act of reading itself. As far as the teaching of English is concerned, the development of the reading skill is indispensable for language acquisition and a great challenge to foreign language programs is how to determine students to read in the context of today's society with its multiple temptations and recreational offers.

There is a general consensus that extensive reading programs are an important tool for teaching English as a second language. But, in spite of their 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 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 behaviors 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. This assessment was performed by means of a pilot program based on web resources. It lasted two academic years and included graduate and post-graduate students. The results offered by the pilot program were analyzed at the end of the first year of implementation (2013-2014), providing the authors of the chapter with valuable information about the participants' opinions. The analysis also identified the difficulties involved by such a program, and tried to find solutions that may help its application as part of the extracurricular activities of postgraduate students in the field of humanities in the academic year 2015-2016.

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