

A Study on Extensive Reading in Higher Education

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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 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, Nuttall, 1996). In other words, to successfully accomplish a reading activity, students need three types of competences at work: background knowledge to help them understand the possible meaning of the text, information about the distinguishing features of the reading texts (fictional, non-fictional etc.) and a good command of the target language system. In the

case of philology students, their ‘familiarity with the context’ and content is supplemented by their awareness of ‘literary devices, such as metaphors and flashbacks’. (Jacobs & Farrell, 2012: 15). In brief, as Nuttall shows (1996: 127, 128), extensive reading ‘can help readers enter the circle of growth’, which she calls ‘the virtual circle of the good reader’, on the grounds that it implies a multilateral and interrelated improvement connected with the reading speed, the capacity to understand ideas and a strong feeling of satisfaction while discovering the fictional world of the text.

Besides the characteristics of the reading process in general, the differences between intensive and extensive reading should also be considered when starting an extensive reading program. As shown in Table 1, what fundamentally separates extensive from intensive reading is that the former requires written material within students’ language competence, these texts being accessible, easy and enjoyable. Furthermore, students are stimulated to read what they want in their own time and as much as they can.

Table 1. Intensive vs. extensive reading

Intensive Reading	Extensive Reading
Reading for comprehension	Reading for pleasure
Students have to read	Students are motivated to read
100% comprehension of the text	Less than 100% comprehension
Word for word reading	Inferring the general meaning
Study of individual words and structures	Understanding sentences and discourse rules
Aid of the teacher in reading	Autonomous, independent reading
Reading above level	Reading according to level
Use of various comprehension strategies	Use of already acquired overall comprehension strategies
Use of dictionary for unfamiliar words and structures	Use of dictionary for vital words only
Short texts	Long texts
Reading done in classroom	Reading done outside the classroom
Teachers choose the reading material	Students select what to read

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