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## **The Role of Extensive Reading on Vocabulary Development**

**Z.Merve Tiryaki<sup>1</sup>**

Istanbul Aydın University, Turkey

**Birsen Tütüniş<sup>2</sup>**

Istanbul Aydın University, Turkey

### **Abstract**

The main purpose of this study is to reveal whether extensive reading has any role on vocabulary development of elementary level EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students. To this respect, a small-scale classroom research was carried out at a private university in the fall term of 2010-2011 academic year. 100 elementary level students were chosen and they were divided into experimental and control groups. With experimental group the materials for extensive reading were selected. Those materials were four graded readers. Control group was not exposed to any extensive reading during the fall term whereas students of the experimental group were asked to read those graded readers until the end of the fall term. However, both groups were responsible from the syllabus which was designed by school administration and it involved studying three units of a main course book until the end of the fall term. Then both groups took a pre-test at the beginning of the term to display that they were at elementary level and a post-test at the end of the term to present whether any improvements were observed in their vocabulary or not. Finally the results were analyzed and compared to find out whether any difference occurred between two groups in terms of vocabulary development.

**Keywords:** *extensive reading, vocabulary development*

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<sup>1</sup> Prof. Dr. Birsen Tütüniş is a lecturer, teacher educator and teacher trainer. She is currently working at Istanbul Aydın University and she also holds an international position as the IATEFL TTEd SIG coordinator.

<sup>2</sup> Z.Merve Tiryaki is an instructor at Istanbul Aydın University. She is doing her PhD in English Language and Literature.

## **Introduction**

Word is the essential instrument for communication. When we read a text, we actually read the words and they are symbols of meanings. During reading process, we interpret those symbols by assigning them different meanings. Thus, we read the words not the texts. The goal of teaching vocabulary is to create storage of words meanings and the information related to those words in the learners long-term memory, which leads student comprehension. Learning from context is not a short-term process. Without a good vocabulary instruction, it is difficult to stimulate learning from the context. However, if taught properly, it is possible for the students to learn words in a shorter period (Stahl, 1999).

It is a common belief that learning a language can only occur in a classroom environment since such a process needs instruction. However, learning continues outside the classroom if the students are oriented correctly. The ESL/EFL teachers are usually reluctant to do extensive reading activities in class because they need to cover their syllabus. They usually disregard activities that can be held outside the classroom for the elementary students such as, reading books or papers. It may be because it is difficult to assess or may be because they do not want to fall behind the curriculum.

To this respect, it can be suggested that learning process should not be limited only to the classroom activities or main course books; on the contrary, students should be encouraged to read English texts or books outside the classroom.

Native speakers continue to expand their vocabulary in adulthood. Little is known about the average language-user's vocabulary but anything from 20,000-100, 000 words could be within a person's receptive vocabulary. Nation (2001, p.24) defines receptive vocabulary as "perceiving the form of a word while listening or reading and retrieving its meaning" and defines (2001, p.25) productive vocabulary as "wanting to express a meaning through speaking or writing and retrieving and producing the appropriate spoken or written form." It is also agreed that these terms are also used as a synonyms for the terms active and passive vocabulary. In addition to Nation's definitions, active vocabulary can be described as the ability to use the words in speaking and writing which is related to production and passive vocabulary as knowing or having the knowledge of a word, which is related to reception (Reads, 2000). Thus, knowing a word means knowing and using it actively and productively as well as receptively (Carter, 2001).

Knowing or having the knowledge of a word in ELT depends on methods used for vocabulary teaching. Over the past two centuries, there have been several methods. The aim of the first method (The Grammar Translation) was for example to prepare students to read, to understand and to write classical materials. Grammar-Translation Method did not include direct vocabulary instruction unless a word illustrated a grammatical rule or without providing any definition, the explanations depended mostly on etymology. Although it had been the dominant method that was used from eighteenth to twentieth century, in 1880's, under the name of "The Reform Movement", another method was propounded by Henry Sweet. The emphasis was on the spoken language and phonetic training. His system consisted of five stages. (Mechanical stage, grammatical stage, Idiomatic Stage, Literary Stage and Archaic stage.) Each stage serves for different controlled purposes of spoken language. The most remarkable point of this method was to avoid isolated sentences or separated words throughout the study.

The next major method, in terms of vocabulary improvement, is Michael West's The Reading Method/Situational Language Teaching, in which he stressed the need to facilitate reading skill by improving vocabulary skills. In the mid 90's with the appearance of new teaching methods such as audio-lingual teaching and, following the former, communicative approach and Krashen and Terrell's Natural Approach in which vocabulary was mainstay of meaning and key to clear comprehension of the message. Current research into corpus analysis represent prominent theoretical and pedagogical shift from the past and all four of them challenge traditional views of word boundaries by emphasizing the collocation and lexis patterns.

Choosing to read based on your taste, which is called free voluntary reading, is a way to achieve second language proficiency. Moreover, the book the reader is interested in facilitates readers' concentration on the book and enables them to take advantage of background information that facilitates comprehension (Cho and Krashen, 1994). Krashen (2003) believes in the power of reading for the development of first, second or foreign language competence. He displays some case studies to support his claim of the power of recreational reading for progress. Extensive reading leads learners to acquire the language if they are sufficiently exposed to the language and if they have the materials that are interesting for them. Krashen (2004) brings in the term "narrow reading" for the extensive reading the learners do on the areas of their own interest. Reading can broaden learners' language competence by providing automaticity of recognizing and decoding words and written symbols of a printed message (Grabe, 1991). Moreover, it can increase the learners' exposure to the language. However, the quality of exposure to language is very important to their motivation to acquire new forms from the input. This exposure to language is more likely to reduce the gap between L1 and L2.

Extensive reading can cause an increase in the range of vocabulary the learner possesses. Unlike direct vocabulary instruction, children between three and twelve grades can learn up to 3000 words a year (Nagy and Herman, 1987) if they do extensive reading.

A number of L1 studies that appear to show the positive effect of reading on subjects' writing skills (Stotsky, 1983., Krashen, 1984). Reading materials should fulfill students' needs and it should be interesting in order to motivate them to read. Extensive reading is important in consolidation of previously learned knowledge as they support new language forms by repeating adequately (Wodinsky & Nation, 1988). In addition, since background knowledge is activated during reading process it facilitates the development of prediction skills.

Writers and researches have not agreed on a common definition what extensive reading is and different meanings have been attributed to extensive reading in language teaching (Hedge, 2000). For instance, Bamford & Day (1998, p.5) defines it as "real-world reading but for pedagogical purpose." Intensive reading is an explicit way of learning and it involves the preselected texts which the students study word by word whereas the extensive reading aims the contrary. It also involves the texts that are chosen deliberately and short usually about 300-500 words long. In this type, reading the focus is on language features such as grammar, discourse and vocabulary. Unlike extensive reading, analyzing sentence structures in terms of grammatical elements and looking up every unknown word is the primary aim of intensive reading. By using term, "intensive reading" Palmer (1921/1964, p.111) meant "take a text, study it line by line, referring at every moment to our dictionary and our grammar, comparing, analyzing, translating, and retaining every expression that it contains." For Palmer (1964) extensive reading is reading book after book rapidly, and the

goal is not language, but the meaning. The purpose is to read for ordinary reasons such as pleasure or information; however, he saw the pedagogic value of both types of reading. Extensive reading requires large amount of reading in the second language.

The reading texts in integrated course books are highly controlled and there is that risk of encountering uninteresting or insufficient texts in terms of variety. These books are useful to teach structure of the target language; however, the reading parts are deprived of interesting texts or new vocabulary. On the other hand, the words enter the readers' sight vocabulary since the readers encounter multiple words while reading graded readers (Williams, 1996). Graded readers are books for English language learners who have limited lexis and syntax and the primary purpose of graded readers is to provide text for extensive reading.

## Method

### *Purpose of the Study*

The literature about the benefits of reading given above aroused the interest of the authors of this paper to see whether extensive reading would help their students' vocabulary development in English. Therefore, they conducted a small scale classroom research on extensive reading and vocabulary development, and they focused on vocabulary learning of reluctant elementary level students. The aim of the study was to see whether extensive reading would make any noteworthy distinction in the vocabulary development of these students.

### *Participants*

Unmotivated, reluctant to a foreign language learning students are chosen as subjects for this study. Teachers were using main course books and merely instructed in the main stream without asking them to do any kind of reading except the texts in their main course books. Two groups (one as the control-50 and the other as the experimental-50) of students (100 in total) were chosen randomly as the subjects of this study.

### *Materials and Design*

Additional reading is hypothesized to be valuable in the expansion of their vocabulary storage. Therefore, in addition to the course books, experimental group students are assigned to read graded readers extensively.

Both groups studied English for twelve weeks ( 3 hrs pwk). The experimental group read graded readers in addition to their weekly English courses at school whereas the control group only studied English in the classroom during this period. In the thirteenth week, both groups took a vocabulary test. The results proved the positive effect of extensive reading on vocabulary development in EFL.

The research Procedure was as follows:

- 1- The syllabus was designed: Both groups would study three units.
- 2- A questionnaire was given to both groups to define their willingness of learning English.
- 3- A vocabulary test (pre-test) of one hundred words was administered to both groups. The words in the test were chosen randomly from the main course book and the

graded readers .Part one questions were from the graded readers and part two questions were from the main course book.

- 4- Both groups took the same mid-term and final exams as the requirements of the university.
- 5- Both groups took the vocabulary test (post-test) again at the end of the research period.

## Results

The questionnaire that was given to the students in order to see their willingness rate and it was analyzed and represented below. (see Table 1).

**Table 1**

*Results of Volition of the Subjects*

	I agree (%)	I disagree (%)
Q1	0.9	0.91
Q2	0.4	0.96
Q3	0.5	0.95
Q4	0.98	0.2
Q5	0.4	0.96
Q6	0.4	0.96
Q7	0.87	0.13
Q8	0.5	0.95
Q9	0.19	0.81

It can be derived from the results analysis of the questionnaire that depending on question 7 and 4 the students believed that English is necessary and important in terms of their future jobs. However, they believe learning it at school is not necessary. On the other hand, they think that learning English will decrease their productivity in terms of their main field lesson. This causes willingness and indifference to language learning as there is not sufficient motivation and yet creating opportunity to read extensively provoked students' interest in English and played a part on their word development. The results of pre-test and the post-test demonstrate this progress.

**Table 2**

*Pre-Test and Post-Test Results*

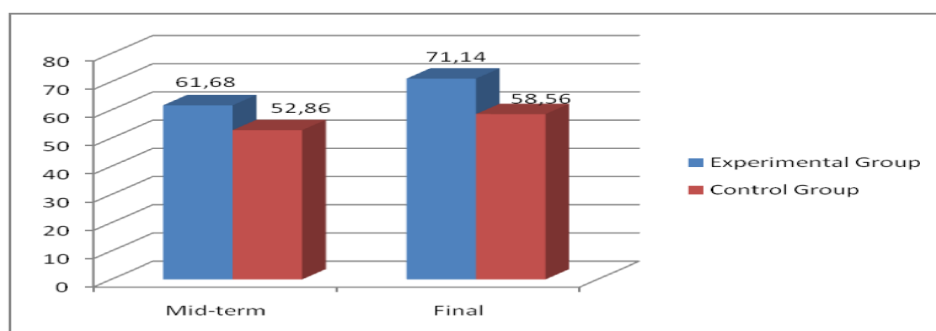
	experimental		control	
	pre <i>M</i> (SD)	post <i>M</i> (SD)	pre <i>M</i> (SD)	post <i>M</i> (SD)
<b>part I</b>	0.14 (0.70)	36.1 (2.88)	0.08 (0.34)	15.7 (8.82)
<b>part 2</b>	0.18 (0.56)	34.2 (6.46)	0.08 (0.34)	1.06 (2.41)

As it was displayed in Table 2, the results indicate that, experimental group got similar low scores in part I and part II of the pre-test. Similarly, control group unable to achieve high scores in both parts of pre-test. However in the post test, experimental group performed better

than the control group in both parts. All in all, total marks of the experimental group were higher than the control group. In other words experimental group were able to increase their vocabulary knowledge, when it is compared to the results in the pre-test, by reading graded readers outside the classroom environment.

As the students were not exposed to any of that four graded readers, the failure of the control group in the second part of the test was expected, and yet, since both groups studied same English course book during the fall term no big difference, between two groups, was expected in the first part of the test. Although, both groups were exposed to the same English classes, experimental group students, who both read extensively, are better at the first part of the test. However, experimental groups progress in learning English is substantiated by the school's mid-term and final exams. During fall semester students studied English in the main stream. Since it was necessary to evaluate students' success based on school regulations a mid-term and a final exam were applied in the fall term. Mid-term exam was before experimental group students completed four graded readers, the final exam was after the completion of reading those books, and after they took post-test.

**Figure 1**  
*Mid-Term And Final Exam Success Graphic*



The average of the exams (Figure 1) indicates that both groups performed similarly in mid-term exam whereas in the final exam students of the experimental group performed better in a certain extent when their mid-term and final exams are compared. However, when it is compared to experimental group the average of the students in the control group in terms of mid-term and final exam results are very close to each other and control group showed less improvement than experimental group.

## Discussion

This small-scale research investigated whether extensive reading plays an important role on vocabulary development of elementary level EFL learners. The interaction between vocabulary development and reading, as it was mentioned in the literature review above, is notably important.

This research revealed that extensive reading affects positively EFL learners' vocabulary development and it ensures more word learning even though the subjects were reluctant to learn English at school.

The results of the data analysis demonstrate that extensive reading improved the range of the words of the reluctant learners in the experimental group who were asked to read graded readers. On the contrary, when the results analyzed and compared it was observed that the control group who were not obliged to read, distinguishably performed worse in the vocabulary test both in the first part and in the second part. This small-scale research supports the research done on the benefits of extensive reading in EFL classes.

However there were some limitations as well. It usually caused noise and therefore students were sometimes having difficulty concentrating on the exercises. The other limitation was the projects or assignments given by their main subject teacher. When they were given a project or an assignment that were related to their main field, they did not want to attend the English classes in order to complete their projects.

Further research is needed to insert extensive reading to the EFL curricula. Extensive reading might be effective on students' writing skills. Therefore, the authors of this study would like to attract the attention of the scholars for a research on the relationship of extensive reading and the development of writing skills in terms of the format.

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