

THE EFFECTS OF EXTENSIVE READING ON THE ATTITUDES OF TURKISH EFL LEARNERS TOWARD L2 READING

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ÖZET

Ders dışı yapılan okumaların öğrencinin İngilizce dil becerilerini olumlu yönde etkilediği ve bu tür okumanın akademik okumaya temel oluşturduğu bilinmektedir. Ancak, yapılan gözlemler İngilizce okumanın genellikle ders saatleri ile sınırlı kaldığını göstermektedir. Bu çalışmanın amacı, ders içi okuma ve öğretmen tarafından yönlendirilmiş ders dışı okumayı temel alan alternatif bir okuma programının üniversite öğrencilerinin İngilizce okumaya karşı olan tutumları üzerindeki etkilerini ölçmektir. Çalışmanın nicel ve nitel verileri, bu tür bir okuma programının öğrencilerin okumaya karşı olan tutumlarını olumlu şekilde etkilediğini göstermektedir.

Anahtar Sözcükler : İngilizce eğitimi, ders dışı okuma, okumaya karşı tutum

SUMMARY

The important role extensive reading plays in developing the linguistic skills and world knowledge of the learners has been emphasized by researchers. Although extensive reading, by itself, is not sufficient for the development of fluent reading comprehension abilities, such abilities cannot be developed without extensive reading. However, learners in foreign language settings, like Turkey, generally do little reading in English beyond course requirements. The present study discusses the effects of an alternative reading program, namely a combination of intensive reading with guided extensive reading, on the attitudes of Turkish university level learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) towards reading.

Key Words: Language learning, extensive reading, attitudes towards reading in L2

Extensive reading programs share the basic tenet that students read a relatively large amount of texts compared with intensive reading programs and are not expected to demonstrate understanding to a degree as they would in intensive reading (Hafız & Tudor,

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1989). Instead, students in the extensive reading programs read for personal pleasure or interest. According to Simensen, extensive reading counteracts “a tendency among foreign language learners always to regard a text as an object for language studies and not as an object for factual information, literary experience or simply pleasure, joy and delight” (1987: 42).

A considerable amount of research has been undertaken to examine the effects of extensive reading on various aspects of learners’ linguistic proficiency, such as reading, writing, vocabulary and spelling (Cho & Krashen, 1994; Grabe & Stoller, 1997; Hayashi, 1999; Polak & Krashen, 1989) and on learners’ affects, such as motivation and attitude (Hayashi, 1999). To give a few examples, in a study investigating the effects of voluntary reading on the spelling skills of learners, Polak and Krashen (1989) found positive correlations between the volume of voluntary reading and spelling accuracy. Similarly, Tüm (1995) in her study with Turkish EFL learners at a state university found that students who were engaged in extensive reading outperformed a more traditional group in terms of vocabulary knowledge. Mason and Krashen (1997), also, conducted experiments with Japanese EFL college students to investigate the effects of reading self-selected books on comprehension. The post-test scores indicated that the extensive reading method produced superior results compared to more traditional approaches to L2 reading instruction.

Regarding the gains in affect, Cho and Krashen (1994) reported that the attitudes of their subjects toward reading in English changed dramatically as a result of reading books from the popular series written for young native speakers.

Although there have been criticisms of research methodology used in these studies (Coady, 1997) and although the results concerning the effects on learners’ linguistic development have not always been clear-cut (Hafiz & Tudor, 1990), it is a generally accepted fact that fluent reading comprehension abilities cannot be developed without extensive reading and that extensive reading should be an integral, even major, part of preparing students for academic reading (Day & Bamford, 1998; Gough & Wren, 1999).

The reasons for including extensive reading in academic preparation programs extend even further, and have to do with the cognitive growth of the learners. Grabe (1986), who claimed that extensive reading plays a significant role in developing the capacity for critical thinking, discusses the teaching of reading in an academic setting to ESL students in the following quotation:

Discovery and creative thinking are emergent processes where the mind, almost of itself, makes nonobvious connections and relations between previously independent domains of knowledge in the mind of the person. It is always striking to note the inability of foreign students to discuss new or complex notions in English, even when their language abilities begin to allow for this. What is being noted is that rather formulaic thinking and expression of opinions that often occur in advanced ESL classes. In short,

second language students usually opt for 'safe' responses. While there are many causes for this phenomenon, a chief one is the lack of background knowledge assumptions which form the basis for many English language assumptions. The point is that prior reading experiences are crucial for having the information base to make nonobvious connections. (1986, p. 35).

Second language students in academic preparation programs must certainly master special skills for reading challenging academic texts. But unless they are also reading with fluency and confidence in the second language, they are unlikely to read broadly and deeply enough to achieve the mass of background knowledge on which speculative thinking depends.

Thus, the role of extensive reading in the second language curriculum has generally been accepted by researchers. However, as the benefits of extensive reading cannot be seen in a relatively short period of time, L2 teachers and reading programs abandon extensive reading as an integral component of the curriculum before they see its real impact (Cipielewski & Stanovich, 1992; Guthrie, Wigfield, Metsala & Cox, 1999).

In order to learn about the current use of extensive reading approach at the university level in Turkey, a preliminary study was conducted at two state universities in 2002-2003 academic year. 112 EFL students at the preparatory schools of these universities were interviewed to find out their ideas about reading in English. Moreover, semi-structured interviews were carried out with 14 EFL teachers to learn about their perspectives on the application of extensive reading approach in university preparatory (prep) classes.

The majority of the EFL students mentioned the lack of reading materials and the difficulties they had in finding the appropriate English books for their level and interests. Most of them indicated that they were not doing much reading outside the class because 'it was not an assignment' and 'they were not enjoying reading in English'. On the other hand, EFL teachers discussed students' negative attitudes towards reading. They complained that generally EFL students did little reading in English that went beyond required course textbooks. Moreover, because of their lack of interest, it was almost impossible to convince students that extensive reading would increase their overall English proficiency, and their reading comprehension ability in particular. Thus, intensive reading was employed practically in most of the English curricula with little or no attention given to extensive reading.

Although limited in scope, this information revealed that in its present use, extensive reading programs do not achieve their aims. Moreover, my belief was that EFL students, even at the university level, did not show much interest to extensive reading when left to themselves; they seemed to need some kind of guidance. Thus, the present study aims to find out whether an alternative reading program, i.e., a combination of intensive and guided extensive reading, would make any changes on the attitudes of EFL learners towards reading.

Participants

The participants were 42 university-level EFL learners, 26 females and 16 males, aged 17-19, at a state university in Istanbul. They were all native speakers of Turkish and were studying English as a foreign language for academic purposes. The participating students were enrolled in the prep school of the university because they could not pass the university English proficiency exam given at the beginning of the school year. The passing score on this exam is 60/100, which is claimed to be the equivalent of a 550 on the TOEFL by the School of Foreign Languages of the university. Students who do not pass the proficiency exam, (i.e. students with scores under 60) take a placement exam, which is used to place them into classes at different levels.

Students who receive between 60-80 on the placement exam are rated as 'intermediate' students and are randomly assigned to classes according to their majors. At the time of the study, there were 14 intermediate classes: 6 in the social sciences and eight in the natural sciences. For the purposes of the study, two intermediate classes with the closest mean scores from social sciences were selected and randomly assigned to control and experimental groups. Twenty-one students were in each group. The mean score of the control group was 72.02/100 (s.d. = 2.23), and that of the experimental group was 71.4/100 (s.d.= 2.49). The mean scores of these two groups were compared by means of a t-test and the results indicated that the differences between the means of group were not significant at the .05 level ($p=0.92$).

The groups had the same reading/writing teacher who was an experienced member of the staff.

Data collection and Analysis

Data for this study came from two sources: A questionnaire adapted from Yamashita (2004) used with Japanese EFL learners at the university level and from student interviews. The questionnaire had sections A and B, probing affective and cognitive reactions of the students to reading respectively (see Appendix A for the questionnaire items). In part A students' level of anxiety and comfort related to reading were assessed and in part B, students' level of self-perception on reading and the value they placed on reading were investigated. The number of items for each variable was as follows: 3 for anxiety, four for comfort, five for value and three for self-perception. The students responded to each statement using a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 5 points (strongly agree) to 1 point (strongly disagree).

The internal consistency of the items representing each factor varied from 0.62 to 0.92. Scores on negatively loaded items were reversed so that a higher score on each variable indicates a higher degree of feelings and beliefs represented by each factor.

Independent t-tests were applied to the test score differences of the groups to find out whether there were any differences between the groups in terms of their attitudes towards extensive reading at the end of the study. Since the test was repeated four times, the critical level was adjusted to 0.012 according to Bonferroni's correction.

Moreover, the experimental group students were interviewed to clarify and to triangulate the data collected from the questionnaire.

Procedure

The present study took place in the first semester of the 2003-2004 academic year in the reading and writing class (R/W). At the beginning of the study, i.e., the third week of the term, students in both groups completed the attitude test as a pre-test. After collecting the tests, the 6-week guided extensive reading treatment given to the experimental group students started. At the end of the 6-week period, students in both groups completed the same questionnaire again and experimental group students were interviewed on their attitudes towards extensive reading.

Setting

The students at the intermediate level have 30 hours of English instruction every week, 15-hour grammar and academic listening instruction and 15 hour academic reading and academic writing instruction. Academic reading program consists of intensive and extensive reading. For the former one, students study three thematically organized books; *Weaving It Together* (Broukal, 1993), *Our Book* (Edis & Miller, 1996) and *More Reading Power* (Mikulecky & Jeffries, 1996). In a typical reading lesson, teachers carry out pre- and post-reading activities on comprehension and vocabulary.

In addition to the intensive reading materials, students are asked to do extensive reading starting from the fourth week of the term. First, students are given information about extensive reading and its benefits. They are told the differences between intensive and extensive reading; i.e., it is reading of self-selected materials outside class, it is done for pleasure and not for detailed inclass analysis, it is not necessary to look up in the dictionary for every unknown word. Moreover, the importance of extensive reading in terms of enriching their world and vocabulary knowledge, and gaining fluency in reading, especially in the Turkish setting where exposure to English is highly limited, is emphasized. As part of the curriculum, intermediate-level students are asked to read and write a report on three different reading materials, one being a novel, for their final assessment. Teachers guide the students with their choice of material selection in terms of appropriate level. Apart from this, students are free to select their own reading materials, to budget their time on their readings and on the preparation of the reports.

Extensive reading in the experimental group

Experimental group students had the same reading program in terms of intensive reading based on the above mentioned materials and extensive reading consisting of three assignments. Yet, the way the teacher conducted the extensive reading component was different. To begin with, after informing the students about the extensive reading assignments, the teacher gave the students a list of books which she had prepared considering the English level and interests of the students. She told the students they could pick the books from the list or borrow from the departmental library.

Unlike the control group, the experimental group students had sustained silent reading for six weeks, i.e., the first 15 minutes of every lesson on four days a week was spent on the reading of the self-selected materials. During this time, students read the materials they had selected according to their own interest, e.g., some read a short story, some an article from a magazine and some a novel. After the silent reading period, the teacher asked the students general questions on their reading materials without forcing any student to participate. Students shared their understanding of the text and their relevant knowledge with the rest.

Moreover, unlike the control group teacher, the experimental group teacher kept track of the progress of each student by means of weekly conferences conducted in pairs or in groups of three. In these conferences the teacher asked each student questions about the general content of his/her readings and took notes. As these were informal meetings, the students were allowed to use both English and Turkish. The students were also asked to jot their ideas on a piece of paper and keep them in a file in class to which all the others had access.

Results

Results of the questionnaire: The results presented in Table 1 indicate that there were significant differences between the groups in all cases except value ($p=0.78$) at the end of the study.

Table 1. Differences between the pre- and posttest scores of the groups in terms of the attitude variables.

Factors		X1	Sd.	X2	Sd.	P
Anxiety	Control	4.42		2.85		0.000
	Exper.	4.39		3.95		
Comfort	Control	3.23		3.62		0.008
	Exper.	3.11		2.47		
Value	Control	4.19		4.47		0.78
	Exper.	4.21		4.39		
Self-perception	Control	3.42		4.33		0.01
	Exper.	3.30		3.2		

Results of the interviews: When asked about their opinions related to extensive reading, the majority of the students expressed favorable attitudes toward this new methodology of reading in English as follows:

I had never thought that I could read a whole English book like this before. I enjoyed reading it.

I did not know that reading a book I selected could be considered as an English study.

It was wonderful that we could choose books of our own, instead of being given materials by teachers.

There were many who focused on their progress indicating that the course increased their self-perception of reading in English, e.g.,

Without this course, I would have never read even one book in English.

I was very much impressed when I understood the story without using a dictionary.

Many others discussed how the course decreased their anxiety towards reading in English, caused by unknown vocabulary they met in the texts, e.g.,

I used to stop reading when I met words I didn't know. I somehow felt demoralized. I think guessing words or knowing that you can even skip them made me feel much more comfortable with reading in English.

I like reading but I used to read only in Turkish although I knew that reading is a must for language learning. For reading in English I used to choose very easy books which were generally not very interesting. I think this course taught me how to read books though it was difficult for me at the beginning. But I somehow managed reading a novel and two short stories which I couldn't dare before.

There were several students who focused on the different aspects of the extensive reading program as can be seen in the following statements:

I especially enjoyed the individual conferencing. It was like a meeting with a friend, but still I felt I had to read something to share it with my teacher.

Writing papers on a text is not fun; I usually read the same thing many times, because I often forgot the contents when I tried to write about it. Still, I think it was beneficial.

I believe the silent reading period and our discussions, though they were very short, were very useful. You look around and see every single person is reading. I liked the atmosphere; as if you were in a library. I noticed that even people who did not do any reading at first somehow get used to it.

Moreover, some of the students (9/21) focused on the feeling of achievement they reached as a result of reading a great deal in English,

I felt a sense of accomplishment and self-confidence when I finished a whole book.

I enjoyed reading English books, because when reading in English I felt I have achieved something.

When asked about their ideas on the role of the teacher, all of the participants stated that they would not have read so much without the guidance of the teacher. Their comments included the following:

Although I like reading I really can't find time and money to get books for my interest. But when the teacher provided us with the books I wanted to read all of them.

I know that as university students we should read but I didn't know where to find interesting things. In this course, I picked lots of interesting things from the materials the teacher brought to class and I also benefited from reading the reports of my friends.

There were two students who resisted taking part in extensive reading. These students indicated that they did not like reading in English and they thought it was not necessary for their future studies.

I don't like to spend my time after school on reading in English. Learning English at school is sufficient for my future.

To sum up, the questionnaire results showed that at the end of the study there were significant differences between the groups in terms of their level of anxiety, comfort and self-perception towards reading. The interviews, moreover, revealed that guided extensive reading program had a positive effect on the attitudes of the experimental group students towards reading and that they enjoyed reading different materials under the guidance of their teacher.

Discussion and Conclusion

Based on the results of the preliminary study, the present study aimed to find out the extent an alternative reading approach would affect the attitudes of Turkish EFL learners towards reading. During the six-week study both groups had carried out intensive and extensive reading in their reading classes. The control group students were asked to do the extensive reading on their own, whereas the experimental group students were guided and supported by the teacher by means of sustained silent reading opportunities in class and individual conferences.

The results of the study showed that both groups valued reading as an important practice in language learning and there was no difference between the groups at the end of the study. On the other hand, a comparison between the pre- and post-test scores showed significant differences between the groups in terms of their anxiety, comfort and self-perception towards reading. That is, guided extensive reading instruction seemed to lower the anxiety levels of the students towards reading. Many indicated that they learned how to cope with unknown vocabulary in the texts. Moreover, they developed a higher sense of comfort for reading in English, i.e., they did not feel tired or bored when reading a long text. They especially enjoyed the silent reading sessions when they felt they were

reading for pleasure.ş Finally, experimental group students outperformed control group students in terms of their self-perception towards reading, i.e., the students in the former group indicated at a significantly higher level that they felt their reading ability improved at the end of the study.

However, it should also be pointed out that the study has its limitations. First of all, the students in this study were at the intermediate level, thus, they did not have much difficulty in reading different kinds of texts. Hence, problems may arise in applying the findings to lower levels. Second, the small number of students was an important factor in making classroom activities possible, (e.g. individual conferencing), thus, the model may be not so effective in large classes and may need certain modifications.

In conclusion, it can be said that the present study has been beneficial in underscoring the crucial importance of guided extensive reading in enhancing the attitudes of learners towards reading. Thus, it is highly suggested that extensive reading programs be guided by the teachers rather than leaving the students on their own and further studies be carried out to investigate the effects of guided extensive reading programs on the linguistic abilities of EFL learners.

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Appendix A: The questionnaire adapted from Yamashita (2004)

1. I feel anxious if I don't know all the words. (A)
2. I think I read a lot. (SP)
3. I think I can read quickly. (SP)
4. Reading is enjoyable. (C)
5. I feel anxious if I'm not sure whether I understood what I read. (A)
6. Even if I cannot understand what I read completely, I don't care. (A)
7. I think reading many books enables us to acquire depth of knowledge and sophistication. (V)
8. I think reading many books is advantageous to the study of my major. (V)
9. If it is not necessary, I prefer to avoid reading as much as possible. (C)
10. I think reading is useful to shape personality. (V)
11. I feel tired when I am presented with a long text. (C)
12. I think reading many books advantageous to getting qualifications (V)
13. I think that reading many books is advantageous to getting a job. (V)
14. Reading is my hobby. (C)
15. I think my reading ability is advanced. (SP)

A- Anxiety C-Comfort V-Value SP-Self-perception