Extensive Reading and Incidental Vocabulary Acquisition: The Case of a Predominant Language Classroom Input

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ABSTRACT

A considerable body of research has investigated the effectiveness of extensive reading on incidental vocabulary acquisition in second language (L2) learners. However, we still know very little about the relationship between extensive reading and vocabulary development among Saudi learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) where language classroom is the predominant source of learning, if not the only one. In the present case study, a single participant was instructed to read extensively for eight weeks as an informal activity outside the classroom. The participant's written receptive vocabulary knowledge was measured before and after the treatment. Results indicated that extensive reading contributed largely to the participant's vocabulary gain, suggesting that a vocabulary uptake of about eight words from extensive reading intervention has occurred compared to about two words per contact hour from language classroom input where reading texts are short and scattered throught the textbook. Finding is interpreted in order to provide some pedagogical recommendations.

Key words: Extensive Reading, Vocabulary Acquisition, Incidental Learning, Second Language, Informal Activities

INTRODUCTION

A number of studies have shown that L2 learners can acquire vocabulary through extensive reading (e.g., Cho & Krashen, 1994; Grabe & Stoller, 1997; Horst, 2005; Robb & Susser, 1989). However, scant research has examined the efficacy of extensive reading on English vocabulary acquisition among native-Arabic speakers where classroom environment is the only, or the major, source of language learning. There is an important reason for wanting to examine the impact of extensive reading on vocabulary acquisition of Saudi EFL learners.

Researchers have repeatedly reported that the vocabulary size of EFL learners in Saudi Arabia is very small (e.g., Al-Akloby, 2001; Al-Hazemi, 1993; Alsaif, 2011; Masrai, 2015). According to those studies, students leave high school with about 1,000 words, most of which are very frequent words. Alsaif and Milton (2012) investigated the school English textbooks lexically and concluded that they only present around half of the most frequent 5,000 words. Poor input inevitably leads to poor output. EFL Learners in Saudi Arabia need to increase their vocabulary size significantly in order to become successful learners at higher levels and to help them in their future careers. Most studies investigating extensive reading in the Saudi context deal with it as a classroom activity which consumes much time. Using such a study design, students cannot choose not to participate because extensive reading is the only method for delivering the reading course. Participation, thus, becomes crucial to passing the course. Although the findings from those studies emphasize the importance of extensive reading, one might argue that practicing it as a mandatory activity violates the definition of extensive reading which is, mainly, reading for pleasure as many definitions suggest. Thus, we still need further evidence from research on practicing extensive reading for pleasure outside the classroom to find out if better positive results emerge.

If positive finding emerges and learners could gain significant amount of vocabulary, this should motivate learners to read extensively to gain similar benefits. This will benefit not only students at languages departments but also students of all majors. Having mentioned the issues with Saudi EFL learners, extensive reading can be used as a strategy for improving their vocabulary development. To this end, the present study aims to investigate the impact of extensive reading on vocabulary gain of a college student who voluntarily chose to participate at his own free time without any obligations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Vocabulary Learning Strategies

It is not feasible to claim that a language program, no matter how successful it is, can provide the learners with everything

they need. Griffiths (2004) explains that learning can only be achieved by the students even if they were presented with the best teachers and methods. So, at some point, learners need to contribute to the learning process by following some learning strategies significantly. This contribution is believed to give the learners some control over the learning process which makes them responsible for their learning (Scharle & Szabó, 2000). This responsibility could potentially raise the learners' motivation which is an important factor for successful language learning.

Nation (2001) pointed out that vocabulary learning strategies (VLS) are a segment of language learning strategies (LLS), which emerge from general learning strategies (LS). The latter can be defined as "techniques which students use to comprehend, store, and remember information and skills" (Chamot & Kupper, 1989, p. 13). Reviewing the literature on LLS and VLS reveals a lack of consensus on defining them. Therefore, for the purpose of the current study, any strategy that might result in learning vocabulary both in terms of breadth and depth will be considered as a vocabulary learning strategy. The strategy under investigation here, however, is extensive reading.

Intensive Reading vs. Extensive Reading

Intensive reading and extensive reading often appear together in studies on reading in a second or a foreign language. Intensive reading is basically a traditional reading approach where learners, guided by their teacher, read relatively short texts and try to get the general meaning of the passage (Ala-hirsh, 2014). The passage is often followed by grammar and vocabulary questions which help develop the learners' language competence. On the other hand, extensive reading requires reading large amount of text(s) selected by the learners based on their interests. According to Carrell and Carson (1997, pp. 49-50), extensive reading involves:

Rapid reading of large quantities of material or longer readings (e.g. whole books) for general understanding, with the focus generally on the meaning of what is being read than on the language. Extensive reading is intended to get the reader to focus on reading for the sake of reading (for information or entertainment), and less on reading for the sake of mastery of a particular linguistic structure of even a particular reading strategy or skill. (Carrell & Carson, 1997, pp. 49-50).

Day and Bamford (2002) proposed some general characteristics for conceptualising extensive reading in a teaching/learning process. They listed the following ten principles of extensive reading in their study:

- The reading material is easy.
- A variety of reading material on a wide range of topics must be available.
- Learners choose what they want to read.
- Learners read as much as possible.
- The purpose of reading is usually related to pleasure, information and general understanding.
- Reading has its own reward.
- Reading speed is usually faster rather than slower.
- Reading is individual and silent.

- Teachers orient and guide their students.
- The teacher is a role model of a reader. (Day & Bamford, 2002, pp. 137-139).

To facilitate reading enjoyment, the level of texts should be easy, but not too easy, to allow some degree of learning to take place. On the contrary, if the reading material is too difficult, learning might be minimised to an insufficient level. The principle for this hypothesis is Krashen's (1985) comprehensible input "i+1", where "I" represents the existing level of the learners and "1" stands for the input provided for them. If learners are provided with texts they already know, there will be no learning to gain; at least in some aspects like vocabulary. Meanwhile, providing them with texts far beyond their level could frustrate them and might hinder their learning.

It is hard to determine how large a text must be in order to be qualified as *extensive*, but generally speaking, learners can read as much as possible, provided that they are not reading in order to learn certain aspects of the language. Rather, their purpose should be reading for pleasure or simply looking for information. It means that they are free to select the texts that match their interests which, obviously, will vary from one learner to another. This kind of reading is what normally students do outside the classroom in their free time. It does not need to be mainly guided by the teacher, although if this happens, it does not disqualify it from being labelled as extensive reading. Language learning here is often incidental, not intentional.

Extensive Reading and Language Competence

The attention towards extensive reading in L2 has been growing rapidly in the past two decades or so. Many studies have reported advantageous effects of extensive reading on several facets of L2 ability, such as writing and reading skills (Hafiz & Tudor, 1989), vocabulary development (Al-Homoud & Schmitt, 2009; Grabe & Stoller, 1997; Horst, 2005; Pigada & Schmitt, 2006), grammar (Yang, 2001), reading comprehension (Bell, 2001), reading speed (Masrai & Milton, 2018b), general L2 proficiency (Cho & Krashen, 1994; Mason & Krashen, 1997), and attitude towards reading (Al-Homoud & Schmitt, 2009; Pigada & Schmitt, 2006).

Ellis (2005) endorsed the importance of substantial amount of input for L2 acquisition and argued that extensive reading is one of the easiest approaches of pedagogically implementing the input-rich learning environment. It can be observed that L2 learners benefit greatly from extensive reading practice in different aspects of language competence. Since it is hard to do justice to all of the elements mentioned above in a single study, the focus of the present study is on vocabulary development and learners' attitude towards reading. Developing a larger vocabulary size is very essential for performance in different language skills (for review see Milton, 2009) and positive attitude towards reading leads to motivated informal extensive reading beyond the language classroom. For the purpose of the current study, these two elements are discussed in more detail in the following two subsections.

Incidental vocabulary growth from extensive reading

Extensive reading provides a large vocabulary input for learners. Reading a large number of texts could lead to more incidental vocabulary learning. Cho and Krashen (1994) conducted a free reading experiment on four foreign female learners living in the United States. The students were asked to choose some novels from a popular series written for young readers. They were not informed about the vocabulary post-test to allow incidental vocabulary learning. However, they were instructed to underline the new words they encounter while reading. They concluded that their informants improved their vocabulary knowledge significantly. According to their scores from the post-test, their knowledge of the target words in the novels varied from 56 to 80%, although one cannot rule out the probability that some of the target words were learned from other sources since they live in a native English-speaking country.

Al-Homoud and Schmitt (2009) found significant vocabulary growth from both the intensive and the extensive groups as indicated by their scores on the Vocabulary Levels Test (VLT). The test originally measures the vocabulary knowledge from five frequency levels: 2,000, 3,000, 5,000, the Academic Word List, and 10,000-word bands. However, the researchers provided a modified version which measures the vocabulary knowledge of only 3 frequency levels (2,000, 3,000, and the Academic Word List). The rationale is to make the test plausible for their participants who were low level learners. Al-Homoud and Schmitt (2009) estimated the number of words learned per day from each frequency level as follows: 5.57 and 6.57 words from the 2,000 level, 2 and 2.03 words from the 3,000 level, and 0.46 and 0.62 words by the extensive group and the intensive group, respectively. It's clear from the figures that vocabulary gain is larger within the ranges of the high frequency levels. This in fact is expected since texts provided to the learners in Al-Homoud and Schmitt's (2009) study were short and include vocabulary from the high frequency ranges.

In the same vein, Horst (2005) conducted a study on 21 EFL learners using a different methodology. She designed a pre-test based on the vocabulary actually appear in the 70 graded readers where the subjects needed to choose from during the experiment. Moreover, she designed individual post-tests using words from the books that each individual has actually read since they were expected to read different books from one another according to their personal interests. Participants had to respond 'Yes', 'No' or 'Not sure' to 100 words in the pre- test and to another 100 words in the post- test. The mean scores show that the number of 'Yes' responses significantly increased in the post-test indicating more words are learned. On the other hand, about half of the 35 words reported 'No' in the pre-test were learned after the six-week treatment of extensive reading. The participants also took another test, the Vocabulary Knowledge Scale (Wesche & Paribakht, 1996) which led to the same conclusion.

Alahirsh (2014) also conducted another study based on the methodology used in Horst (2005) in an attempt to overcome some shortcomings found in her study. For example,

Alahirsh designed both pre-test and post-test using the words that actually appear in the books read by the subjects unlike Horst who designed the pre-test using vocabulary from all the books that were available to the participants which some of them were eventually reported unread. A total of 80 adult Libyans participated in the study and were equally assigned into the control and the experimental groups. Forty different novels were available to the participants to read in the university library but were not allowed to take them home. Students were not informed that they will be tested after the treatment, nor they were allowed to use dictionaries as both, according to the author, might "invoke the process of intentional learning of vocabulary" (Alahirsh, 2014, p. 164). After a 9-week treatment, only 18 participants in each group were able to finish the experiment due to the unfortunate crisis in Libya which started in 2011. However, the scores show significant vocabulary growth by the experimental group compared to the control group. The mean scores for the control group were 0.47 ($SD = 0.14$) in the pre-test and 0.49 ($SD = 0.11$) in the post-test. While for the experimental group, the mean scores were 0.52 ($SD = 0.14$) in the pre-test and 1.52 ($SD = 0.30$) in the post test. This shows that extensive reading has resulted in a significant incidental vocabulary gain.

Attitude towards second/foreign language reading

Extensive reading can develop positive attitude towards reading in an L2. For example, Asraf and Ahmed (2003) concluded that their Malaysian high school students had positive attitudes towards L2 reading. Nishino (2007) also found out that after two and a half years of extensive reading the two Japanese students in her experiment became more motivated readers. In Al-Homoud and Schmitt's (2009) study, the results of the questionnaire administered to the participants showed a significant difference between the experimental group and the control group in terms of the attitude towards L2 reading. The students who had extensive reading treatment for 10 weeks had more positive attitudes towards *reading, reading skills, reading comprehension, reading fluency, vocabulary knowledge, self-confidence, amount of reading,* and *books*. Data from interviewing 14 informants in the experimental group who completed the experiment in Alahirsh's (2014) study shows that about 93% of them (13 out of 14) perceived extensive reading positively.

THE STUDY

The present study was designed to determine the vocabulary acquisition benefits from informal extensive reading activities with a native-Arabic learner of English over a period of eight weeks. It is worth noting that, in the Saudi context, language learners lean heavily on the lecture notes and materials provided by their teachers and appear to put no further effort to develop their vocabulary knowledge through language exposure beyond the classroom time. It is, thus, expected to see some level of improvement in the learner's vocabulary gain through informal learning activities (i.e., extensive reading). The study employed a pre- and post-testing approach to quantify any potential gain of the

participant's written vocabulary knowledge via the intervention period. In particular, the study addresses the following research questions:

1. Does extensive reading lead to increasing receptive word knowledge?
2. Is there a significant difference in vocabulary development from extensive reading compared to learning from language classroom?
3. What is the learner's perception of vocabulary acquisition through extensive reading and attitude towards reading?

METHOD

The current study adopted a methodological design used by some previous case studies on quantifying lexical gain from extensive reading (e.g. Milton, 2008; Masrai & Milton, 2018b). Detailed description of the method is given in the following sub-sections.

Participant

The participant in the present study was one male student enrolled in a university undergraduate programme of languages and translation in Saudi Arabia. The participant was 22-year-old at the time of the study and was at level three of his study programme (i.e., third semester). To select the appropriate reading materials for the participant, his vocabulary knowledge was measured using a written receptive vocabulary test. Since his vocabulary score was identified to be at C1 level of Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), graded readers materials of 4,000 – 6,000 word-frequency level were chosen. This frequency level includes words from mid-frequency range which are considered an important target of words for L2 learners to obtain (Schmitt & Schmitt, 2014; Masrai, 2019a). Furthermore, the participant was interviewed to find out if he uses certain vocabulary learning strategies other than the learning occurring from the language classroom.

Instruments

Vocabulary knowledge test

A receptive vocabulary size test, XK-Lex (Masrai & Milton, 2012), was used to measure the participant's vocabulary knowledge before and after the extensive reading period (pre and post-testing). The XK-Lex is a *Yes/No* test comprised of 100 real English words and 20 non-words which are words designed to look like real English words. These non-words are included in the test as a measure to adjust for guess-work if practiced by a test-taker. The test measures L2 learners' knowledge of the most 10,000 frequent words of English. To compute the total vocabulary knowledge of a test-taker, yes responses to pseudowords (false alarms) are calculated and then subtracted from the total raw score of yes responses to the real items. Each yes response to a real item is given a credit of 100 points and each yes response to a pseudoword deducts 500 points. The final adjusted score is believed to

represent a test-taker's vocabulary size. *Yes/No* tests, such as XK-Lex, are reported to be valid and reliable measures of L2 learners' receptive vocabulary knowledge (e.g., Harrington & Carey, 2009; Masrai & Milton, 2012; Masrai & Milton, 2018a; Mochida & Harrington, 2006).

Extensive reading materials

Five graded readers, including fiction and non-fiction, were provided to the participant to read through the intervention period. These graded readers are no longer subject to copyright and are available online for free. They were downloaded in a PDF format from Professor Paul Nation' home page on Victoria University of Wellington website (https://www.victoria.ac.nz/lals/about/staff/paul-nation#free-graded-readers). Having these materials in electronic version was very useful to the informant to read from his portable devices based on his preference. The graded readers materials were: (1) A Modest Proposal by Jonathan Swift written with the most frequent 4,000 word level, (2) A Christmas Carol by Charles Dickens written with the most frequent 4,000 word level, (3) Alice's Adventures in Wonderland by Lewis Carroll written with the most frequent 6,000 word level, (4) Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass an American Slave by Frederick Douglass written with the most frequent 6,000 word level, and (5) The Prince by Niccolo Machiavelli written with the most frequent 4,000 word level.

The graded readers written with the most frequent 4,000-word level should not be difficult for the participant to read, since his vocabulary knowledge was about 4,600 words. Materials written at or just below the reader's level should help improving the reading habit and speed and also vocabulary knowledge consolidation (Day & Bamford, 1998). On the other hand, materials written with a vocabulary range beyond the learner's level should help in acquiring new vocabulary to sustain vocabulary growth (Al-Homoud & Schmitt, 2009).

Procedure

Similar to some previous intervention studies (e.g., Masrai & Milton, 2018b; Masrai, 2019b), the participant's receptive vocabulary knowledge was measured prior to the reading intervention period. Then, the participant was introduced to the reading materials that he needs to complete over eight weeks. He was informed about the advantages of reading extensively over and above those from traditional learning from language classroom. He was also advised to read without interruption for the purpose of comprehension. The participant was given a diary to record his extensive reading activities. After eight weeks of extensive reading, a post vocabulary knowledge test was administered to the participant.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Result of the pre-test shows that the participant in the present study has a receptive vocabulary size of 4,600 words. After extensive reading for eight weeks, the participant's vocabulary size was measured again using a post-test in week

nine. The result indicates that the participant's vocabulary knowledge has increased to 5,300 words. The total number of words acquired during the intervention was 700 words. In percentage, the vocabulary gain was about 15%. However, to clearly identify a more accurate estimate of the learner's vocabulary uptake from extensive reading, learning from language classroom input was calculated. According to Masrai and Milton (2018b) vocabulary uptake from language classroom at Saudi universities is about 2.5 words per contact hour. Using this rate of vocabulary development, the participant's vocabulary learning from classroom input was about 160 words. When vocabulary gain from classroom input was deducted from the total number of words acquired, about 540 words were assumed to be gained due to the effect of extensive reading (see Figure 1 for illustration).

The rate of vocabulary development from extensive reading was about 8.4 words compared to 2.5 words from language classroom. This result advocates the efficacy of extensive reading on supporting vocabulary development over and above the learning of vocabulary from language classroom, particularly when the exposure to language is very limited beyond classroom time. This finding is in line with that from previous research. For example, Al-Nujaidi (2004) found that his college students acquired about 556 words from extensive reading treatment. The vocabulary acquisition rate from extensive reading in this study almost matches that from Al-Nujaidi's study, suggesting that extra reading plays a significant role in vocabulary growth. Also, Alshwairkh (2004) concluded that his EFL learners had developed their vocabulary size from extensive reading on the Internet. The finding from the current case study is congruent with the finding of Pigada and Schmitt (2006), who found that their case study participant had improved his vocabulary knowledge after four weeks of reading. Furthermore, Masrai and Milton (2018b), in a recent case study of a native-Arabic college student learning English as a foreign language, concluded that their participant had developed his orthographic side of the lexicon at a rate of 18 words per hour through reading English subtitles of films over a period of five months.

Findings from Masrai and Milton (2018b) suggest that reading extensively for an extended period of time not only improved the rate of vocabulary development but also contributed to a faster reading process. Day and Bamford (1998)
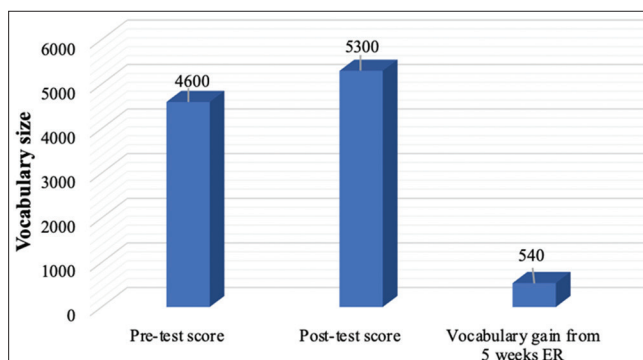
suggested that it is extensive reading which is believed to further the progress of rapid and automatic word shape recognition, which is an essential element for efficient reading. In the case of native-Arabic speakers, Alhazmi (2018) found that learners tend to 'sound out' every English word while reading. This reading process not only affects reading speed but also leads to a poor reading comprehension. Alhazmi attributed this sort of reading problem to the insufficient time devoted to reading English materials. The current case study confirms that reading extensively for eight weeks has resulted in a reasonable vocabulary gain. The participant appears to have progressed from being at C1 level to being at C2 level of CEFR.

Progressing to vocabulary knowledge at C2 level is essential for reaching at least the minimal text coverage, about 95%, suggested by Laufer and Ravenhorst-Kalovski (2010) as required knowledge for a good level of reading comprehension. Thus, taking into account the rate of vocabulary development from language classroom input only, reaching the minimal vocabulary knowledge required for adequate reading comprehension is a very lengthy process. This promotes the usefulness of informal activities, such as extensive reading, in developing vocabulary acquisition of EFL learners at a better rate.

In the current study the perception of the participant towards extensive reading was also considered. In the interview that followed the extensive reading phase, we asked the participant about his perception of vocabulary acquisition through extensive reading method and his attitude towards reading in general. The participant reported that he developed a more positive attitude towards his reading and learning experience. Specifically, he stated that having the opportunity to take part in this extensive reading study helped him greatly in developing his vocabulary knowledge, reading skills, reading speed and achievement throughout his course. These positive views towards reading conveniently beyond language classroom are very important because the learner is most likely to continue reading after the trial he was embarked on. These positive perceptions and attitudes towards the extensive reading approach and the learning outcomes from such approach support the findings from previous research. For example, Day and Bamford (1998, p. 35) reported that "study after study shows how attitudes changed toward reading in the second language and how the students become eager readers when exposed to the extensive reading approach".

Overall, the result of the current case study indicates that the participant has developed his orthographic vocabulary knowledge from extensive reading which agrees with previous studies (e.g. Day, Omura, & Hiramatsu, 1991; Hulstijn, 1993; Brown, Waring, & Donkaewbua, 2008). The finding of the present study indicated that the participant approximately tripled his vocabulary gain when compared to that from classroom learning. This finding corroborates Pigada and Schmitt's (2006) results that vocabulary knowledge can be largely improved through reading even from a small amount of texts. This signifies that extensive reading does in fact have a positive impact on vocabulary development of L2 learners.

Figure 1. The participants' performance in pre- and post-tests and vocabulary gain from ER

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The present study supports the previous research that extensive reading in foreign language can lead to the enhancement of language learners' skills very greatly. EFL learners should understand that extensive reading is a pleasurable activity that not only brings joy in reading good materials but also results in acquiring many language skills and general knowledge about the world that might not be available through the materials provided in the language classroom. It is recommended, therefore, that language teachers should pay a great deal of attention to promoting informal reading activities among their learners. Raising students' awareness of the benefits they would have from extensive reading can motivate them to change their attitudes towards reading and read more outside the classroom. In terms of curriculum design, it is recommended to include unassessed but assisted and guided extensive reading programme during students' study. This would urge students to read more without being stressed by examination condition, but at the same time monitored by their teachers to ensure that reading is taking place.

LIMITATION

Although case studies in lexical uptake (e.g., Meara, 1995; Milton, 2008), including the current one, can be used to accurately quantify the time expended on extensive reading task and the nature of vocabulary input and learning they offer, findings cannot be generalised over the population of EFL learners. In the present study, the participant was a very capable and highly motivated learner. Therefore, whether less-skilled and low motivated readers who are potentially in need of vocabulary development can benefit from the extensive reading approach is not yet clear. In fact, this study started with 79 participants but, unfortunately, only one student managed to complete the task. However, vocabulary gain found in this study and previous research encourages us to believe that greater reading using this approach would contribute to greater vocabulary gain. Future research will need to include a larger number of EFL learners at various levels to verify this belief. Furthermore, future research may consider the effect of extensive reading on different language skills, such as grammar, collocation and spelling.

CONCLUSION

Extensive reading appears to lead to a substantial vocabulary gain, over and above the lexical uptake from language classroom. Reading extensively for only eight weeks improved the learner's orthographic vocabulary knowledge greatly and has supported him to progress from CEFR C1 to C2. Although more vocabularies are still needed for the text coverage proposed by Nation (2006) to reach the 98% required for reading authentic materials and reading for pleasure, C2 level is sufficient to reach the 95% text coverage required for a good level of reading comprehension. Thus, if extensive reading can show promising results for learners in an input-poor environment, such as the context of the present study, there is little doubt that it can be a viable approach implemented by language teachers to sustain learners' vocabulary development.

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