

## Extensive Reading with Adult Learners of English as a Second Language

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*The best way to improve one's knowledge of a foreign language is to go and live among its speakers. The next best way is to read extensively in it.*  
Nuttall (1982:168, cited in Yu, 1993)

*This paper reports on a study of the impact of extensive reading (ER) on the language proficiency of a group of Vietnamese government officials studying English. Two questions were of interest. First, we wanted to examine if ER could be successfully implemented with adult second language learners beyond traditional student age. Secondly, we were interested in the relationship between learning gain and a set of ER variables, such as amount of ER materials read, the extent to which this material was perceived to be a useful and enjoyable activity. The results indicated that older adult second language learners could indeed benefit from a carefully planned and systematically implemented ER program. Further, a regression analysis showed that amount of ER was the only significant predictor of participants' gain scores.*

### INTRODUCTION

The 1990s saw renewed interest in ER and the role it plays in second language learning. The May 1997 issue of *The Language Teacher* (a journal published by the Japan Association for Language Teaching), for example, was devoted to papers on ER. The authors of these papers argue that ER should be given a larger share in our language curriculum and present ideas on how to achieve this. The present article begins by presenting an overview of why and how to implement ER. This is followed by a report on a study of the impact of ER on the language proficiency of a group of Vietnamese government officials studying English.

The principal theoretical motivation behind the use of ER in second language learning comes from the idea that learners need large amounts of comprehensible input in their new language in order to make progress toward overall command of that language (Krashen, 1982). In this way, ER benefits not only reading proficiency but overall language proficiency as well. Numerous research studies in both L1 (e.g., Herman, Anderson, Pearson, & Nagy, 1987; Nagy, Herman, & Anderson, 1985; for an extensive review, see Krashen, 1993) and L2 (Elley, 1991; Elley & Mangubhai, 1983; Hafiz and Tudor, 1990; Krashen, 1997; Mason & Krashen, 1997; Nation, 1997; Lituafias, Jacobs and Renandya, to appear; Sims, 1995) have consistently shown the benefits of ER for learners' language development.

The experiment reported by Lituafias, Jacobs, and Renandya, for instance, demonstrated how remedial students at a secondary school in the Philippines

considerably improved their reading skills during a six-month ER program. In this experiment, two groups of students received the same amount of daily instruction (40 minutes) during their remedial reading class. However, unlike the control group who were taught the conventional way, the experimental group were given class time to read books, magazines, and newspapers, and were encouraged to continue this ER outside class hours. After six months, the ER treatment was associated with learning gains that were greater to a statistically significant degree than those registered by remedial students taught via the traditional mode of reading instruction.

In addition to being associated with learning gains in experimental studies, ER has also been a reliable predictor of second language proficiency in ex post facto research. In a study of ESL students in the US, Constantino, S.Y. Lee, Cho, and Krashen (1997) report that, along with amount of previous English study in their home countries and length of residence in the US, the amount of reading was a significant predictor of students' TOEFL scores. In contrast, other variables (i.e., amount of TV viewing in English, frequency and amount of L1 reading, and amount of English study in the US) included in the study were not significantly correlated with TOEFL scores.

In another study involving ESL students in the United States, Y.O. Lee, Krashen, and Gibbons (1996, cited in Krashen, 1997) report that amount of L2 reading was also a reliable predictor of students' ability to translate and to perform a grammaticality judgement task. It is interesting to note that in this study, unlike the TOEFL study above, amount of formal study in English and length of residence in the US were not significant predictors. Providing evidence for the view that ER benefits all aspects of language proficiency, Jonopoulos (1986) found a significant correlation between the amount L2 reading and L2 writing proficiency, as measured by holistic evaluation of student writing.

While definitions vary, experts agree that ER involves the independent reading of a large quantity of material for information or pleasure. The prime focus of ER is on the meaning of what is being read rather than on the language. On the other hand, in intensive reading students work with short texts under the guidance of the teacher. The aim of intensive reading is to help students construct detailed meaning from the text, to develop reading skills, such as identifying main ideas and recognising text signals, and to enhance vocabulary and grammar knowledge. These two approaches to teaching reading - intensive and extensive reading - are not seen as being in opposition, as both serve different but complementary purposes (Carrell & Carson, 1997; Nuttall, 1982).

What are the characteristics of successful ER programmes? The following characteristics are generally thought to be among the most important (Campbell, 1989; Davis, 1995; Day and Bamford, 1997; Fielding & Roller, 1992; Gambrell, 1979; Hill, 1997; Hsui, 1994; Jacobs, Davis and Renandya, 1997; Kim & Krashen, 1997; Nash & Yun-Pi; Park & Turn, 1987; Raja, 1995; Waring, 1997; Yu, 1993):

1. Students read large amounts of printed material;
2. Students choose what they want to read;
3. Students read a variety of materials in terms of topic and genre;
4. The material students read is within their level of comprehension;
5. Students take part in post-reading activities;
6. Teachers read with their students, thus serving as role models of good readers;
7. Teachers and students keep track of student progress;

## 8. Teachers provide help and guidance where needed.

Finding the materials to support Points 1, 3, and 4 above can be difficult, especially where funding is insufficient. Lituñañas (1997) describes how she collected materials from a wider variety of sources, including fellow teachers, past students, and community groups. Toh and Raja (1997) explain ways that teachers themselves can write ER materials suited to their students' cultural contexts and proficiency levels. Ways that students can be involved in creating reading materials for themselves and peers are explored in Davidson, Ogle, Ross, Tuhaka, and Ng (1997) and Dupuy and McQuillan (1997), while Derewianka (1997) gives ideas for finding ER materials on the internet.

It is worth noting that not all writers on ER agree with Point 5 above, i.e., including post-reading tasks in the ER program. The main objection is that post-reading tasks may spoil students' reading enjoyment, and that in ER, reading should be seen as its own reward. However, we feel that post-reading tasks, if carefully designed, can serve useful purposes (see Yu, 1993; Mason and Krashen, 1997 for a similar view). Post-reading activities can be used to (i) reinforce what students have learned from their reading; (ii) give students a sense of progress; and (iii) help students share information about materials to read or avoid. The output hypothesis (Swain, 1985, 1993, in press) provides additional support for the use of post-reading tasks. This hypothesis states that while comprehensible input supplies an essential basis for second language acquisition, it must be supplemented by the production of comprehensible output if learners are to reach a high level of proficiency in the target language. Swain argues that production tasks force learners to notice features of the target language and to form and test hypotheses about the language. A number of post-reading activities used in the present study are described in the next section.

Some educators use student groups to support ER. Group activities support reading interest and proficiency and can take place before, during, and after ER. For instance, Cockburn, Isbister, and Sim-Goh (1997), Rhodes (1993), Rodgers (1997), and Samway, Whang, and Pippitt (1995) depict programmes in which more proficient, often older readers, support less proficient, often younger students, in various literacy activities. Daniels (1994), Hill and Van Horn (1997), and McQuillan and Tse (1997) describe group activities that provide readers with opportunities to discuss what they have been reading.

The present study was designed to address the following questions. First, since previous studies have dealt with the effect of ER on children or young adults, we wanted to examine if ER could be successfully implemented with older adult second language learners. Secondly, we were interested in the relationship between learning gain and a set of ER variables. These variables include the amount of ER material read, the extent to which this material is perceived as interesting, easy/difficult, and comprehensible, and whether or not ER is perceived to be a useful and enjoyable activity. In the next section, we describe the context in which our study was implemented.

## THE STUDY

### *Participants*

Participants in the study were 49 Vietnamese government officials who were in Singapore for a two-month intensive English course. Two students did not return the questionnaire, and were excluded from analysis. They all spoke Vietnamese as their first language. About an equal number of male (47%) and female (53%) participants were represented in the sample. The youngest participant was 21 and the oldest 55, with the majority (62%) falling in the 36 – 45 age bracket. A small majority, 55%, had taken English at school or university, with the rest having studied Russian or French. Those who reported taking English were mostly the younger participants. As to their university education, 64% held only a bachelor degree, about 20% held a doctorate, and the rest had completed a diploma or masteral degree. Most participants had fairly recently taken part in some intensive English study, usually ranging from 2 – 3 months, in Vietnam. Participants' proficiency in English ranged from low to high intermediate.

### *The Course*

The course in which participants were enrolled, entitled English for International Communication (EIC), was conducted at a centre established to meet the needs of language learners and educators throughout Southeast Asia. Course components included the following:

1. Speaking/Listening (8 hrs per week)
2. Reading/Writing (5 hrs per week)
3. Presentation skills (6 hrs per week)
4. Business writing (3 hrs per week)
5. Pronunciation (4 hrs per week)
6. Presentation software skills (2 hrs per week)

On the basis of their pretest scores (see Table 1), the 49 course participants were divided into two classes—one more proficient and the other less proficient.

### *Procedure*

An ER programme was a key element of the EIC course's Reading/Writing component that the first author taught on. First, the benefits of ER for learning a second language, discussed above, were explained to students in order to offer them a strong rationale for engaging actively in the programme. The key message here was that large amounts of English reading would likely result in greater English proficiency. Then, students were asked to read fiction and non-fiction graded readers of their own choice which they selected from the centre's extensive collection.

The amount of reading students were required to do was arrived at through negotiation. Initially, we agreed on 20 books. But given the large variability in the number of pages that the graded readers contained, ranging between 20 to over 100 pages, we decided to be more flexible. Students were allowed two options: (i) reading 20 books of their choice, or (ii) reading fewer than 20 books as long as the total number of pages was not less than 800. The students were next briefed on how to select books. They were told to choose ER books that they found interesting and were of no more than medium difficulty level. It was stressed that while it was better to read books which were too easy than those which were too difficult, they should, whenever possible, read books

which were neither too easy nor too difficult. They were also encouraged to read books of different genres, such as romance, adventures, science fiction, action thrillers, and biography. All reading was done out of class.

As a post-reading activity and to provide writing practice, students were asked to write short (one or two-paragraph long) summaries of the books they had read. The instructor collected students' summaries on a regular basis and gave feedback which focused mainly on the content rather than on the mechanics. These summaries formed the basis for in-class post-reading activities which were done at least once a week. One of these activities was *Book Wheels*, in which students in groups of 4 or 5 first shared their summaries and then discussed their books in a game-like manner using higher order questions as prompts (see Jacobs, 1993, for further details). Students found this activity highly engaging, as it gave them an opportunity to share not only the content of their books, but also their cognitive and affective responses to them.

Another post-reading activity that students enjoyed was also based on summaries of the books they had read. Brown and Cambourne (1987) argue that retelling is a natural form of language use, rather than an artificial classroom exercise. Students worked in pairs in which one took the role of a teller of their summary, and the other of listener. Then, listeners retold the story they had just heard to someone whose previous role was that of teller. This continued until listeners had had two or three opportunities to recount the book summary they had heard. Students then returned to their original pairs, reversed their roles, and the retelling process began again. It was stressed that the pairs had to work together closely to carry out the task. Tellers had to make sure that their listeners understood the story; similarly, listeners had to be active in order to understand the story. Listeners were encouraged to take notes and ask questions to clarify any misunderstandings.

### *Instruments*

Three instruments were used to collect data in this study. The first one was a test designed to measure participants' proficiency in English. It consisted of four sections: (i) listening, (ii) reading, (iii) grammar and vocabulary, and (iv) writing. The test was administered at the beginning of the course and, as was mentioned before, the scores were used as the basis for grouping students into two classes. The same test was given again at the end of the program.

The second instrument was a *Book Record* form (see Appendix) given at the beginning of the course. In the form, students were asked to record the title of the book, the number of pages, the extent to which the story was interesting (1=least interesting, 10=most interesting), the difficulty level of the story (1=easy, 10=difficult), and the degree of their comprehension of the story (0%=zero comprehension, 100%=full comprehension). The Book Record allowed the teacher and students to regularly check on student progress towards their reading goals. Students who lagged behind were continually reminded to keep up with their reading.

The third instrument was a two-part questionnaire constructed to elicit further information from participants. The first part of the questionnaire asked about sex, age, and educational background. The second part asked about the amount of exposure to English and number of English books read before coming to Singapore; amount of time spent reading English newspapers and/or magazines while studying in Singapore, the

extent the ER assignments were perceived as enjoyable, and the degree the ER assignments were perceived as useful in improving their English. The questionnaire was administered towards the end of the two-month course. Students were specifically told to be as honest as possible in filling out the questionnaire. To lessen any possible bias, the instructor waited outside the classroom while students were completing the questionnaire.

## RESULTS

Descriptive statistics for the data from the Book Record and the questionnaire are displayed in Table 1.

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Insert Table 1 here  
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Table 2 presents the intercorrelations among the variables. Of interest here is how students' gain scores were related to the rest of the variables. As can be seen, gain scores were significantly correlated only with number of books read in students' home country ( $r=.448$ ), amount of ER done in Singapore ( $r=.386$ ), and amount of English newspapers and magazines read while in Singapore ( $r=.360$ ).

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Insert Table 2 here  
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In order to determine the relative contribution of the variables to the gain scores, a simultaneous multiple regression analysis was run. As shown in Table 3, the results are easy to summarise. Of the 10 variables entered into the analysis, only one, amount of ER done during the two-month course in Singapore, came up as a significant predictor of student gain scores ( $t = 2.83, p<.05$ ).

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Insert Table 3 here  
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## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

One of the first things to notice in Table 1 is that there was considerable variability in the amount of reading that participants did. Despite frequent monitoring and reminding by the instructor, about 60% of the students read below the required 800 pages of reading material. But, to our surprise, 40% of them exceeded the required amount, with 10% of them reading more than 1000 pages. This was certainly encouraging, given the fact that these students were literally flooded with large amounts of homework assigned by the other instructors.

Table 1 also shows that students reported reading material which was quite interesting (7.31 out of 10), moderately difficult (4.38 out of 10), with quite a high degree of comprehension (87% out of 100%). This was quite expected, as students were

continually reminded of the importance of selecting a book which was interesting and easy to read—one which they could read fluently and with a high degree of comprehension. On the question of whether the ER assignments were useful in improving their English, students on the average gave a score of 3.04—*Very Useful*. An average score of 2.63 (midway between *Enjoyable* and *Very Enjoyable*) was given in response to the question of whether the ER assignments were enjoyable. This, we feel, is a good indication that our adult learners responded positively to the ER program. Although initially we heard many complaints regarding the amount of reading that they had to do, at the end of the program, most students reported finding the ER assignments beneficial in improving their English. One student who rated the ER assignments *Very Useful* commented (student comments are unedited), "Reading make me understand a lot of things. I can learn a lot from books." The same student, however, said that he needed more time to enjoy the books.

Thus, the answer to the first research question--whether ER could be implemented with older adult ESL learners—seems to be in the affirmative. Participants not only quite enjoyed doing the ER assignments, but also found them very useful in improving their knowledge of English. On the average, students did quite a large amount of reading within the two-month period they were in Singapore. In fact, as was mentioned earlier, about 40% read more than they were required to do, thus indicating that they were indeed willing to invest their time and effort in ER.

While the majority of participants in the present study could not be described as middle-aged, Rane-Szostak (1997) argues that ER also has important benefits for older adults, a growing proportion of the population in many countries. Research she conducted (Rane-Szostak & Herth, 1995) suggests that ER is associated with decreased loneliness and enhanced feelings of self-worth among elderly people. She explains these benefits with reference to the work of Csikszentmihalyi (1991) on the Psychology of Optimal Experience, i.e., by taking part in enjoyable, self-directed, goal-oriented activities, we experience a state called *flow*. ER certainly meets the criteria for producing this beneficial feeling of flow.

However, it is important to remember that people are more likely to immerse themselves in reading extensively if careful planning and monitoring take place. Not all our adult second language learners came to the program with the motivation to spend lots of time reading graded readers. In fact, in the first two weeks of the course some complained a lot about the quantity of reading assignments, saying that they did not have enough time to read and were busy doing the assignments given by other course instructors. This opposition displayed by some only turned to eagerness after repeated explanation of the importance of ER for language learning, weekly progress reports through the Book Record, tireless encouragement from the instructor, and, last but not least, the pleasure and insight provided by the reading material. Towards the end of the course, it was not uncommon to hear comments such as "I read fast now" and "I think I will continue reading English books after I return to Vietnam".

The second research question asked about the relationship between a set of variables (e.g., prior English study, amount of reading done, perceived usefulness of ER assignments) and learning gain as measured by the difference between posttest and pretest scores. Only three variables—amount of reading in English done in home country ( $r=.448$ ) and in Singapore, amounts of ER ( $r=.386$ ) and newspaper/magazine reading

( $r=.36$ )—were significantly correlated with gain scores (see Table 2). Note here that all three variables are associated with *quantity* of reading. On average, a correlation of about .40 was obtained for these three variable, which means that about 16% of the variation in gain scores can be accounted for by the three variables associated with amount of reading.

Further examination of the data using a more powerful data analysis procedure (i.e., regression analysis) revealed a very interesting result. Only one variable, amount of ER done in Singapore, was a significant predictor of students' gain scores. The other variables made poor showings on the regression analysis, including the two variables that were significantly correlated with learning gain. These two variables did not survive the multivariate analysis. One possible explanation for this is that perhaps at the present stage of their language development, what participants in our study needed most was: (i) large amounts of language input which (ii) they could comprehend. The only variable that satisfies these two requirements was the ER done during the course. The other types of reading that students did (reading in home country and newspaper/magazine reading in Singapore) were small in amounts and perhaps not as comprehensible, thus exhibiting weak effects.

One last issue that came up as we were writing this report was whether language proficiency affected the amount of ER done by the participants in our study. Did higher proficiency students tend to read more than the lower proficiency students? In other words, did higher proficiency lead to more reading, rather than or in addition to more reading leading to higher proficiency? We did a follow-up analysis to address this issue. Our results showed no significant correlation ( $r = .223$ ) between pretest score and quantity of reading done in Singapore, although there certainly was some correlation with the more proficient class reading an average of 774 pages and the less proficient averaging 684 pages. This difference, however, was not significant ( $t = .94, p > .05$ ). One possible explanation for these results is that our library has a sufficiently large collection of graded materials to meet the needs of even those who came into our program with minimal language proficiency. As mentioned earlier in this article, ER specialists such as Hill (1997) stress the great importance of providing a collection of materials that cater the range of proficiency levels represented among students. The fact that the quantity of newspaper and magazine reading was not significantly related to learning gain in the regression analysis may have been due to the greater difficulty level of such material compared to graded readers.

Thus, our results seem to indicate that ER can indeed be beneficially implemented with second language learners beyond the age of university undergraduates, even in programmes of relatively short duration, such as the two months of the EIC programme. We propose the following diagram to show the key components in our ER program which may partly explain participants' language development (see Figure 1).

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Insert Figure 1 here  
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In conclusion, we should emphasise that it may not be sufficient to simply provide books and ask students to read them. As was discussed above, the success of our ER program required a careful planning and systematic implementation. And finally, one of the greatest rewards in conducting this study is in seeing the initially not-so-eager readers



gradually develop a healthy reading habit—a very important component of learning a foreign language.

Notes:

1) Two students who were originally placed in the more proficient group based on their pretest scores (which were higher than the cut-off point of 4.6) were moved into the low group following their complaints that the pace of the lessons was too fast to follow.

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**Table 1**

Descriptive Statistics (N=47)

Item	Mean	s.d.	Min	Max
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Pretest Scores				2	
Low Group		3.56	.80	4.6	4.7 <sup>1)</sup>
High Group		5.54	.87		7.6
Posttest Scores			.81	2.5	5.5
Low Group		4.33	.85	5	8
High Group		6.29			
Years of English study in Vietnam		1.29	1.55	0	5
Months of intensive English study in Vietnam		2.53	1.21	0	6
Number of English books read before coming to Singapore		2.34	1.35	1	6
1 = none	4 = 11 – 15 books				
2 = 1 – 5 books	5 = 16 – 20 books				
3 = 6 – 10 books	6 > 20 books				
Amount of ER done while in Singapore (number of pages)		728.68	329.26	221	1638
Extent to which ER material read was interesting 1 = least interesting 10 = most interesting		7.31	1.05	4.9	9.6
Extent to which ER material read was easy or difficult 1 = easy 10 = difficult		4.38	1.80	1.3	7.9
Extent to which ER material was comprehended 0% = zero comprehension 100% = full comprehension		86.86	11.52	52	100
Extent to which ER was thought to be useful in Improving Ss' English		3.04	.65	2	4
1 = a little useful	3 = very useful				
2 = useful	4 = extremely useful				
Extent to which ER was thought to be enjoyable		2.63	.60	2	4
1 = a little enjoyable	3 = very enjoyable				
2 = enjoyable	4 = extremely enjoyable				
Amount of English newspaper/magazine reading while studying in Singapore		3.65	2.15	1	7

1 = 1- 5 min 2 = 6 – 10 min 3 = 11 – 15 min 4 = 16 – 20 min	5 = 21 – 25 min 6 = 26 – 30 min 7 > 30 min				
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**Table 2**

Correlation Matrix

Item	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Gain Score	1.000							
2. English study at school in home country	-.069	1.000						
3. Intensive course in home country	-.056	-.244	1.000					
4. Books read in home country	.448*	.233	-.073	1.000				
5. Amount of ER done in Singapore	.386*	.123	.074	.400*	1.000			
6. Extent to which ER material was interesting	-.030	.104	.120	-.092	.030	1.000		
7. Extent to which ER material was easy/difficult	.195	.067	-.094	.086	-.123	-.207	1.000	
8. Extent to which ER material was comprehended	-.021	.269	-.133	.160	.234	.119	-.121	1.000
9. Extent to which ER was thought to be useful	.077	-.065	-.138	.032	.000	-.338	.169	-.21
10. Extent to which ER was thought to be enjoyable	-.045	-.090	-.117	-.059	.157	-.006	.037	-.03
11. Amount of English newspaper reading in Singapore	.360*	.028	.079	.404*	.128	-.021	.222	.143

\* Significant at  $p < .05$

**Table 3**

Multiple Regression Analysis: Predictors of Gain Scores

Predictor	Standardized Beta	t	Sig.
Amount of ER done in Singapore	.414	2.83	yes, $p < .05$
Amount of English newspaper/magazine reading in Singapore	.279	1.85	ns



