



Bhutanese Fourth Grade Students' Opinions towards Extensive Reading

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ABSTRACT

The mixed perceptions towards extensive reading (ER) were shown by several studies of higher and university-level students in foreign and second language learning contexts. However, ER perception studies are limited, particularly qualitative ER studies with kids, and Bhutan has yet to implement and evaluate the important concept of extensive reading. Hence, this qualitative study investigates fourth-grade Bhutanese students' opinions towards extensive reading regarding reading material preferences, ways of book selection, choice of place for reading, and the benefits of extensive reading instruction. Sixteen students participated in the study, and later six students sat for a semi-structured interview. The results revealed that extensive reading had a positive impact on the development of overall language proficiencies. Some participants favored challenging books over easy books, while many others preferred enjoyable books over academic texts. There were varied preferences of reading locations and choices for choosing books. All children enjoyed reading and also expressed the benefits of extensive reading, suggesting ER to

	<p>be implemented in other similar contexts of Bhutanese primary schools.</p> <p>Keywords: reading material preferences, choice of place for reading, ways of book selection, extensive reading</p>
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Introduction

The study of extensive reading perceptions has become an essential aspect of extensive reading implementation because many recent extensive reading researchers (Arai, 2019; Chang & Renandya, 2017; Sun, 2020; Waring & Vu, 2020) found varying ER perceptions that further demanded exploration of students' perception in other second language contexts. If the ER concerns of the students are resolved, then the ways to support them would be more effective for the successful implementation of extensive reading. Moreover, Macalister (2010) states that though the importance of cognition has become one of the most recognized interests, a limited number of studies have been found that examine students' knowledge concerning reading in second and foreign language classrooms. And further, Macalister strongly supports that the cognitive studies in extensive reading did not receive explicit attention.

Reading in Bhutan

Since 1984, Bhutanese schools of various levels have constructed library rooms, allocated reading periods to build reading culture, and initiated various intensive reading programs (Shaw, 2005). The trend of intensive reading that focuses on linguistic details seemed still prevalent in Bhutanese second language learning classroom, because, according to Wangmo (2019), Bhutanese students have low English skills due to teacher-centered instruction. Likewise, the PISA-D national report, that was compiled by Yangchen (2019) asserted that Bhutanese students read information without comprehending the meaning of the text, with poor reading habits being one of the critical factors. Reading is considered a study-related activity associated with textbooks and passing exams (Shaw, 2005). Therefore, it is necessary to find some ways to assist students in becoming more independent and joyful readers.

The Royal Education Council & Education Initiatives (2011) showed consistently declining English scores from students' learning assessments for the years 2008, 2010, and 2011 of grades 4, 6, and 8. The students did well only in recall questions, showing that the students lacked English

comprehension reading skills across all grade levels. The Education Sector Review Commission (2008) further reported that, over the period from 2001 to 2007, the grade repetition rate of 11.8% was consistently high. In addition, primary grade students were passed on to their class level without actually obtaining the fundamental skills of reading, writing, and numeracy, which eventually ended up elevating primary dropout rates. Further, Bhutanese students' academic success depends on the ability to read and understand English, since English is the medium of instruction for all the content-related subjects (except Dzongkha, the national language of Bhutan), whether mathematics, science, or social studies (Biddha & Thinley, 2010). Likewise, the PISA-D national report for Bhutan also found that low reading literacy among Bhutanese students affected performance in science and mathematics (Yangchen, 2019). Hence, proficiency in English language has become utterly critical.

However, throughout the year, Bhutanese schools are encouraged to bestow with enjoyable activities to instill reading habits among the Bhutanese students (Read Global, 2020). Further, the country also observes reading year where his Majesty the king of Bhutan declared 2015 as the national reading year embracing the importance of reading (Read Global, 2020). Nonetheless these reading programs may not have had much impact on the rural schools, because the Ministry of Education (2014) ascertained those students of rural areas in Bhutan performed poorly in reading and lacked reading abilities compared to students in urban areas. Moreover, the time allocated for library period is just a period a week and sometimes that too is replaced by teaching other exam-oriented content subjects in order to finish the syllabus (Shaw, 2005).

Literature Review

Extensive Reading

Extensive reading (ER) has come to mean reading large quantities of easy and enjoyable text materials that focus on meaning and a general understanding of a text (Bamford & Day, 1998; Grabe & Stoller, 2011; Suk, 2017). Interestingly, the traditional reading approach that is intensive reading (Arai, 2019) has drawbacks, and those drawback have led to the popularity of extensive reading across the second language classrooms. Intensive reading is reading a text line by line, focusing on grammar, translating, comparing, and analyzing every bit of information it contains by repeatedly using the dictionary (Palmer, 1921).

The purposes of extensive reading and intensive reading are different. Extensive reading is reading for pleasure, whereas intensive reading (IR) is for understanding literal meaning, grammatical structures, and rhetorical relationships in the text (Brown & Lee, 2015). There are several characteristics of implementing extensive reading in the classroom provided by Day (2018). The list of ten extensive reading characteristics explains that the reading materials must be easy, comprehensible, and not demanding explicit attention, which can bore the students (Day, 2018). Moreover, a great variety of reading materials of different topics is preferred as it will cater to the needs and interest of more of the students in the class. Students choose their own books with enjoyable content so that reading becomes a reward for self. During extensive reading, readers read individually. The extensive reading teacher is a model reader who orients and guides students to read more.

The most effective ways for choosing books in extensive reading instruction is by using the five finger rule as stated by Rasinski et al. (2005). The five-finger rule is a process where students open a book, select any page, read through it, and hold up a finger for each word they cannot read or do not know. If the student finds one to two unknown words, the book is easy. If they find three to four unknown words, students can give it a try. Finally, if students find more than five unknown words, then the book is difficult and can leave the book for other easier books.

Benefits of Reading

Innumerable extensive reading (ER) studies have found that extensive reading encourages benefits to the overall development of language proficiencies. ER aids in the development of fluency (e.g. Huffman, 2014; McLean & Rouault, 2017; Stoller, 2015; Suk, 2017), reading comprehension (Nakanishi, 2015), writing skills (Ahmed & Rajab, 2015; Mermelstein, 2015), vocabulary (Aka, 2019; McQuillan, 2019; Song, 2020; Suk, 2017), grammar (Khansir & Bafandeh, 2014), and reading motivations (Tabata-Sandom, 2018; Vu, 2020). The purpose of ER is that students take responsibility for their own reading in extensive reading, and should reap a variety of benefits from ER (DoHuy, Hull, & Tepsuriwong, 2006). Despite massive benefits of extensive reading in all the four skills of language learning, implementing ER in Bhutanese context would be a challenge. The exam-oriented learning environment in Bhutan leads English teachers to adopt intensive reading approaches that requires close reading of vocabulary and grammar. The intensive reading approach is suitable to enhance students' scores on tests and exams (Huang, 2015). Moreover, reading in Bhutanese schools are related only to passing exams and coverage of syllabus rather than reading for pleasure (Shaw, 2005).

Extensive Reading Instruction

The extensive reading instruction was conducted based on implicit learning theory and the Affective Filter hypothesis. Implicit learning theory is described as the acquisition of cognitive ability and language comprehension without being conscious of the basic information; it's based solely on large volumes of comprehensible input (Grabe, 2009). The Affective Filter Hypothesis states that highly motivated learners with a positive self-image are self-assured, have lower anxiety levels, and are more likely to succeed at second language acquisition (Krashen, 1982). During extensive reading instruction, the reading materials were easy, enjoyable and below the level of their grade. The materials for this study were gathered and divided into stages in accordance with the extensive reading foundation graded reader scale. The reading scale includes: Alphabet level with 50 headwords; Beginner level with 300 headwords; and Near Native level with 18,000 headwords (Extensive Reading Foundation, 2011). For the study, most of the books ranged from alphabet beginner (50 words) to early elementary (400 headwords) making the reading materials less challenging. In contrast to library class, where Bhutanese students only have one class per week to visit the library room to exchange books, participants in this program have the option to exchange their books whenever they liked. Furthermore, the researcher read with the participants, recommending books, and offering some book talks that encouraged them to read more books.

Students Opinion

Since opinion is interrelated with perception, opinion is the term defined as a person's opinion on anything they learn, whether they agree or disagree with the technique about something they learn. Many studies found varying perceptions of extensive reading. The most recent study from Sun (2020) found that Chinese teachers had varying opinions of extensive reading, and also refuted some of the widely accepted principles of extensive reading. Similarly, significant differences appeared in many perceptions of extensive reading, due to the varying beliefs and preferences of the university students (Imamura, 2020). However, there are very few studies of extensive reading with young learners, and even fewer studies on young learners' attitudes toward extensive reading. Although a recent study of extensive reading on young learners by Ermerawati (2019) demonstrated favorable effects of extensive reading on reading motivation and building reading habits, the study did not explore the attitudes of young learners' towards extensive reading. Understanding the attitudes of the students would benefit ER implementers to conduct more ER programs more effectively by better

understanding the needs and preferences of the young students. Therefore, this study aims to address the following research question:

1. What are Bhutanese fourth grade students' opinions towards extensive reading?

Research Methodology

Research and Participants

The research was carried out at one of the primary schools in Trongsa, in the country's central region. The rural school has pre-primary till sixth grade. Students in the lower primary (grades PP till III) take three subjects, English, Mathematics, and Dzongkha. Students in the upper primary grades (grades IV to VI) take those three subjects in addition to Science and Social Studies. The students in the school are diverse coming from nearby villages, business communities, public officials and from all over the nation. They speak various languages as well. The students used English as a medium of instruction for all subjects (English, Mathematics, Science & social studies) except Dzongkha. English was a second or third language for most students, since their families speak their local dialects at home.

The study consisted of 16 fourth-graders aged between 9 to 10. The study used naturally formed group, and convenience sampling was used to select the participants for the study. The 50 minutes ER class met twice a week for 12 weeks. Six students participated in an interview after twelve weeks of ER instruction.

Research Instrument

The study employed qualitative methods (semi-structured interview). Imamura (2020) maintains that the qualitative approach is ideal for objective and in-depth descriptions of the complexities of ER and it allows for a multi-faceted and comprehensive interpretation. Over the past 30 years, a limited number of researchers have chosen qualitative methods to study ER (Imamura, 2020). Hence, the study employed the qualitative method (semi-structured interview) to explore fourth grade Bhutanese students' opinions towards extensive reading after 12 weeks of ER instruction. The qualitative methods encouraged the interviewers to rephrase the questions and allows the interviewer to use probing questions in explaining fascinating and salient issues (Hutchinson & Wilson, 1992). Use of rephrasing and probing questions make it easier for the students to understand and respond clearly. The interview was conducted in a closed room, away from disturbances at the end of the ER instruction.

Three experts in the field of education assessed the content validity of the interview questions. The interview questions were revised, as per the suggestions from the experts. The interview questions were piloted with a few students who shared the identical characteristics as the sample. The questions were appropriate since all the participants were able to understand and respond to the questions confidently.

The semi-structured interview was administered in Dzongkha (students' national language), so that the language did not become a barrier in responding to the questions. However, an experienced bilingual teacher used the back-translation method to validate the participants' responses. Back-translation is a process in which a translator who does not see the original text retranslates the translated text into the source language (Tyupa, 2011).

The data was analyzed using the content analysis based on the following four aspects: 1) reading material preferences, 2) ways of book selection, 3) choice of place for reading, and 4) benefits of extensive reading instruction.

Procedure

The extensive reading (ER) Instruction was implemented for twelve weeks. During the first week of ER instruction participants were oriented about extensive reading. The extensive reading instruction was solely built around the accepted 10 ER characteristics of Bamford and Day (2004). The ER class consisted of varieties of enjoyable and comfortable graded reading materials. Participants selected their choice of books using five finger rule stated by Rasinski et al. (2005). Students read as much as possible for enjoyment at school and home without any grades, and the teacher served as a guide and a model reader. Students filled simple reading logs consisting of the title of the book read, number of pages, and easy cloze tests to complete after reading each book. After twelve weeks of ER instruction a semi-structured interview was administered to explore students' opinions towards extensive reading. Six of the students participated in a semi-structured interview. Before the interview, participants gave their consent. The researcher clarified the study's overall intent and how the confidentiality of the data was protected. The researcher conducted the interview in a closed room away from any disturbances and voice recorded.

Results

A total of 16 students were categorized into high, mid, and low groups according to their reading comprehension post test scores. Then two participants from each group were selected for the interview. P5 and P6 are

the interviewees from the high group. P3 and P4 represented from the mid. P1 and P2 are from the low group. The selected six students participated in the semi-structured interview to find out their opinions towards extensive reading instruction of four aspects, 1) reading material preferences, 2) ways of book selection, 3) choice of place for reading, and 4) benefits of extensive reading instruction.

Reading Preferences

The reading material preferences of the students were similar. Almost all the student participants preferred reading books that are easy and enjoyable with lots of beautiful illustrations. However, a few preferred challenging books:

“I like to read story books having pictures that are challenging. I read hard books because I can practice reading new words.” (P3).

The use of text books in the class was not a good choice for students to read. One student participant, for example, expressed dislike for reading textbooks in the class.

“I like to read story books with more pictures, and I don't like to read English/mathematics text books, because they are too hard to read.” (P1)

To summarize, it was clear that children liked reading books that were easy, engaging, and full of illustrations. It did, however, highlight the need to provide a variety of enjoyable reading materials to fit children's varied reading levels.

Ways of Book Selection

Students were trained to utilize the five-finger method to choose books throughout extensive reading instruction. As a result, every student participant used the five-finger rule to select books, and they preferred to do it on their own.

“I choose books that are easier for me to read. I open a book and read whether I can read or not. I also use five finger rules to choose books.” (P2)

However, two of them preferred books chosen by the teacher:

“I like to read books chosen by the teachers because I always tend to choose books that are uninteresting.”

(P3)

“I like to read books chosen by teacher and as well by me. However, I like teachers to choose book for me, since I don't know which books are enjoyable.” (P6)

To summarize, most of the participants sought more manageable books, showing students preference for reading easy books. In addition, students liked to choose books on their own. However, it also demonstrated the significance of the teacher's involvement in book selection and book recommendations for students.

Choice of Place for Reading

The following excerpts shows that students hardly get time to read at home either due to their social responsibilities or subject related homework to complete. The majority of the students preferred to read in school, while two others preferred to read at home. As indicated below, the participants stated their reasons for choosing at school for pleasure reading:

“I like to read books at school and at home. However, I do not like to read at home because my younger brothers disturb me when I read.” (P2)

Similarly, another participant stated:

“I like reading at school because at home I need to look after my sisters. But sometimes I do my homework and sometimes I read story books.” (P3)

Two others (P5, P6), on the other hand, read mostly at home. They were from the highest-scoring group and read the most books during the ER instruction. The following are their responses:

“I read books most of the time at home.” (P5)

“I read books most of the time at home. Because at home, I get a lot of time for myself.” (P6)

Since many of the participants prefer school than home for reading, students need enough time for pleasure reading at school. Some children who do not have enough time to read at home may benefit from at least an hour of pleasure reading at school every day. In rural Bhutan, scenarios like these

are quite frequent, with older brothers and sisters caring for younger siblings, helping their family with household chores, etc. As a result, it is critical to provide enough pleasure reading time at school.

Benefits of Extensive Reading Instruction

All the participants shared the benefits of extensive reading instruction, expressing its positive impact on all aspects of language proficiency including reading motivation. Most notably, one of the low-score individuals noted the following advantages of ER:

“Extensive reading improved me a lot. Before, I cannot read books well but now I can read a lot better. I can read well and understand better now. I am motivated to read further and I will keep on reading.” (P2)

Similarly, another participant from the higher group shared as follows:

“After extensive reading I can read faster, and I can use new words while writing as well. I enjoy reading and motivated to read. I will read two books every week now on.” (P6)

The reading speed record of the pre-test (2nd week) and the post-test (11th week) also showed a drastic improvement in their reading speed. For example, one of the participants read 59 words per minute during the reading speed pre-test, and read 174 words per minute during the reading speed post-test. This indicated that extensive reading instruction radically enhanced participants reading speed. One of the student participants added how ER aided her in other subjects as well:

“Extensive reading also helped me progress in other subjects. It helped me improve both my reading fluency (reading speed) and as well as reading comprehension, that aided me to understand other subjects.” (P4)

Further, a few students also shared how ER benefitted them in understanding the concepts of other subjects, as English is utilized as a medium of instruction for all content-related topics. Overall, participants perceived that extensive reading helped them improve their reading speed, comprehension, vocabulary, writing, academic subjects, and as well as motivated them to continue reading.

Discussion

In this study almost all the participants revealed immense benefits of extensive reading instruction, with the overall development of language proficiencies in reading comprehension, reading fluency, writing, vocabulary, and reading motivations. The findings of this study are in accordance with (Smadi & Al-Zawahreh, 2013; Sun, 2020). Almost all the participants preferred easy and enjoyable reading materials; however, one student participant favored challenging books. Further, many of the student participants preferred to select their own books using the five-finger rule, while a few others liked to read books chosen by the teacher.

Gathering a large number of reading materials was a challenge, as the researcher herself incurred a huge expense on books. A large number of books were gathered from nearby schools for the study. To implement extensive reading in more schools in Bhutanese context, gathering graded books should be made a priority. Now is the time to implement extensive reading, since the curriculum in Bhutanese schools is exam-oriented, and uniform syllabus coverage is found to be pertinent. Only one library period in a week is allocated for reading that is also used to exchange books rather than actual reading. Regular, daily pleasure reading time must be allocated in the schools to encourage students to read for enjoyment.

Further, this result is similar to the study of Sun (2020), that the participants in the study had a mixed results for book selection. Regarding the choice of place for reading, many participant students prefer school for reading, since participants had to fulfil family responsibilities at home. For example, one student mentioned that he likes to read at school because at home he needs to look after his sisters. However, three participant students like to read at home. Since the participants in the study had different opinions towards the ER characteristics, it is important for the ER teachers to know that each student has their own preferences and consider it during the ER instruction.

Conclusion

The qualitative findings showed that, the students' preferences must be respected and further determine the methods accordingly to students' preferences. For example, giving enough time for pleasure reading at school has been proven crucial owing to children's social responsibilities at home. The available reading materials and resources, time, and guidance must be available for the successful implementation of extensive reading. The next steps for bringing about more ER instruction include: a) gathering of a huge number of graded readers that are enjoyable, and b) prepare and educate

teachers to help kids read more joyfully and confidently without fear, anxiety, or academic pressure by facilitating, orienting, and guiding them. The ER instructor plays an important role in implementing extensive reading. The ER teacher must adhere to the following aspect of ER implementation: a) be a model reader, b) recommend books for students, c) introduce ER and demonstrate how to choose books, d) provide enough and efficient ways for students to exchange books whenever they need, e) deliver engaging ER activities to motivate students to read extensively, and f) inform students of their reading progress. The findings also revealed immense benefits of extensive reading on students' overall language competencies that suggested extensive reading to be implemented in primary grades of the Bhutanese education system.

Limitations

The research employed qualitative method to find out Bhutanese fourth grade students' opinion towards extensive reading, regarding the reading material and place of reading preferences, ways of choosing books and as well as the benefits of extensive reading after twelve weeks of extensive reading instruction. There are some limitations of the study. The sample is small with a similar background, age, language proficiency and levels of education. Thus, the findings cannot be generalized to other settings. Therefore, to produce generalizable results, quantitative studies with various samples in different contexts must be conducted.

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