



Effects of Extensive Reading on Ethiopian EFL Students' Reading Comprehension and Perceptions

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This study aimed to investigate the effects of extensive reading on reading comprehension and perceptions toward extensive reading programme. Thus, 90 eighth graders were selected from two intact classes, and they were assigned as an experimental and a control group. The experimental group was exposed to extensive reading for 12 weeks, while the control group was not. The data were collected using reading comprehension tests and a perception questionnaire. To analyze the data, independent and paired sample t-tests and descriptive statistics were used. The results revealed that the experimental group scored better than the control group in comprehension posttest, although the result was not statistically significant. The findings also showed that the extensive reading group perceptions toward the extensive reading programme were positive. These results therefore suggested that extensive reading seems to be one of the most effective and feasible approaches for input-poor EFL settings.

Background of the Study

The significance of being proficient in reading comprehension for success in school and life-long learning is undeniable. Comprehension becomes important to students in the later elementary grades (Sweet & Snow, 2003) because it provides the foundation for further learning in secondary school and beyond. Yet despite 8 years of instruction in reading, most of the eighth graders of Ethiopia lack the required competence in reading comprehension (Ambachew, 2003; Teshome, 2014; Tiruneh, 2014). This has been confirmed with the evidence gathered in the three national learning assessments: the result in the 2008 Third National Learning Assessments (TNLA) indicated that students' reading

comprehension achievement decreased (mean=43.9) compared with either the 2004 Second National Learning Assessments (SNLA) (mean=64.5) or the 2000 Baseline National Learning Assessments (BNLA) (mean=64.3). These reports reveal that most of the students lack the ability to comprehend reading texts. Difficulty with reading comprehension negatively affects achievement in all areas of the curriculum (Hassell & Rodge, 2007). Moreover, students who are poor in reading often develop a negative attitude to reading, particularly extensive reading and invariably the development of poor reading habits (Tunde-Awe, 2014). An investigation of a survey result also confirms that second cycle post-primary (grades 7 and 8) school students' habits and attitudes toward extensive reading (ER) were poor (Endris, in press).

Considering the above problems, the present researcher observed the teaching of reading lessons in some second cycle

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primary schools in Woldia, Ethiopia. The teachers seemed to focus mainly on intensive reading (IR). That is, the students were asked to read texts from the textbook and answer some comprehension questions. Regarding this, Tadesse (1999) stated that reading is mostly used as a means to teach language (such as grammar) in primary and secondary schools in Ethiopia. Such an intensive reading instruction influences not only the students' reading comprehension but also their attitudes towards reading (Nuttall, 1982). Therefore, an appropriate approach of teaching reading that can help students improve their reading proficiency, attitudes, and habits is required.

In recent years, extensive reading has received great emphasis as an effective and promising approach of developing foreign language abilities (Yamashita, 2013), and it may just be the right remedy for pupils' learning problems when intensive reading is not effective (Renandya, 2007). Extensive reading is reading for pleasure purposes, as opposed to prescribed reading for academic purposes (Day & Bamford, 1998; Extensive Reading Foundation, 2011). The aim of the extensive reading approach is for learners to read massive amounts of language at a comfortable level to gain input, build fluency and consolidate language that was previously encountered discretely through textbooks and language instruction (Waring, 2006). Sometimes extensive reading is also called by alternative terms such as pleasure reading, sustained silent reading, free voluntary reading or book flood (Yamashita, 2013). The theoretical basis of the ER approach is that people learn to read by reading (Grabe, 1991; Smith, 1994; Yamashita, 2013). In relation to this, Krashen (1982) formulated a theory known as the 'input hypothesis' (e.g., 1982), which focuses on the role of written input through reading, and

represents the strongest theoretical contention of the necessity and sufficiency of comprehensible input for second language acquisition. Krashen claims that when L2 readers focus on the meaning of a large amount of input, they incidentally learn the second language. Extensive reading, hence, provides an opportunity for large amounts of comprehensible input (Hafiz and Tudor, 1989). Regarding the implementation of ER, Day and Bamford (2002) have suggested ten principles that define a successful ER programme for L2 learners: accessibility of easy reading materials; a variety of reading material on a wide range of topics are available; students select what they want to read; students read as much as possible; they read for pleasure, or new knowledge; students often read at a faster speed; reading is viewed as its own reward, reading is individual and silent, and teachers become model readers and guide the students. Over the last few decades, various studies (Elley & Mangubhai, 1983; Hafiz & Tudor, 1989; Robb and Susser, 1989; Lituana, Jacobs, & Renandya, 1999; Richards & Schmidt, 2002; Nakaniishi, 2015) have provided positive evidence that students, even disadvantaged ones, increased in reading comprehension and overall language proficiency in second or foreign language ER programme. Positive effects of extensive reading on the affective domains of reading, such as attitude and motivation have also been reported (Day & Bamford, 1998; Grabe, 2009; Yamashita, 2013).

Previous studies have also examined the effects of ER on EFL students' reading proficiency and attitudes toward extensive reading. Sheu (2003), for instance, conducted a study to examine the effects of extensive reading on Taiwanese junior high school EFL students, for a period of one academic year. The result showed that

the extensive reading groups significantly improved from pretest to posttest in reading comprehension, but the control group did not. The finding of the study also indicated that the students' attitude toward the extensive reading programme was positive. Morgado (2009) also carried out a study on the impacts of extensive reading on Venezuelan university students' reading comprehension performance and perception of the extensive reading strategy. Findings suggested that reading comprehension performance was essentially the same with or without an extensive reading programme. However, the programme did seem to positively affect participating students. The ER group did significantly better in the posttest than in the pretest. Besides, the students' perception of extensive reading was very positive. Similarly, in Ethiopia, Ambachew (2003) conducted a study to investigate the effects of donated supplementary readers on grade 8 EFL students' reading ability in Addis Ababa. The result of the study was inconsistent with most of the findings in other countries that there had been no significant increase in the students' reading abilities after the intervention.

Despite successful research and growing interest in ER in various countries, especially among the Southeast Asian countries like Japan, Singapore, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Korea, it has not received as much attention as it might in Ethiopia. Besides, as far as the reading of the researcher, little research has been carried out on ER in Ethiopian context in general and with second cycle primary schools in particular; even if there was one (Ambachew, 2003), its findings were inconsistent.

To fill in the existing gaps, the present study aimed to shed light on this issue by investigating how ER may influence EFL

learners' reading comprehension and their perceptions toward the extensive reading programme (ERP). To achieve these objectives, this study made an attempt to answer the following research questions:

1. Does extensive reading affect students' reading comprehension achievement?
2. What are the students' perceptions toward the extensive reading programme?

Method

This study employed a quasi-experimental pre and posttest research design to investigate the effects of an ER programme on reading comprehension and perceptions of the ERP. Therefore, 90 eighth graders were selected from two intact classes, and they were assigned as an experimental and a control group. The experimental group consisted of 46 students, with 22 males and 24 females, while the control group included 44 students, with 22 males and 22 females. Students' average age was about 14.5.

Reading Comprehension Tests

As standardized tests that can measure reading comprehension of primary school students in Ethiopia were not available, the researcher constructed two parallel versions of reading comprehension tests, one as a pretest and the other as a posttest. The tests were constructed based on the grade 8 curricula materials. Each test consisted of four reading passages followed by 32 questions. The questions included both lower- and higher-order skills, such as retrieving explicitly stated information and making straightforward inference, interpreting and integrating ideas and information, and reflect-and-evaluate questions about the reading text.

Perception Questionnaire

After the intervention, participants in the experimental group were asked their perceptions toward the extensive reading programme. The questionnaire items were adapted from (Sheu, 2003) perception questionnaire. The items included the participants' perceptions toward the features of the ERP (self-selection, reading different books, silent reading, writing in a reading log, teacher participation, oral report, lack of homework and tests). Each item was fixed to a 4-point Likert scale, ranging from 'like it very much' (1) to 'dislike it very much' (4). The 4-option format left no option for neutral responses, in order to escape the 'fence-sitting' phenomenon (Dörnyei, 2003). Then the questionnaire was translated to the students' mother tongue (Amharic).

Both the reading comprehension tests and perception questionnaire were given to the researcher's advisors and EFL teachers for validation (content and face validity). Based on the comments, necessary modifications were made. The reliability of the reading comprehension tests and perception questionnaire were also checked in the piloting phase of the study using Cronbach's Alpha. Their reliability was 0.70 and 0.61 for the reading comprehension tests and self-perception questionnaire respectively.

Reading Materials

As ER is new in Ethiopia, extensive reading materials and graded readers are not available. Hence, the researcher used his own personal collection, including stories, narratives and folk stories from different sources, such as stories from the British Council Ethiopia by Sargent and Elizabeth Laird.

The stories were selected based on the following criteria: the content of the story

should be within the participants' age and level; the topic or the story line should be interesting; and the stories should be short to allow students to finish reading in a short time.

Procedures

Receiving an approval from the school principal and the English teacher, the researcher provided training for the experimenter teacher on the theory, benefits and implementation of extensive reading for a week. Then the reading comprehension test was administered to diagnose the students' current level of reading comprehension proficiency. Next the ER programme was implemented as follows: first, students were introduced to the concept of ER: what it is, its benefits and how to do it. Second, a handout of photocopies of one story from the collected stories was given to all the experimental students for shared reading. That is, the teacher first explained the topic and told the story to the students in easy English for three consequent classes. Third, books were set out on tables in the classroom, and students were encouraged to choose books of their own choice. The students participated in ER for one academic semester, which is approximately three months. The classes met twice a week for 60 minutes for reading and 20 minutes for keeping reading logs and reading conference. The logs were to include date, title, level (easy vs. difficult), reading time, number of pages and a short comment about the books. In the reading conference, students in a group talked about their reading: one of the group members, for instance, spoke about the main characters and the other member talked about the theme of the story, etc. There was also a reading marathon competition programme. The three winners were awarded a passport and book at the end of each month and at the end of the programme respectively.

Meanwhile, the researcher observed the extensive reading programme in the classroom to check the extent to which ER was implemented properly among students in the experimental group, and made discussions with the experimenter teacher before and after each of the classroom observations. In addition, the researcher read their reading logs and provided suggestions concerning the choice of books. At the end of three months, the reading comprehension posttest and the perception questionnaire were administered.

Finally, the data were analyzed via t-tests (independent samples and paired samples) and descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviations) using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 20.0 for Windows.

Results

Reading Comprehension Test

In order to compare the two groups before the intervention, an independent sample t-test was conducted, and the analysis confirmed that there was no significant difference between the two groups on the pretest ($t = -1.23, p = .19$). This reveals that the students in both groups were homogeneous or they had similar background in their levels of reading comprehension. The mean scores of students' performance in reading comprehension on the pretest and posttest are shown in Table 1 below.

The experimental group's mean for the pretest and posttest were 12.20 and 14.57, respectively (see Table 1), which was a gain of 2.3. The students in the ERP scored better

Table 1. Pre-test and Post-test Mean Scores of the Two Groups

Group	Pre-test		Post-test		t	p (2- tailed)
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
Control (N = 44)	10.50	6.12	10.30	6.86	0.15	.88
Experimental (N = 46)	12.20	6.50	14.57	8.58	-1.65	.10

* The mean difference between the post-tests on the two conditions is not significant, $P > .05$.

Table 2. Perceptions toward the Extensive Reading Programme

Item descriptions	The experimental group (n = 46)	
	Mean	SD
1. Silent reading programme	3.63	0.52
2. Self-selection of books	3.84	0.36
3. Reading different stories	3.76	0.42
4. Writing in a reading log	3.37	0.08
5. Lack of homework	2.35	0.95
6. Lack of tests and scores	2.26	0.94
7. Teacher participation	3.73	0.69
8. Oral report	3.53	0.78
Grand mean	3.30	0.59

on the posttest than the pretest (though the difference was not significant), while the control group did not.

Perceptions toward the Extensive Reading Programme

After the extensive reading programme, the experimental group participants were asked their opinions toward the extensive reading programme using a 4-point Likert scale (ranging from 'like it very much' (1) to 'dislike it very much' (4).

As presented in Table 2, the results confirmed that the participants' perceptions toward the extensive reading programme were positive, with the average mean of 3.30, an above satisfactory level to all the features of the ERP. Among the features, self-selection of books was given the highest rating (mean = 3.84), followed by reading different stories (mean = 3.76), teacher participation (mean = 3.73) and silent reading programme (mean = 3.63). Lack of tests and scores (mean = 2.26), and lack of homework (mean = 2.35) were given the lowest ratings.

Discussion

The results showed that the experimental group scored better than the control group in comprehension tests although the result was not statistically significant. Students in the ERP group scored better on the posttest than the pretest, while the control group did not (see Table 1). The findings of this study were consistent with many other studies (Elley & Mangubhai, 1983; Hafiz & Tudor, 1989; Robb and Susser, 1989; Lituanas, Jacobs, & Renandya, 1999; Richards & Schmidt, 2002; Sheu, 2003), which indicated that the intervention with ER approach improved students' reading comprehension. This suggests that extensive reading had a positive impact on the students' reading comprehension. In terms of theory,

the findings of this study are consistent with the Comprehension Hypothesis: extensive reading is a means of gaining convincing comprehensible input, and is therefore a powerful means of developing language and literacy (Krashen, 2004). However, the results of this study did not provide full support to the findings of previous studies, as the gain score was not statistically significant. The lack of significant differences in reading comprehension is similar to the findings of previous research on extensive reading (Al-Homoud, & Schmitt, 2009; Morgado, 2009). The failure to achieve statistically significant differences in the tests may be because the students were unable to acquire adequate vocabulary within a short instructional period (12 weeks) as research findings have consistently found that vocabulary knowledge correlates very highly with reading comprehension (Nation, 2001). Besides, mere classroom reading without home/outside reading may not lead students to significant improvement in reading comprehension.

The findings also showed that the experimental group participants' perceptions toward the extensive reading programme were positive (see Table 2), particularly the freedom to choose what to read based on their level and interest, the opportunity to read about topics which are varied and interesting to them, teacher's participation and the sustained silent reading programme. The results were consistent with other previous research, which reported that the implementation of ERP has resulted in a positive attitude toward the ERP (Sheu, 2003; Morgado, 2009). This may be because they enjoyed the pressure-free atmosphere of the ER programme. Individual choice and interest are the main motivating factors in reading programmes (Day & Bamford, 2002). The other fascinating finding was that the lack of tests and homework were given

the lowest score. It seems that the students required their reading (ER) to have its own values or be part of the curriculum.

This study provides some implications for educators, school principals and teachers, who are interested in implementing ER in input-poor EFL settings like Ethiopia, particularly the positive perceptions toward the extensive reading programme shown by the experimental group participants. That is, the pressure-free atmosphere can encourage students to participate fervently in the ER programme. The positive perceptions could then develop students into becoming life-long readers.

There are, however, some limitations in this study. First, this was a small-scale study with a small number of samples examined, it was not representative enough. To acquire more accurate data, further studies need to be replicated in larger data sets in future investigations. Second, in the current study, participants had the opportunity to read only in the classroom with limited access to books (only 12 books). Future research needs to provide a big stock of books in the classroom and school library and ask participants to read more to maximize the effects of ER. Third, future research can focus on the effects of ER on other areas of language learning like vocabulary and grammar. Finally, time commitment is important for ER to be rationally effective; this study lasted for three months, which may not be adequate for the benefits of ER. Future studies can gain better results if learners participate in an ER programme for a longer time.

Conclusion

The results of this study revealed that the experimental group scored better than the control group in comprehension tests

although the result was not statistically significant. Besides, the experimental group students scored better on the posttest than the pretest, while the control group did not. This suggests that extensive reading had a positive impact on the students' reading comprehension. The findings also showed that the experimental group perceptions toward the ERP were positive, especially the self-selection, availability of different reading materials, teacher participation and silent reading programme. This shows that the stress-free extensive reading programme seems to be one of the most effective and feasible approaches even in an input-poor environment like Ethiopia.

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