

Effects of Extensive Reading on Students' Perceptions of Reading Ability and Use of Reading Strategies

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Abstract

This paper investigates the effects of extensive reading on students' perceptions of their reading ability and on their use of metacognitive and cognitive strategies while reading extensively. The study, conducted in Vietnam over a period of seven weeks, found that the subjects perceived that extensive reading enhanced certain aspects of their reading ability as well as their motivation to read. It also found more reports of the use of reading strategies at the end of the research than at the beginning. This suggests that extensive reading raised the subjects' awareness of their own reading and thus might have helped them become more autonomous as readers. These findings suggest that extensive reading should be promoted in Vietnam, where the pedagogical tradition of teacher-centeredness has long been dominant.

Background of this study

To have a deeper understanding about the way Vietnamese students learn how to read, it is necessary to report that the educational system in Vietnam is still heavily teacher-centered in every aspect. Students in Vietnam are apt to follow strictly their teachers' requirements for ways of learning. Most teachers are attached to the curriculum partly because of the constraints on time and lesson contents. The learning environment is still an exam-oriented one in which "testing strongly affects learners' motivation and learning styles" (Nguyen, 2002: 2). This exam-oriented learning environment has affected heavily the way students choose their reading strategies and reading materials, mostly to suit the requirements of passing their exams. Le (1999: 3) points out further that all learners need is "a sufficiently good knowledge of grammar and vocabulary of the target language [English] to pass the national grammar-based and norm-referenced examinations". There have been no significant changes in recent years in the educational policy towards a learner-centered environment and learner autonomy.

For English language learning, the English textbooks currently used in Vietnamese high schools from Grade 6 to Grade 12 (ages 11 to 17) are still a mixture of the contents found in typical materials of the Grammar-Translation Method and Audio-Lingual Method. This trend of English language teaching and learning continues throughout the years students learn in most tertiary-level institutions. In most of the EFL textbooks designed for those institutions, the 'reading skills', in fact, were mostly limited to skimming and scanning as well as answering comprehension questions. The texts used in those textbooks were taken directly from some academic textbooks in the students' study fields and not designed specifically to teach reading comprehension. Most students thus had problems with vocabulary and/or grammatical structures. They also did not have much perception about self-management in reading (i.e. finding their

own ways and strategies to manage their reading). Therefore, it is necessary to find some ways to help students become more independent as readers.

Definitions and characteristics of extensive reading

The term ‘extensive reading’ was originally coined by Palmer (1917/1968: 137, cited in Day & Bamford, 1998: 5), which means “reading book after book” and “reading rapidly”. Krashen (1989: 89) gave similar terms to extensive reading such as Free Voluntary Reading, or Sustained Silent Reading. In extensive reading, readers will “gain a general understanding of what is read” (Richards, Platt & Platt, 1993: 133). In this study, extensive reading is defined as reading widely, in quantity and with an emphasis on the materials that readers find interesting. The reading activities are done outside class and at students’ own pace and language proficiency level.

Purposes and benefits of extensive reading programs

The main purposes of second-language (L2) extensive reading programs are likely to be to expose students to various genres and topics, to foster enjoyment of reading and to promote autonomy in reading. In extensive reading, instead of having to do follow-up exercises to motivate themselves, students will take responsibility for their own reading. After doing extensive reading, students should enjoy a number of benefits. As Light (1970) claimed, extensive reading “would not only raise reading speeds, but importantly would reduce the negative affective consequences of slow, text-based, intensive approaches” (Light, 1970: 122, cited in Bell, 2001). Students are then likely to gain confidence in reading, increase their reading motivation, and have a positive attitude about reading in English. Nash & Yuan (1993: 28) found that extensive reading helped their Taiwanese subjects “develop a habit of reading in L2 and to see L2 reading as enjoyable”. Extensive reading also “motivates the learners to read” (Bell, 1998), and students will become eager readers (Mason & Krashen, 1997). In addition, Day & Bamford (2000: 12) claim that extensive reading “weans students away from the word-by-word processing of text, encouraging them instead to go for the general meaning of what they read, and to ignore any details they do not fully understand” (e.g. free themselves from the habit of using dictionaries for every unknown word).

Reading strategies

It is necessary to reiterate that, while working on extensive reading, students have to employ reading strategies on their own. Gardner (1987, cited in Kletzien, 1991: 69) states that “a reading strategy is an action (or series of actions) that is employed in order to construct meaning”. In Olshavsky’s definition, reading strategies are “purposeful means of comprehending the author’s message” (Olshavsky, 1977, cited in Hull, 2000: 68). Various classifications of reading strategies have been proposed, many of which derive from the literature on learning strategies, which often differentiates among metacognitive, cognitive and social-affective strategies (e.g. Rubin 1987, O’Malley & Chamot 1990, Oxford 1990). For instance, Sarig (1987) proposed a classification of her L2 subjects’ strategies (or ‘moves’, as she calls them) in terms of metacognition and cognition involving, respectively, ways that help readers plan and monitor their reading and ways readers deal with different types of texts. On the other hand, Block (1986) classified the reading strategies her subjects reported using from a different perspective: ‘general’ strategies (including comprehension-gathering and comprehension-monitoring) and ‘local’ strategies (e.g. attempts to understand specific linguistic units). Thus, while precise categories might vary among researchers, generally, we can identify the underlying traits of metacognitive and cognitive strategies.

This article comprises part of the first writer's MA thesis (DoHuy, 2005), which was originally designed to investigate the effects of extensive reading on students' perceptions of their reading ability and their reading behaviours. This paper seeks to answer the following research question: "*What are the effects of extensive reading on students' perceptions of their reading ability and their use of strategies?*"

Methodology

Subjects

This study was done with six undergraduate students majoring in Computer Science at Saigon Institute of Information Technology in Saigon, Vietnam, during seven weeks from October to December, 2004. One of the criteria to select the subjects was that they had to show a very positive attitude towards reading in English and Vietnamese, and had to commit later, during a pre-interview (see Instruments, below) to devote a certain amount of time per week to extensive reading during the seven weeks of the study. None of them had any previous experience with extensive reading in English.

Reading materials

There were five genres used for the subjects' extensive reading: fairy/folk tales, short stories, adventure stories, science fiction, and novels. During the seven weeks, the subjects chose items of these genres from a total of 28 items available in this study, read them and wrote reflection reports on their experience.

Instruments

The instruments used in this study were pre- and post-questionnaires, pre- and post-interviews, and reading reflection reports. The questionnaires and interviews each contained some identical items (to assess changes in subjects' perceptions and reading behaviour during the study) as well as some different items (e.g. while the pre-questionnaire sought the subjects' biodata, the post-questionnaire, in an open-ended item, sought their reflections on their experiences as reader subjects in this study). The strategies listed in the questionnaires were adapted from O'Malley & Chamot (1990) and Oxford (1990). The reflection reports were completed by the subjects on a regular basis during the seven weeks of data gathering and sought information on such matters as the number of pages read, the duration of reading undertaken, perceived degrees of understanding and gratification as well as strategies utilized.

Data analysis

The data from the questionnaires and interviews were analyzed to find out possible changes in the subjects' perceptions of their reading ability and the reading strategies they reported using, which were grouped under the categories metacognitive, cognitive and social-affective (O'Malley & Chamot 1990, Oxford 1990). In the case of the questionnaires, analysis involved tallying frequencies of responses to closed-ended items and identifying categories in responses to open-ended items; in the case of the interviews, it entailed interpreting and categorizing transcriptions of what the subjects had said. The data from the reflection reports were analyzed to find out the comprehension problems the subjects encountered during their extensive reading and strategies they utilized to deal with those difficulties.

Results

The results of this study will be presented in two parts: motivation and improvement in subjects' perceptions of their reading ability, and changes in their use of reading strategies (metacognitive, cognitive and social-affective).

Motivation and improvement in perceived reading ability

The subjects' reading motivation is shown through the increase in the amount of time they planned to devote to extensive reading (recorded in the pre-interviews) compared with the actual time spent (recorded in the reflection reports) and the time anticipated for future such reading (recorded in the post-interviews). The precise times are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Time (minutes/week) for extensive reading

Subjects	Time planned	Time spent	Time anticipated
S1	90	90	120
S2	180	180	200
S3	90	115	120
S4	90	100	120
S5	120	120	120
S6	60	120	180
Means	105	120.83	143.33

It can be seen from Table 1 that, on average, the amount of time for extensive reading increased from 105 minutes per week (planned before the study) to 120.83 minutes (actual time during the study) and then to 143.33 minutes (anticipated time after the study). Generally, it can be said that the subjects were satisfied with the outcome of their participation in this study since they said they felt motivated to devote more time to extensive reading in the future.

By the end of the study, the subjects also perceived that their reading ability had improved in various respects, as reported in Tables 2, 3, and 4.

Table 2: Perceived reading ability before and after extensive reading

Subjects	Before (pre-questionnaire)	After (post-questionnaire)
S1	Average	Fluent
S2	Fluent	Fluent
S3	Average	Average
S4	Average	Fluent
S5	Average	Average
S6	Average	Fluent
	Average: 5 subjects (83.33%) Fluent: 1 subject (16.67%)	Average: 2 subjects (33.33%) Fluent: 4 subjects (66.67%)

Scale of perceived fluency

Very fluent = the subject can understand practically everything written in English texts

Fluent = the subject can understand more than 80 per cent of English texts

Average = the subject can understand 50-60 per cent of English texts

Less than average = the subject can understand 40 to 50 per cent of English texts

Table 2 shows, on a four-point scale of perceived fluency, that half the subjects reported they were better readers after the study; meanwhile, the other half felt that their reading ability stayed within the same range on the fluency scale. However, this does not necessarily mean that the latter subjects felt that they had made no improvement. Using a five-point scale of perceived improvement, Table 3 shows that, at the end of the study, all the subjects felt they had made considerable or even huge

improvement in their reading ability; indeed the mean, at 4.33, easily falls within the top range of perceived improvement.

Table 3: Perceived degrees of improvement (post-questionnaire)

Subjects	Rating
S1	5
S2	5
S3	4
S4	4
S5	4
S6	4
Mean	4.33

Scale of perceived improvement

5.00-4.21 = Huge improvement
 4.20-3.41= Considerable improvement
 3.40-2.61 = Some improvement
 2.60-1.81 = Little improvement
 1.80-1.00 = No improvement at all

Table 4 shows that, after seven weeks of extensive reading, the subjects perceived that their reading had considerably improved in several aspects, ranging from 3.5 to 4.17 on the five-point rating scale. The two most remarkable aspects of perceived improvement were ‘being willing to read more genres’, which suggests that the subjects had gained a positive motivation for reading, and ‘guessing meaning more easily’, which (as shown below in the presentation of findings on reading strategies) seems to have had a beneficial impact on these subjects’ dictionary use. Another important aspect of improvement that needs to be reported is ‘feeling more confident’, which the subjects reported in both the pre-questionnaire and the pre-interview as being their biggest expectation from participating in the study on extensive reading. Other aspects of improvements reported by the subjects during the post-interviews (not tabulated) were ‘gaining vocabulary’ and ‘concentrating more while reading’.

Table 4: Aspects of perceived improvement (post-questionnaire)

Aspects of improvement	Average rating
Being willing to read more genres	4.17
Guessing meaning more easily	4.17
Feeling more confident	4
Reading without stopping	4
Identifying main idea	4
Reading faster	3.5

Scale of perceived improvement

5.00-4.21 = Huge improvement
 4.20-3.41= Considerable improvement
 3.40-2.61 = Some improvement
 2.60-1.81 = Little improvement
 1.80-1.00 = No improvement at all

Though the subjects reported improvements in their reading ability, they also reported encountering various problems with all the genres available for them to read in this study (i.e. fairy/folk tales, short stories, novels, science fiction, adventure stories). The main problems that the subjects encountered in extensive reading (not tabulated) are vocabulary and unknown/uninteresting contents of two genres: novels and science fiction. The subjects, however, met no problem concerning the length of the texts chosen or their grammar and sentence structure. In addressing these and other factors, the subjects exhibited an evolving utilization of reading strategies.

Changes in the use of reading strategies

The findings relating to reading strategies are presented in the following categories: metacognitive, cognitive, and social-affective.

- **Metacognitive strategies**

Analysis of the pre- and post-questionnaire data concerning the subjects' reported use of metacognitive strategies shows a trend towards their increased use by the end of the seven-week study, as shown in Table 5.

Table 5: Metacognitive strategy use before and after extensive reading

Strategies	Before	After
Setting reading goals	5	6
Planning how to attain goals	3	6
Finding a more interesting text to read on the same topic	2	6
Reflecting on relevance of text content to future learning	3	5
Planning reading time	2	4
Checking if text is suitable to reading level	2	3
Giving up reading a text	0	3
Subject-nominated strategies		
• Ensuring important points are not missed by taking notes of text content	1	0
• Evaluating reading speed	0	1

From Table 5, it can be seen that, between the beginning and end of the data-collection period, there was an increase in the number of subjects who reported using all but one of the metacognitive strategies. This increase might indicate that, to a certain extent, the extensive reading seemed to help reinforce the subjects' use, or awareness, of metacognitive strategies.

'Setting reading goals', 'planning how to attain goals' and 'finding a more interesting text to read on the same topic' were strategies reported by all six subjects at the end of the study. It seems from the post-interviews and reflection reports that the subjects' reading goals relate mainly to reading for pleasure or to get new knowledge in life. Most subjects planned their reading time to attain their reading goals. It is noted that most of the subjects reported that they perceived the strategy 'reflecting on relevance of text content to future learning' to be an accompanying strategy to 'setting reading goals', and they often ticked these two strategies together in the reflection reports. One subject reflected on text relevance to future learning as follows:

"I think that, reading like this [extensive reading]...will bring me some useful information about the culture, and a variety of different aspects of life in other countries...in science...They [the information gained] would help me a lot in dealing with the new strange things I have to cope with in my school [academic] reading, help me be more familiar with the strange cultural items when I have to do the TOEFL tests."

For the case of an increase in the number of subjects using the strategy 'reflecting on relevance of text content to future learning', it should be noticed that the texts here refer to various genres chosen by individual subjects, and these subjects had a

variety of goals for their extensive reading. The change in the subjects' use of strategies could also be observed from the scope of their reading goals. Though they still concentrated on the aspects that they perceived to be useful for them, either their field of study (Information Technology), foreign language field (EFL), or some fields of entertainment, their goals expanded to cover reading for pleasure.

At the end of the study, the strategy 'checking if text is suitable to reading level' was reported by half the subjects as they pondered whether or not to start reading a particular text. Related to this was the strategy 'giving up reading a text', which refers to subjects following the fundamental precept of extensive reading that readers choose the texts they read, not outsiders such as teachers. The subjects gave up reading texts whose language level was inappropriate or whose content failed to interest them. They then sometimes used the strategy 'finding a more interesting text to read on the same topic', which was reported by only two subjects at the beginning of the study but by all six of them at its end, suggesting that the subjects became more aware of their autonomy in choosing texts.

There were also two strategies that subjects nominated in open-ended items in the questionnaires; essentially, both these involved monitoring, for key points and for reading speed. Two additional subject-nominated strategies were recorded in the reflection reports (not tabulated), each mentioned by one subject: 're-reading the story many times until getting a favourable degree of understanding' and 'putting oneself in the story' (i.e. imagining oneself as a character in that story to guess and to better understand its plot).

It can be tentatively said that, by the end of the seven weeks, the subjects had more ideas about metacognitive strategies and, from their reading experience, could draw what steps they should take to achieve their reading goals or to evaluate their reading performance.

- **Cognitive strategies**

The result of the analysis for the 'before' and 'after' data concerning subjects' reported use of cognitive strategies also shows a generally rising trend. Table 6 below shows, for instance, greater reported use of titles, illustrations and background knowledge to access text meaning. It also shows consistently high figures during the study for guessing text meaning. However, the table shows a decreasing trend in reported use of dictionaries for decoding key words and a particularly dramatic fall, from all six subjects to none, reporting use of dictionaries to decode the meaning of every unknown word. This finding may relate to the increase in reported use of 'skipping unimportant parts of the text'. Interestingly, this seems consistent with one of the expectations the subjects had for participating in this study on extensive reading, that they would gradually be freed from the habit of using dictionaries to search for the meaning of every unknown word, partly as this would decelerate their reading speed. The following extract, taken from a post-interview, illustrates how one subject dealt with an unknown word without resorting to a dictionary:

"When I want to guess the meaning of the word 'silversmith', I tried first to check the position of that word in some other sentences...This word always stood before a verb and after the article 'the'. So, it must be a noun. And, it contains the word 'silver', so it must be related to somebody whose work relates to silver. Then, I met the word 'goldsmith' in another story, and since I could guess the meaning of the word

‘goldsmith’ from the context of that story, I refer again to the word ‘silversmith’. I can conclude that my previous guess for the meaning of the word ‘silversmith’ was totally right.”

This kind of change in the subjects’ use of some strategies might reflect their increasing autonomy in extensive reading since they were reading for a different purpose (for pleasure rather than for study), they were allowed to choose their favourite genres, and they could decide their own reading schedule. Any other change in the number of subjects who reported to have used certain cognitive strategies might be explained by the reason that, at the end of the study, the subjects may have realized which strategies were useful for their reading and have formed a modified view on the use of those strategies.

Table 6: Cognitive strategies before and after extensive reading

Strategies	Before	After
Reading title and trying to guess text content	5	6
Making use of illustrations to understand text meaning	3	6
Using background knowledge of topic	4	6
Using dictionary to find meaning of		
• every unknown word	6	0
• some key words	6	3
Guessing meaning of words/phrases by		
• identifying their part(s) of speech	6	6
• analyzing their structure	6	6
Skipping		
• unimportant part of text	3	6
• incomprehensible part of text	3	3
Stopping reading a text for a while and trying to read it later	4	6

At the beginning of the study, the cognitive strategies that the subjects used were more related to intensive reading; meanwhile, at its end, these strategies were more related to extensive reading. It can be said that, to a certain extent, the experience of extensive reading offered by this study helped reinforce the subjects’ use, or awareness, of the cognitive strategies that they perceived to be appropriate for their reading performance. Indeed, given the inherent connection between cognitive and metacognitive strategies, such changes in the subjects’ use of the former might indicate that there was a corresponding improvement in their use of the latter.

• Social-affective strategies

There were two social-affective strategies reported by the subjects for their extensive reading: ‘taking the risk’ and ‘reinforcing oneself’. One of the subjects in the post-questionnaire anticipated that she would encounter problems with a novel she had selected: dealing with new vocabulary and the length of the item that she was going to read; however, she decided that she would read that novel since she wanted to discover new information from it. She illustrated this strategy in the post-interview as follows:

“After I read the first part of Pride and Prejudice, I found that the content of the later parts gradually become less and less interesting. However, the story was still comprehensible, and I made up my plan to finish reading

that novel even if I had to face some challenges. As my habit, I hate giving up any work half of the way. When I finished reading the novel, I felt proud and more confident because I had overcome myself: not giving up reading, and it [my feeling when I finish reading the novel] enhanced my love for extensive reading.”

Surprisingly, a social-affective strategy the researchers expected the subjects to use (‘seeking help from others’) was not reported. The study was initially designed to provide consultation during the whole data collection process in Vietnam, but none of the subjects opted for it. They reported in the post-interviews that they felt competent enough in their extensive reading and could solve their reading problems by themselves.

Limitations of this study

One of the possible limitations of this study is the classification used for perceived reading fluency. As can be observed from Table 2, there was a 20% gap between ‘fluent’ readers (i.e. subjects can understand more than 80% of the text) and ‘average’ readers (i.e. subjects can understand 50% to 60% of the text). Therefore, if any subjects estimated that they could understand about 70% of a text, they would not have been able to define their reading ability with much precision.

Conclusion

The results of this study reveal that extensive reading gave the subjects a positive change in their perception of their reading ability. After reading extensively for seven weeks, the subjects reported positive attitudes towards reading and increased motivation. Their reports also provided evidence of improved choices of metacognitive and cognitive strategies for their reading. The indications of improvements in the subjects’ reading performance, which fit well with the widely-claimed benefits for readers after an extensive reading program, were: the elimination in their use of dictionaries to find the meaning of every unknown word and a reduction in dictionary use for unfamiliar key words. The subjects’ experience of reading extensively for this seven-week study might have raised their awareness of strategy use, helped them manage their reading process and, in so doing, enhanced their autonomy in extensive reading.

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