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Extensive Reading in Action: Voices from the grounds

Dzulfikri*

Universitas Negeri Malang and Universitas Islam Malang

Ali Saukah **

Universitas Negeri Malang

Abstract

This study is aimed at investigating how extensive reading affects students' reading attitude and comprehension. Based on two participants' pretest and posttest results and analyzing the results of interviews, the study reveals that extensive reading tends to promote participants' reading comprehension as indicated by the improvement of their scores in posttest and participants' reading attitude as indicated by their responses to interviews. Their positive attitude develops particularly because of the autonomy given to them to select any materials in their interest as when finding interesting reading texts beyond their current linguistic competence, which is not recommended to read in extensive reading, they struggle to understand them regardless of their reading proficiency. Their positive attitude is also shown by their increasing reading amount week after week and their dreams to have a private library and be lifelong readers. Moreover, exposure to a large number of different texts, a large array of words, and different topics enables them to build background knowledge which helps them understand texts better which subsequently affects their reading ability positively.

Keywords: *extensive reading, reading attitude, reading comprehension*

* Doctoral student in English Language Teaching Study Program, Universitas Negeri Malang and Lecturer at the Faculty of Teacher Training Education, Universitas Islam Malang, Jl. MT. Haryono 193 Malang, Indonesia
E-mail: dzulfik@yahoo.co.id

** Professor at the Faculty of Language and Literature, Universitas Negeri Malang, Jl. Semarang 5 Malang, Indonesia.
E-mail: alisaukah@yahoo.com

Introduction

Reading is defined in different ways. In a general sense, it is defined as readers' attempts to construct meaning from the texts through a number of interactive and complex processes. The interaction between the readers and the texts involves both linguistic and non-linguistic aspects. The linguistic aspects include vocabulary, syntactic knowledge, and so on; meanwhile the non-linguistic aspects involve background knowledge, reading strategies, motivation, attitude, and so forth.

Commonly, reading is categorized into intensive and extensive reading. Extensive reading has several characteristics such as reading a large number of pages, self-selection of materials, reading within linguistic levels, and so on (Day & Bamford, 1998). In contrast to intensive reading which is based on using predetermined materials, in extensive reading, students can select the texts freely based on their interests and language levels. The autonomy given to students to select the reading texts freely might make them enjoy reading and have motivation to read. This is partly because the autonomy is the basic psychological need of individuals (Ma, 2009) and the fulfillment of this need potentially results in motivation (Guilloteaux & Dornyei, 2008). Their motivation to read may lead them to read more which likely affects their reading comprehension.

Beside self-selection of the materials, the students are allowed and even recommended to read any reading texts below their current language proficiency. This is to pave their reading attitude, motivation and confidence as Day and Bamford (1998) suggest that the reading material be easy and thus they should read material that contains vocabulary and grammar well within their linguistic competence. Arnold (2009) in his study reports that at the beginning, students tend to read the texts below their current language proficiency, but they challenge themselves to read more difficult texts soon after their reading proficiency develops. The finding also implies that their motivation, confidence and attitude toward reading improve.

Furthermore, the confidence which develops through reading the easy text potentially generates self-efficacy, person's beliefs to run a specific task successfully. Learners with high self-efficacy are committed to work harder and be more persistent in solving problems (Wang, 2011). In relation to reading, several studies demonstrate that self-efficacy has positive impact on reading comprehension (e.g. Heidari, Izadi & Ahmadian, 2012; Habibian & Roslan, 2014; Naseri and Zaferanieh, 2012). Naseri and Zaferanieh (2012), for example, doing research to eighty Iranian junior and senior EFL students claim that self-efficacy belief and reading comprehension are positively and statistically correlated. This further implies that the students' reading comprehension progresses in line with development of their self-efficacy.

In addition to those benefits, reading in a large quantity enables readers to employ different strategies in reading and these reading strategies also play an important role in reading comprehension. Several studies have revealed that reading strategies contribute to reading comprehension (e.g. Madhumathi & Ghosh, 2012; Chen & Chen, 2015; Saeedeh, 2013; Huang & Nisbet, 2014). Employing correlation studies, Saeedeh (2013) and Huang & Nisbet (2014) confirm that reading strategies and reading comprehension are positively correlated; even certain strategies are powerful to predict reading comprehension. Furthermore, by using different strategies such as circling certain words, managing reading paces etc, readers will be able to sharpen their meta-cognitive awareness, which is also crucial to reading comprehension (e.g. Alsheikh, 2011), suggesting that good readers are not only those who are rich in vocabulary and background knowledge but also those who know how their brain works.

Also, reading extensively allows readers to be exposed to a large array of vocabulary either specific-field or general vocabulary. This enables them to enlarge their word knowledge which is crucial to reading comprehension. Laufer (1989) observes that learners who recognize 95% of the words in a text will be able to comprehend the text adequately. Moreover, he contends that mastering a 5,000 word lexicon of general English vocabulary is sufficient for reaching this 95% criterion in non-specialized texts. Many studies in vocabulary domain also confirm that good vocabulary mastery positively affects reading comprehension. A study by Baleghizadeh & Goblin (2010) using a correlation design and involving 83 Iranian freshmen reveals that vocabulary size and reading comprehension are linearly and positively correlated, implying that the larger the students' vocabulary size is, the better their reading comprehension is.

A large number of studies have been done in extensive reading domain. Many of them seek to investigate the effects of extensive reading on students' reading attitude (See Leung, 2002; Junko, 2004; Nishino, 2007; Crowford 2001; Arnold, 2009; and Al-hamoud & Schmitt, 2009). Their studies demonstrate that extensive reading has positive effects on students' reading attitude. Crowford (2001) and Junko (2004), for example, investigate the effect of extensive reading on participants' reading attitude. Using attitudinal questionnaires in their studies, they reveal that the participants' reading attitude develops positively after attending extensive reading program. Similarly, Leung (2002) reports

that the participants' attitude toward reading improves as reflected in the participants' diaries. Furthermore, the participants' reading attitude plays an important role in reading comprehension. This role has been substantiated in several studies such as those conducted by Yamashita in subsequent years (2004, 2007 and 2013). They have shown that attitude towards reading significantly affects the reading of second language (L2) learners.

In addition to its effect on students' reading attitude, many studies are aimed at investigating the effects of extensive reading on students' reading proficiency (Jang, Kang, & Kim, 2015; Iwahori, 2008; Mermelstein, 2014; Al-Nafisah, 2015; and Nakanishi, 2015). Al-Nafisah (2015) and Mermelstein (2014), for instance, employ an experimental design to confirm the effect of extensive reading on participants' reading proficiency. Their experiments indicate that the experimental group outperformed the control group. This further suggests that extensive reading has positive effect on participants' reading comprehension. Similarly, Nakanishi (2015) does a meta-analysis study to 34 studies (two PhD dissertations and 32 research articles) and involving 3,942 participants. The results of the study indicate a medium effect size ($d = 0.46$) for group contrasts and $d = 0.71$ for pre-post contrasts for students who received extensive reading instruction compared to those who did not. In short, the previous studies demonstrate that extensive reading improves students' reading proficiency. However, Al-hamoud & Schmitt (2009) reported that the participants' scores of extensive and intensive reading program in their studies do not show any significant difference, but, the attitude of extensive reading participants develops positively as shown in their self-report.

All in all, a large number of studies such as those of Crawford (2001) and Junko (2004) investigating readers' attitude in extensive reading program and those of Al-Nafisah (2015) and Mermelstein (2014) seeking to find out the effect of extensive reading on reading proficiency may give a picture on benefits of extensive reading. Almost all of them result in positive attitude and reading proficiency development indicated by numerical data. Nakanishi's meta-analysis study (2015) involving a large number of studies also confirm the previous research findings on participants' reading proficiency improvement in extensive reading program. However further studies need to be carried out for at least two main reasons. The first, the studies such as Nakanishi's meta-analysis (2015) rely on numerical data particularly the effect sizes; thus the voices of the participants are unheard. Second, the reviewed studies reveal that extensive reading affects participants' reading comprehension and reading attitude but how it can affect them still needs further investigation. To fill those gaps, the current research seeks to investigate how extensive reading affects participants' reading attitude and reading comprehension.

Method

Before teaching extensive reading class, the researchers administered pretest and posttests using a reading test to find out the difference between their reading comprehensions before and after they were involved in extensive reading. Upon completion of this program, the researchers selected 2 participants i.e. those who have read most and had good reading progress in extensive reading class as seen in their reading log (identified as RJ and SA).

To answer the research questions, we observed their reading log particularly their reading progress or amount on weekly basis and followed up with interview to find out their reading attitude in this program and how extensive reading program may potentially affect their reading comprehension. The researchers conducted multiple interviews to see the consistency of their answer. The data obtained from the interview were then analyzed qualitatively.

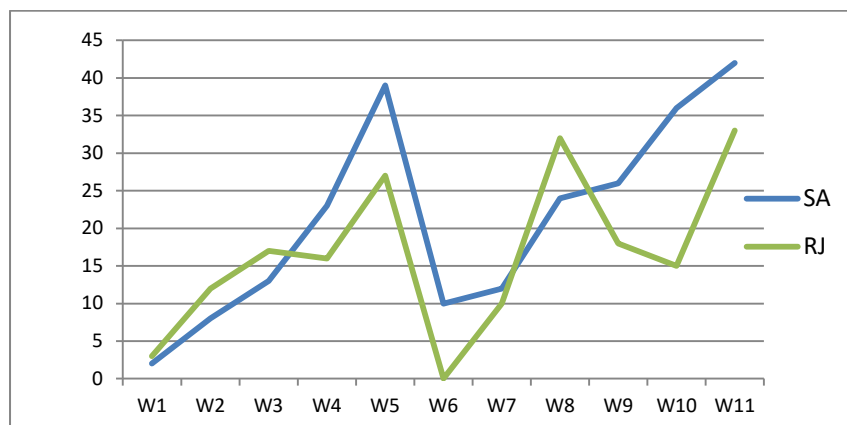
Results

The results of data collection can be divided into the following sub headings: participants' reading log, perception on autonomy in extensive reading, reading difficulty levels, the availability of the materials, future plans, vocabulary acquisition, and reading strategies.

Participants' reading log

The participants' weekly reading log is presented in Graph 1. The graph shows a trend that students' reading quantity tends to improve week by week. However in week 6, students' reading rates decreased in terms of the number of pages. It is because the mid-term tests week requires them to work concentrating on preparing for the tests. Their motivation might be stable during the exam week, but the tests they regard as high-stake make them put down their reading texts as RJ commented: "during mid-term tests week, I had to prepare as well as possible by reading the materials to be covered in the tests,

doing assignments for mid-term test and I left my reading for a while”; thus, the reading amount decreases in this week; however, the trend increases after the mid-term tests week.



Graph 1: Participants' reading log

Perceiving Autonomy in ER

In addition to reading amount, the participants also commented on self-selection of the texts in extensive reading program positively as seen in their answers in their interview. Both participants came to agreement that autonomy in extensive reading is very important to them as RJ asserted, “in extensive reading program I can choose any materials which I like and read much more pages than I do in intensive reading”. In similar vein, SA pointed out, “I often do not read the assigned reading texts in intensive reading program because the texts are frequently uninteresting to me, but in extensive reading program, I can choose the texts in my interest and keep me reading even I sometimes forget time”.

Reading difficulty level

In the extensive reading program, students are recommended to read the text within their current linguistic competence or sometimes referred to $i-1$ which is in contrast to Krashen's comprehensible input model, $i+1$. In fact, the participants in this study stated that they enjoyed the reading text beyond their linguistic competence even at the beginning of this program as SA asserted, “even at the beginning of this program, when I found the materials which are in my interest even though very difficult, I would not give up and spare my time to understand it and I don't care how painful I struggle for it”. RJ also commented, “I struggle at any cost to understand any texts which are of my interest”.

The availability of the materials

The availability of materials is of the top issues in the extensive reading program. Today, the available material ranges from the printed to online, from genres to genres; thus the participants of extensive reading can select reading texts from a large number of topics or issues relevant to their interest. Concerning the reading texts, SA commented, “we will be motivated in this program if the lecturer provides the printed materials, not the online because we commonly encounter problem in access to internet, downloading, procedures, and some other technical issues that we frequently cannot solve. Even we are often empty handed with our expected materials. This really irritated us”. Similarly, RJ added, “online media offers us a large array of reading texts, but we commonly have problems to get the materials due to the quality of internet or our poor skill to access them. This is discouraging”.

Future plans

The participants' attitude develops positively throughout the implementation of the program and after the program is completed. SA stated, “I will keep reading even though my extensive reading class is over and will read throughout my life, I really enjoy reading texts sharpening my imagination”. On the other hand RJ asserted, “I will always try to read in my leisure time and I plan to have a private library”. Their future plans reflect how their reading attitude develops.

Vocabulary acquisition

Both participants in this study not only read various texts for comprehension, they also try to learn vocabulary meaningfully. RJ asserted that “When I get new words, I try hard to remember them particularly by writing them in a relevant context or say them many times”. Similarly, SA stated, “after I get new words, I use them in my conversation or sometimes I sing them out”.

Strategies in comprehending texts

Reading a lot and being exposed to different texts allow them to apply different strategies to comprehend the texts. Their cognition may work more flexibly to adapt to different levels of difficulty and to different types of texts in comprehension process. This training may help them improve their comprehension and hence their overall English proficiency. SA stated, “I use different strategies to understand the texts such as guessing, adjusting reading speed, recalling my previous knowledge or combining all”. Similarly RJ confirmed, “When I did not understand the text, I tried to pay more attention to difficult words, or guess them from context, recalled my background knowledge, reread the text, read aloud, or integrated them”.

Discussion

The results of the current study show that there are several aspects which provide evidence about the participants’ reading attitude. Their attitude is indicated particularly by the number of pages and reading trend (Graph 1), their perception on autonomy in extensive reading, availability of materials, future plans, and level of reading difficulty. Meanwhile their improvement in reading comprehension as indicated by increasing scores might be explained as benefits and nature of extensive reading.

Participants’ reading attitude

In terms of the reading attitude, the participants’ attitude develops positively as illustrated in the Graph 1 showing a positive trend in reading. Thus this study confirms previous findings claiming that extensive reading has a positive effect on readers’ reading attitude (e.g. Leung, 2002; Junko, 2004; Nishino, 2007; Crowford, 2001; Arnold, 2009). Based on the interview results, some important points concerning their positive attitude can be made. The first, giving the autonomy to participants to select any reading text in their interest is crucial. Deci and Ryan (1985) argue that one of the ways to improve students’ motivation to perform task is by giving autonomy since autonomy is the psychological need of every individual (Ma, 2009). The participants in this study are found to have good motivation as they tried hard to understand text beyond their linguistic competence regardless of their reading proficiency when they found interesting texts; however the literature on extensive reading recommends that readers read within their linguistic competence. It is quite in contrast to Arnod’s study (2009) reporting that the participants challenge to read more difficult text after their reading competence develops.

Another important point is concerning reading materials. In fact, it is not enough for the lecturer just to tell the name of website in internet for reading texts because they commonly don’t know how to access them due to poor digital literacy and internet accessibility. Their inability to access to materials from Internet which may be caused by their poor digital literacy or internet accessibility can have detrimental effect on their attitude. Thus, the availability of the printed materials is essential to build their motivation. This is different from online extensive reading program in other countries (e.g. Arnold, 2009) that the participants do not experience the inconveniences as they are probably more digitally literate than participants in this study and have better access to internet. Therefore geographical and demographical aspects should also be taken into account in extensive reading programs.

Their positive reading attitude is also indicated by their plans after completion of the program. The participants’ reading attitude, which is one of the indicators of success in the extensive reading program, is not only indicated from the number of pages the students have read during the program but also what they will do after the program (Day & Bamford 1998). In fact both participants not only have read a large number of pages during the program but they also have positive plans. Planning to have a private library and having a dream to be a lifelong reader indicate that their attitude toward reading develops positively.

In short, among the key characteristics of extensive reading, autonomy to choose reading texts seems to be the most important aspect in paving participants’ reading attitude which later leads to better reading comprehension. Moreover, this has to be supported by the availability of wide ranges of materials enabling them to choose any materials in their interest, allowing them to enter second language culture on their own and even to enter it deeper. The deep understanding of second language cultures very possibly builds better attitude to the target language (Day & Bamford, 1998). In relation to

reading comprehension, Yamashita's studies (2004, 2007, and 2013) reveal that attitude towards reading significantly affects the reading comprehension of second language (L2) learners.

Participants' reading comprehension

In terms of reading comprehension, this study confirms previous studies such as those of Jang et al. (2015), Iwahori, (2008), Mermelstein (2014), Al-Nafisah (2015), and Nakanishi (2015), reporting that extensive reading has a positive effect on reading comprehension. In this study the participants' reading comprehension also improves as indicated by the differences in scores between pre and posttest. Their better reading proficiency can be explained in several ways. First, in extensive reading program, the participants read a wide variety of texts as shown in their reading log, resulting in good background or prior knowledge which can be recalled in later reading activities. A number of studies demonstrate that prior or content knowledge contributes to reading comprehension (Abdelaal & Sase, 2014, Gilakjani & Ahmadi, 2011). They report that there is a significant relationship between prior knowledge and reading comprehension and this finding lends support to an interactive reading approach under basic notion that readers construct and reconstruct the text information based in part on the knowledge drawn from the text and in part from the prior knowledge available to readers. Furthermore, the background knowledge can overcome linguistic deficiencies in comprehending texts (Hudson, 2007).

Second, as the name reflects, extensive reading requires readers to read a lot as the participants did in this program. They not only get information and knowledge which will be useful base for background or prior knowledge in later reading, but they will also encounter and acquire a lot of vocabulary. Several studies on extensive reading show that the program enhances students' vocabulary size. TzuHuang's (2007) study using online extensive program, for example, shows that learners' vocabulary scores improve after joining the extensive reading program. He argues that this online extensive reading program is practical and pedagogically beneficial. The important role of vocabulary in reading comprehension has been substantiated in many studies. Aryadoust & Baghaei (2016), Zhang (2012), for example, report that linguistic knowledge such as vocabulary mastery is of strong predictors to EFL readers' comprehension.

In fact the participants in this study learn the new words from the texts meaningfully such as using them in writing and conversation in a relevant context. Hudson (2007) argues that learning words in a more contextualized way may give richer meaning to each word, and the multiple encounters to those contextualized words such as through reading texts, writing, or speaking activities would help them have better retention. In relation to reading comprehension, Laufer (1989) observes that mastering 95% of the words in a text enable readers to have an adequate level of comprehension. Furthermore, Laufer (1989) and Nation (1993) suggest that mastering 5,000 words of general English vocabulary is sufficient for reaching this 95% criterion in non-specialized texts.

Also, by reading extensively, the participants encounter different texts which need different strategies to understand them. Reading strategies the participants employ in this study such as rereading text, recalling prior knowledge, adjusting reading speed contribute to reading comprehension (Saeedeh, 2013; Huang & Nisbet, 2014). Saeedeh's (2013) correlation study, for instance, demonstrates that the participants' reading strategies significantly correlate to their reading comprehension test scores and her regression analysis also shows that the strategies employed were found to contribute to reading comprehension. In similar vein, Huang & Nisbet (2014) have found that certain types of reading strategy used by the students in reading a text can be predictors to their reading proficiency.

The other point is that, the participants' positive self-efficacy belief as indicated by their favorable reading attitude and confidence in reading also plays a crucial role in developing reading proficiency (e.g. Heidari, Izadi & Ahmadian, 2012; Habibian & Roslan, 2014; Naseri and Zaferanieh, 2012). Naseri and Zaferanieh (2012) doing correlation study to Iranian EFL learners confirm that reading comprehension and self efficacy are significantly correlated, implying that the higher the participants' self efficacy is, the better their reading comprehension is. Moreover, Yogurtcu (2012) argues that readers with high self-efficacy develop different reading strategies, allowing them to gain richer cognitive interactions, making their reading processes more effective. Some studies also found that good readers employ different strategies in comprehending texts (Cogmen and Saracaloglu, 2009; Kummin and Rahman, 2010)

Lastly, reading large variety and amount of texts allows participants in this study to test several strategies they have. This strategy testing may make them more sensitive and more automatic in deciding which strategy works best to use when encountering difficult texts. This further enhances their meta-cognitive awareness which also contributes to reading comprehension (e.g. Anderson, 2002 and

Cohen, 2003; Tsai, Ernst, & Talley, 2010). They claim that the more a student knows about how s/he learns, the better s/he will achieve the learning goals.

Going through reading comprehension is a complex process which may start from building positive reading attitude to lead them to read more. A lot of reading will result in background knowledge enhancement, vocabulary development, and meta-cognitive awareness which are needed in reading comprehension processes.

Conclusion

Participants' reading attitude and comprehension develop through processes as found in this study. This study shows that the participants' reading attitudes develop positively particularly if they are given autonomy to select reading texts. When finding interesting but difficult texts, they struggle to understand them regardless of their reading proficiency.

Moreover, the autonomy which allows them to choose any texts of their interest seems to be the embryo of better reading comprehension if it is well cultivated in extensive reading programs. The autonomy to choose interesting texts encourages them to read more which enable them to enrich vocabulary, build background knowledge, and sharpens meta-cognitive strategy awareness; all of which are essential to reading comprehension. In addition, this study shows that extensive reading programs will be successful if demographical and geographical issues are taken into consideration.

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