The Benefits of Extensive Reading (ER)
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There have been a number of experimental and quasi-experimental studies that have
demonstrated the effectiveness of ER and to provide support for the use of ER in English as a
second language (ESL) and EFL classroom settings. The purpose of this short article is to
provide an overview of the studies which can help teachers become familiar with both the
benefits and the research.

There is a robust literature in scholarly journals that reports the results of investigations
into the impact of ER on learning English in both second language (ESL) and foreign language
(EFL) contexts. The investigations have looked at both language learning and the affective
dimension of language learning, primarily attitude and motivation.

Table 1 is an overview of representative studies conducted in both ESL and EFL
environments with diverse populations, from young children to adults. First, let’s look at
learning to read. As we might expect, the studies convincingly demonstrate that learners who
engage in ER will become better readers in the target language. Not only does reading
comprehension improve, but students who read extensively learn reading strategies and increase
their reading rates. Increasing reading rate is important because rate is a critical component of
fluent reading. We know from research that fluent readers are better readers (i.e., score higher on
measures of reading comprehension) than slow readers. The results displayed in Table 1 are
strong confirmation of the benefits of ER on learning to read.

The gains in motivation and attitude (often called affect) are equally impressive. Study
after study shows how attitudes changed toward reading in English and how the students became
eager readers. Elley (1991, p. 397) reported that the students developed “very positive attitudes
toward books as they raised their literacy levels in English.”

In addition to gains in affect and reading proficiency, research demonstrates that students
who read extensively also make gains in overall language proficiency. For example, Cho and
Krashen (1994) reported that their four adult ESL learners increased competence in both
listening and speaking abilities.

Writing proficiency is also impacted by reading extensively. This includes both primary
students (Elley and Mangubhai,1981), and university students (Janopoulos, 1986).

Finally, the research convincingly shows that ER increases vocabulary knowledge.

It is not surprising that ER helps students become better readers. Research in both first
language (L1) and second language (L2) shows that we learn to read by reading. The more our
students read, the better readers they become. An integral part of this is learning new
vocabulary. One of the primary ways in which vocabulary is learned is through reading.
Learners encounter the same words over and over again in context, which results in vocabulary
learning.

So how does ER result in increases in other aspects of L2 learning? We are not sure. It
is my opinion that there are two factors involved. The first is vocabulary. Learning vocabulary
is one of the keys to learning a new language. Without knowledge of the L2’s vocabulary, no
progress can be made. So I believe that ER impacts writing, listening and speaking because
students know more vocabulary. The second possible factor is the increase in positive affect.
Students develop positive attitudes toward and increased motivation for learning the L2. Let me
stress that this is my opinion. There has been no research into why ER works.

In conclusion, good things happen when learners engage in extensive reading.
Table 1. Results of Studies of the Benefits of ER on EFL & ESL Learners

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Results</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Iwahori 2008</td>
<td>EFL; secondary; Japan</td>
<td>Increase in reading rate &amp; general language proficiency</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nishono 2007</td>
<td>EFL; secondary; Japan</td>
<td>Increase in reading strategies &amp; motivation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Horst 2005</td>
<td>ESL; adults; Canada</td>
<td>Increase vocabulary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kusanagi 2004</td>
<td>EFL; adults; Japan</td>
<td>Increase in reading rate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taguchi et al. 2004</td>
<td>EFL; adults; Japan</td>
<td>Increase in reading rate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sheu 2003</td>
<td>EFL; junior high school; Taiwan</td>
<td>Increase in general language proficiency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asraf &amp; Ahmad 2003</td>
<td>EFL; middle school; Malaysia</td>
<td>Increase in attitude</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Takase 2003</td>
<td>EFL; secondary; Japan</td>
<td>Increase in motivation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bell 2001</td>
<td>EFL; university; Yemen</td>
<td>Increase in reading rate &amp; general language proficiency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mason &amp; Krashen 1997</td>
<td>EFL; university; Japan</td>
<td>Increase in writing proficiency</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tsang 1996</td>
<td>EFL; secondary; Hong Kong</td>
<td>Increase in writing proficiency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Masuhara et al. 1996</td>
<td>EFL; university; Japan</td>
<td>Increase in reading proficiency &amp; rate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cho &amp; Krashen 1994</td>
<td>ESL; adults; USA</td>
<td>Increase in reading proficiency, oral fluency, vocabulary knowledge, &amp; attitude &amp; motivation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lai 1993a, b</td>
<td>EFL; secondary; Hong Kong</td>
<td>Increase in reading proficiency &amp; vocabulary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elley 1991</td>
<td>EFL; primary; Singapore</td>
<td>Increase in reading proficiency &amp; vocabulary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hafiz &amp; Tudor 1990</td>
<td>EFL; primary; Pakistan</td>
<td>Increase in writing proficiency &amp; vocabulary knowledge</td>
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<tr>
<td>Robb &amp; Susser 1989</td>
<td>EFL; university; Japan</td>
<td>Increase in reading proficiency and attitude</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pitts, White, &amp; Krashen, 1989</td>
<td>ESL; adults; USA</td>
<td>Increase in vocabulary knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Janopoulos 1986</td>
<td>EFL; university; USA</td>
<td>Increase in writing proficiency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elley &amp; Mangubhai 1981</td>
<td>EFL; primary; Fiji</td>
<td>Increases in reading proficiency &amp; general language proficiency including listening &amp; writing; increase in attitude &amp; motivation</td>
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</tbody>
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References


