

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

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

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