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Research Article

The effect of graded readers on reading comprehension skill of EFL students¹

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Abstract

This study investigated the effects of reading graded readers on the reading comprehension scores of the prep students at university. 30 EFL students from School of Foreign Languages (SOFL) in Selcuk University participated in the study. Two groups, control and experimental group, each consisting of 15 students were formed at the beginning of the study. Both groups attended traditional language classes of SOFL, and the experimental group was additionally involved in an extensive reading program as an extra-curricular activity. The program was performed in the second semester of the academic year. Reading comprehension development of the groups was assessed by means of reading comprehension tests given as part of the third and fourth mid-term exams set by SOFL. Findings indicated that students in the experimental group scored significantly higher than those in the control group at the end of the extensive reading program. Also, the amount of reading had a significant effect on the reading comprehension scores of the students; students who read more books achieved more reading comprehension development in comparison to those who read less. Consequently, results of the study revealed that extensive reading had a positive effect on the reading development of EFL students.

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Yaygın okumanın yabancı dil olarak İngilizce öğrenen öğrencilerin okuduğunu anlama becerilerine etkisi

Öz

Bu çalışma, seviyeli hikâye kitabı okumanın üniversitede hazırlık öğrencilerinin okuduğunu anlama puanları üzerindeki etkilerini araştırmıştır. Çalışmaya Selçuk Üniversitesi Yabancı Diller Yüksekokulu'ndan (YDYO) 30 öğrenci katılmıştır. Çalışmanın başında her biri 15 öğrenciden oluşan kontrol ve deney grubu olmak üzere iki grup oluşturulmuştur. Her iki grup da geleneksel YDYO sınıflarına devam etmiştir; deney grubu ayrıca müfredat dışı bir etkinlik olarak yaygın okuma programına katılmıştır. Program, akademik yılın ikinci döneminde uygulanmıştır. Grupların okuduğunu anlama gelişimi, YDYO tarafından hazırlanan üçüncü ve dördüncü ara sınavların bir parçası olarak verilen okuduğunu anlama testleri ile değerlendirilmiştir. Bulgular, deney grubundaki öğrencilerin, yaygın okuma programının sonunda kontrol grubundakilerden önemli ölçüde daha yüksek puan aldığını göstermiştir. Ayrıca, okuma miktarının öğrencilerin okuma anlama puanları üzerinde anlamlı bir etkiye sahip olduğu görülmüştür; daha çok kitap okuyan öğrenciler daha az okuyanlara kıyasla okuduğunu anlamada daha fazla gelişim kaydetmişlerdir. Sonuç olarak, çalışma, yaygın okumanın yabancı dil olarak İngilizce öğrenen öğrencilerin okuma gelişimi üzerinde olumlu bir etkiye sahip olduğunu ortaya koymuştur.

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Introduction

To be proficient in a foreign language requires commanding every aspect of that language, and reading being an important aspect of language has a great significance for the language development. Reading is an essential skill in all languages, and reading in a foreign language therefore becomes twice as important for the learners to be successful in the target language. The ability to read fast and with full understanding in a foreign language is one of the main criteria of competence in that language.

Extensive reading (ER) is a language teaching approach in which learners read a large quantity of easy materials in the target language (Bay & Damford, 2004, p.1). They select their own reading material and read it independently with no aid from their teachers. They read for information and pleasure as well as overall meaning. They are motivated to quit reading once they find the material uninteresting or if it is too complicated for them to understand. In short, it is much like the way people read for pleasure in their native languages. Extensive reading is by no means a new idea. Although many teachers acknowledge the educational benefits of ER (Krashen, 1993), it is not practiced “extensively” or at all in many schools. It is a means of language development. ER is a reading style for some researchers and also an instructional approach to the learning and teaching of reading in a second language (Day and Bamford, 1998).

The role extensive reading plays in improving reading skills and developing learner language is seen highly valuable. In his book, *The Power of Reading*, Krashen emphasizes the role of extensive reading as follows; “When [second language learners] read for pleasure, they can continue to improve in their second language without classes, without teachers, without studying and even without people to converse with.” (Krashen 1993, p. 84). Extensive reading also plays a significant part in the learning of a second language. Nuttall (1996, p.128) states that “The best way to improve your knowledge of a foreign language is to go and live among its speakers. The next best way is to read extensively in it”.

Extensive reading programs encourage reading a large range of texts of different genres in the target language. The material chosen should not be beyond the student’s level of comprehension and that student should be free to pick what to read. According to Brown (1988), extensive reading is done to get an overall understanding of a text. Long and Richards (1987) identify it as “occurring when students read large amounts of high interesting material, usually out of class, concentrating on meaning, reading for gist and skipping unknown words.” For that reason, reading is the primary focus of extensive reading programs. There may be after-reading activities or supervision from the teacher, yet these should not restrict the desire to read.

Reading materials utilized in an ER program could be graded readers or authentic texts. Graded readers are fiction and non-fiction books specially written for learners of English as a foreign or second language. They are graded into levels of language difficulty (e.g. Stage 1-6, stage 1 being the lowest level) by means of grammatical features, vocabulary, information load and cultural background. Graded readers are basically simplified materials. They can be simplified and adapted from first language originals or could be original texts written for second language learners (Day and Bamford, 2000). These simplified materials can be graded according to the language in use—higher frequency vocabulary, simplified phrasing and

sentence structure, and the use of illustrations (Waring, 2000). The graded system provides a convenient criterion by which teachers can choose materials suitable for their students' proficiency levels. Readers can move to a higher-level stage by stage as their reading fluency develops; they can also move from higher level to lower level whenever they feel like it. One of the primary functions of graded readers is to provide a basis for foreign language learners to acquire the ability of reading authentic materials comfortably. It is known that beginners cannot deal with authentic materials because of their difficulty, so they need to be supported by the materials of increasing levels of difficulty until they are able to read authentic texts.

One of the issues on which there is no consensus among educators concerning extensive reading is how much reading must be done before it can be called extensive. Based on previous research, Susser and Robb (1990) mention seventeen measures that show the variety of criteria cited by researchers related to extensive reading. These measures include "thirty pages an hour, three pages an hour, an hour per evening, five hours by a specified date, one page per day, thirty minutes per day, a chapter per week, one reader per week, at least two books a week, 60 hours over three months," (p. 165-166). This indicates that while quantity is essential in extensive reading, researchers think differently in the measurement of "extensive." The quantity of reading may change depending on the type of program, level of students, and other variables, rather than the total number of hours or pages (Susser and Rob, 1990: 166).

After reviewing previous research studies concerning extensive reading, it was seen that extensive reading improves not only reading comprehension skills of learners but their overall language proficiency, as well. Nevertheless, extensive reading has been disregarded most of the time by EFL teachers and learners as it is not an integrated part of curriculum. It is seen simply a supplemental activity that is done if there is enough time. Little attention has been drawn to this issue, and even less research was conducted in Turkey to explore the effects of extensive reading programs. As a consequence, this study was aimed at increasing the long-term reading comprehension development of the students via graded readers while the students are taught reading strategies in the Turkish EFL context. Focusing on the effects of extensive reading programs on reading proficiency gains, the study will provide additional evidence for Second Language Acquisition research. Accordingly, the following questions were addressed:

1. Does extensive reading have an effect on the reading development of the students who volunteered to read extensively?
2. Are there significant differences among the reading comprehension scores of the students in experimental group according to the number of the books read by each student?

Methodology

Participants

Thirty students from Selcuk University School of Foreign Languages participated in the study. Being at the same proficiency level (elementary), the subjects of the study can be described as homogeneous. The sample included 22 male and 8 female students between the ages of 18 and 21 years. A two-group pretest-posttest research design was used. 15 students were assigned to each group. Control group followed the school program which was limited to the reading sections of their course book, which means they read intensively. Students in

experimental group were supported with an extensive reading program outside the school curriculum.

Materials

Books from Oxford Bookworms Series were chosen to use in the extensive reading program. Students were asked to get a book from each stage (stage 1, 2 and 3) to establish a kind of classroom library. With the books already available in the class library the total number reached 60 books. When students read their first book, they were asked if they had any problems with the book. The answers were affirmative and encouraging. They had no difficulty reading their first book, and even some stated it was great fun to do such an activity since it took them beyond the monotonous class instructing. The following weeks, students kept reading their books regularly, and at the end of the two weeks they brought their books into the classroom for exchange. Records of the books read by the students were kept by the researcher.

Taking into account their language level at the beginning of the second term, students were asked to read one or two readers of stage 1. Four reading comprehension tests were implemented during the academic year for the collection of data. The reading tests measured students' ability to comprehend short reading passages. The first two tests were given in the first term, and the other two were given in the second term during and after the extensive reading program. In each test was given a reading text. The texts were usually followed by such tasks as answering multiple choice and open-ended questions about the text, deciding whether the statement given is true or false, putting events in the correct order based on the text, matching titles with paragraphs and answering cloze type questions. An internal consistency estimate of reliability computed for the first reading comprehension test with Cronbach's coefficient alpha was 0.69, for the second reading comprehension test 0.71, for the third reading comprehension test 0.77 and for the fourth reading comprehension test 0.67. For the reliability, the reading texts and the questions included to assess reading comprehension performance of the students were sent to the testing committee composed of six ELT experts. Each text and question item was analysed. The reviews and feedback provided by these experts were considered and modifications, if necessary, were done accordingly.

Procedure

A pretest-posttest design was used. Two groups with an equal number of participants (n=15) were formed; control and experimental group. Extensive reading program was carried out at SOFL (School of Foreign Languages), Selcuk University, Konya. Throughout the first semester students in control and experimental groups worked on the course book chosen by the SOFL-within the same language program framework. The program required them to approach the basic language skills; reading, writing, speaking and listening, equally rather than to focus on a certain skill. Students in both groups took an exam every week on Fridays. This exam consisted of questions that measure the structures taught to the students during that week. That is, students normally had to complete a unit from the course book every week and at the end of the week they were tested for that week's subjects. In addition to these exams, they had two mid-term exams and a final exam which included reading tests to evaluate the

reading development skills of the students. These reading sections constituted 20 per cent of the total examination score.

In the second semester, students were divided into two groups as control and experimental group. The control group would continue in the same way as they did during first semester. However, students of experimental group were involved in an extensive reading program at the beginning of the term with the aim of developing their reading skills. This program was performed as an extra-curriculum activity. They were going to read outside the school hours. The language ability levels of the students in this group did not show much difference when their first and second mid-term exams scores were examined.

Because of the students' tight schedule and heavy load of assignments on diverse subjects, the researcher came to an agreement on reading demands; one book every two weeks which were less than the researcher had planned but more realistic. Reading at least one book (graded reader) outside the classroom every two weeks, they would read at least 8 books according the schedule. Language level of students was appropriate for reading stage 2 books given the level that they already reached at the end of the first semester. Yet they were demanded to begin the program with a stage 1 book in order to motivate them to read more. In a way, reading a book from this stage was considered to be a warm-up activity to prepare them for the books of next stages (stage 2 and 3).

During the second term, students took two mid-term exams, which were used to evaluate the reading performance of the participants. The scores of students in both groups were recorded. The score of each participant on reading comprehension sections of the exams was also noted, and these scores were compared to see if there were differences between the reading comprehension levels of control group and those of experimental group.

Data analysis

The first step in data analysis was calculating the scores for each test. The maximum score on the sections of the mid-term examinations used in order to determine the group equivalencies was 80 points. The maximum score on the four reading comprehension tests was 20 points. After getting raw scores, the means and standard deviations were calculated for both groups on the first and second mid-terms and for the four reading comprehension tests. Next, the mean scores of the groups were compared by the application of non-parametric statistics; Mann-Whitney U Test. The Mann-Whitney U test was used for the statistical analysis of the data. All the results were compared at the '0.05' level of significance, as is common in language studies of this type and proportion. It should be noted that two different types of software were used for the data analysis; SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences), version 10.00 and Selcuk Stat 1.09, and the results were compared in order to eliminate possible errors.

Findings

Analyses of treatment group equivalencies

Participants were placed in their respective classes on the basis of their language ability at the beginning of the academic year. As the extensive reading program was implemented in the second term of the year, in order to examine the potential influence of the English instruction given in the first term and other factors on group equivalency, results of the first

and the second mid-term examinations of the two groups were compared prior to the study. The mean scores and the standard deviations of the first mid-term examination for the two groups, which was applied six weeks after the beginning of the first term, are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Mann Whitney U analysis for the first mid-term scores

Groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Mann Whitney U -Z-	P
Experimental	15	57.40	11.218	1.889	0.059
Control	15	51.53	10.144		

The Mann-Whitney U test, which is appropriate to the case of two independent samples of observations measured at least at an ordinal level, was used for the statistical analysis of the data. A Mann-Whitney U test analysis (Table 1) of the first mid-term exam scores was computed, the z value being 1.889 at the 0.05 level of significance. The results of the Mann-Whitney U test show that there was no significant difference between the two groups ($P > 0.05$) regarding their language levels after a six-week instruction.

As a result, both groups were equal in terms of their language levels after a six-week instruction. It is worth noting here that the mid-term exam included structure, vocabulary, reading and writing tests. However, since the study aimed at developing the students' reading comprehension levels, it was necessary to see whether the two groups were equivalent in terms of their reading comprehension levels at the beginning of the study.

Table 2. Mann Whitney U analysis for the first reading test scores

Groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Mann Whitney U -Z-	P
Experimental	15	11.87	2.47	0.491	0.624
Control	15	12.13	2.58		

The standard deviations of the two groups for the first reading test (2.47 and 2.58) also show the close equivalence of the members of the two groups regarding their reading comprehension levels.

A Mann-Whitney U test conducted on the first reading test scores of both groups revealed no significant differences between the two groups ($z = 0.491$, $p = 0.624$) at the 0.05 level of significance. The results of the Mann-Whitney U test, mean reading comprehension scores and standard deviations for both groups are presented in Table 2.

Table 3. Mann Whitney U analysis for the second mid-term scores

Groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Mann Whitney U -Z-	p
Experimental	15	52.27	11.108	0.519	0.604
Control	15	49.6	10.164		

The results of the second mid-term examination would be a better indicator of the equivalence of the two groups as it was given at the end of the first term of the academic year. A Mann-Whitney U test conducted on the second mid-term scores of both groups revealed no significant differences between the two groups ($P > 0.05$), the z value being 0.519 at the 0.05 level of significance. The mean second mid-term test scores and standard deviations for both groups are presented in Table 3.

A Mann-Whitney U test conducted on the second reading test scores of both groups revealed no significant differences between the two groups ($Z = 0.567$, $p = 0.57$) at the 0.05 level of significance. The mean reading comprehension scores and standard deviations for both groups are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Mann Whitney U analysis for the second reading test scores

Groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Mann Whitney U -Z-	p
Experimental	15	10.87	2.55	0.567	0.57
Control	15	11.33	2.33		

The Standard deviations of the two groups for the second reading test (2.55 and 2.33) also show the close equivalence of the members of the two groups regarding their reading comprehension levels. Accordingly, it can be said that the two groups can be defined as homogeneous and the research aimed at and reached an adequate level of control.

Reading comprehension levels during the program

The results of the third reading comprehension test were evaluated to see the effectiveness of the extensive reading program after six weeks.

Table 5. Mann Whitney U analysis for the third reading test scores

Groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Mann Whitney U -Z-	p
Experimental	15	14.60	2.274	1.754	0.079
Control	15	12.87	2.918		

It can be seen in Table 5 that the mean scores of the third reading comprehension test for the two groups, which was applied 6 weeks after the beginning of the extensive reading program, were 14.60 and 12.87.

A Mann-Whitney U test analysis of the third reading comprehension test scores was computed, the z value being 1.754 at the 0.05 level of significance. The results revealed that, although there were statistically no significant differences between the two groups, the group who attended the extensive reading program scored slightly higher than the other group, although they had slightly lower reading comprehension scores in the first two mid-terms.

Reading comprehension levels at the end of the program

Table 6. Mann Whitney U analysis for the fourth reading test scores

Groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Mann Whitney U -Z-	p
Experimental	15	12.13	3.17	3.087	0.002
Control	15	8.33	2.45		

A Mann-Whitney U test conducted on the fourth reading comprehension test scores of both groups revealed significant differences between the two groups ($Z = 3.087$, $p = 0.002$) at the 0.05 level of significance. According to the statistical data, extensive reading group scored significantly better than the control group.

Amount of reading and reading comprehension

In order to find the correlation between the amount of reading and reading comprehension development, the numbers of books read by the students who participated in the extensive reading program were compared. As it was given at the end of the extensive reading program, the fourth reading comprehension test scores were used for the evaluation of the effect of the number of books read.

Table 7. Mann Whitney U analysis for the fourth reading test scores depending on the number of the books read

Groups	Mean	Std. Deviation	Mann Whitney U -Z-	p
Group 1	10.37	2.997	2.209	0.027
Group 2	14.14	2.03		

According to Table 7, the average reading comprehension test scores of the first sub-group were calculated as 10.37, the second sub-group as 14.14. A Mann-Whitney U test conducted on the test scores of the two sub-groups revealed that the students who read more

scored significantly better than the other students, the z value being 2.209 at the 0.05 level of significance.

Discussion

The present study investigated if extensive reading has (positive) effects on reading development. Learners in the extensive reading group achieved significantly better reading comprehension than subjects in the control group, and this is strongly supported by the data; the large and significant differences between the reading comprehension scores of the two groups at the end of the study, the much greater gains in reading comprehension development by the extensive reading group support this conclusion.

Sims (1996) conducted an experimental study with 120 freshmen identified as mid-level proficient in English. One group was instructed through a skill-based approach and the other using extensive reading. The study revealed that students in the extensive reading group scored significantly higher than those in the skill-based group. Similarly, our results showed that reading graded readers extensively and as a complementary reading activity for traditional intensive reading was beneficial to the development of students reading comprehension.

This study on extensive reading is restricted to its effects on reading development. There are studies with positive results which investigated its effects on some other skills such as vocabulary growth, writing development and motivation to reading and effects on linguistic knowledge. Weitz (2003), for example, examined the role of extensive reading program in reading comprehension, vocabulary/language acquisition, and the attitude toward reading among 120 high school students. Half of the students joined classrooms where 15-minute sustained silent reading took place everyday while the other half took part in their regular English curriculum. The results showed significant gains in the extensive reading group in the areas of comprehension, vocabulary, and attitude toward reading. In the control group, some gains were also noted in comprehension and vocabulary, but not in their attitude toward reading.

Whether to use authentic or inauthentic materials in language teaching, particularly in extensive reading, is a controversial issue. Authentic materials can be too cultural-based and might require a good knowledge of cultural background, and challenging language structures can result in comprehension problems for lower-level readers (Martinez 2002). Richards (2001) underlines that unlike simplified materials authentic materials generally include difficult language, redundant vocabulary and complex language structures. As the sample of our study consisted of students with low level of language proficiency, graded readers were selected as reading material because they are more convenient in terms of motivating students to read in L2 and increasing their reading speed and amount.

The students in the current study were free to choose what they want to read, so they were provided with a range of reading materials. When students choose their reading materials according to their reading level and taste, it will likely increase their motivation towards reading in L2. Harmer (2002:210) suggested that readers should be encouraged to decide and pick what they want to read for pleasure and general language improvement. Therefore, teachers are suggested to let their students choose reading materials as they wish. Teachers should consider the value of exposing students to a wide range of interesting English materials.

They also need to be aware of the rich variety and the benefits of different types of materials available for their students, and then, use them wherever and whenever appropriate.

Another conclusion drawn from the current study was that the students who read more books achieved more reading comprehension development in comparison to those who read less. This is evidenced by the previous research, for instance, Walker (1997) reported a positive correlation between the test scores of students and the amount of reading done. For that reason, considering that reading more leads to more reading success teachers should encourage their students to do as much extensive reading as possible.

Conclusion

For language teachers, how to promote proficient reading is an important issue. In the ESL and EFL context, there is a tendency towards the use of skill-building textbooks and procedures. Little attention has been given to extensive reading for pleasure as a means to improve reading comprehension, and the value of extensive reading is overlooked most of the time though many extensive reading studies have shown that extensive reading has a long-term effect on language learners' reading development and also on overall language proficiency. What needs to be done is to incorporate extensive reading into the curriculum. The present study therefore provides further evidence regarding how reading extensively via graded readers contributes to reading development of language learners .

The results of the present study also indicated that the reading program based on graded readers, to which the extensive reading group were exposed, brought about much more satisfying gains in reading comprehension than the traditional close reading techniques applied to the control group. Significant difference on gains in reading comprehension strongly suggests that an extensive reading program based on graded readers is much more beneficial to the development of reading comprehension than traditional reading lessons based on the close study of short texts.

On the other hand, the other research question of the current study was to reveal if the number of books read by the students took part in the experimental group had effect on the reading comprehension development of the students. For this reason, students in the experimental group were divided into two sub-groups, and the numbers of books read by the students who participated in the extensive reading program were compared. This comparison showed that students who read more books scored significantly better than the other students reading less books. Thus, we got a favorable result for the effect of the amount of reading on the reading comprehension development of the students.

We may conclude, therefore, that reading comprehension will develop naturally if learners are motivated to read interesting simplified materials like graded readers. The extensive reading program based on graded readers has led to much greater improvement in learners' reading comprehension than traditional language activities. Although one of the stated objectives of the material used by subjects in the control group was a 'close and detailed understanding of the text', it appears that this approach is much less successful in developing comprehension than providing learners with attractive, high-interest story books, which learners are well-motivated to read and understand.

Given the importance reading plays in language acquisition and the support for the significance of extensive reading for pleasure, it seems logical to consider the use of ER in language classrooms in order to promote language learning and to create more enjoyable environments for acquiring the foreign language.

Recommendations for future research

Considering the findings of this study, several recommendations can be made for future research. This study has focused on a small group of participants (15 students). Another study with a larger group of EFL students is recommended to see if the findings can be generalized to a larger group. Additionally, time allocated to this study is just a semester. Same kind of study is recommended to be carried out in a more extended period; a whole academic year or more.

Since the participants in this study were students of SOFL, they only engaged in English instructing throughout the year. Most of students do not find it essential to keep busy with English after they complete SOFL. It may be considered challenging but such a reading program can be carried over their regular faculties, and it can be observed if continuing reading extensively helps those students maintain or even develop their existing language proficiency. The current study has been organized to see if extensive reading has effects on reading development of EFL students. Further research can be done to see what effects extensive reading might have on other language skills such as vocabulary development, writing development or general language proficiency in general.

This study has been performed with graded readers, that is, with simplified materials. It could be recommended to compare the effect of both types of reading materials on reading comprehension development and on language proficiency in general. Finally, a similar study can also be performed with the use of computers. Thanks to the rapid development on computer assisted language learning students can be guided to do online extensive reading.

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