



## THE POWER OF EXTENSIVE READING ON ENHANCING RELUCTANT READERS TO READ IN AN EFL SETTING

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### ABSTRACT

Although reading is not the only skill which is taught in the foreign language classroom, it is definitely one of the most emphasized by many EFL teachers. Indeed, in an EFL setting, reading may be considered as an outstanding point to learn the foreign language as it provides learners with a multitude of opportunities to broaden their horizons and relate them to a wider and more wonderful world than their own from a social, cultural, and academic point of view. Yet, despite the large amount of time devoted to the teaching of reading and years of instruction and practice of this skill in the middle and secondary schools, many EFL university students face difficulties in front of a printed material and seem to be unwilling and reluctant to read in English.

Consequently, this current study tries to investigate the teaching/learning of the reading skill, with reference to first year EFL students at the Department of English at Djillali Liabes University of Sidi-Bel-Abbès. The research work pinpoints the reasons that lie behind students' reluctance to read in English as it tries to propose some remedial solutions to such a situation. The study also suggests the possibility of introducing extensive reading as complementary to intensive reading instruction to motivate students and encourage them to read more in the foreign language.

**Key words:** extensive reading, reluctant readers, reading motivation, graded readers.

### Introduction

Despite the great amount of literature which emphasizes the importance of reading in EFL settings (Anderson, 2000; Anderson, 1999; Biancarosa and Snow, 2004; Chambers, 1973; Cho, 2010; Collins, 2004; Dedebe, 2006; Grabe, 2009; Grabe and Stoller, 2011; Grellet, 1981; Hudson, 2007; Koda, 2004; Krashen, 1988; Nation, 2009), it has been noticed that the improvements that students of English reaching university are making in this skill remain minimal, and this if true, is a real tragedy. It is felt that there is no reading culture among EFL students, and that reading, either as a means of self-improvement or just a way of escapism or relaxation, has never been the matter of concern for these students. Moreover, the majority of these students would rather admit that an activity such as reading is the direct opposite of having a good time, that it is unpleasant, laborious, and even frustrating.

EFL students seem to increasingly lose their passion to read in English and they become passive to this skill (Guo, 2011). They have the feeling that they are trapped in a vicious circle, i.e., they read slowly, do not understand what they read, do not enjoy the reading process, avoid reading, and at the end become struggling or reluctant readers who, for a reason or another, choose not to read, doing so only when it is necessary (Nuttall, 1996). They become passive in regard to reading, doing no more than what is required from them (Wigfield, 1997; Takase, 2007; Morris, 2008; Guthrie, 2000; Childrey, 1981; Beers, 2003). Students lack the motivation and the desire to read independently, i.e., they do not complete assignments, they avoid



challenges and they only try hard enough to get by. These students are usually capable of doing extremely well at school, they can be intelligent, but they prefer not to try and they just give up.

Watching students lacking this motivation to read in English is really disheartening. Students with poor reading abilities often end up receiving low grades, get distracted and frustrated, have behaviour problems, seem to dislike school, and fail to develop to their full potential. Such a situation causes not only unmemorable tragedies, but also significantly draws instruction down and threatens the future of schools. So, who is to blame in such a case? Why is this shift from the print? What is it that makes students so demotivated to read in the foreign language? And what is the alternative to such a situation?

From this view of things, the present research work is an attempt to identify, then analyze the reasons that lie behind the first year EFL students' reluctance to read in English. The study then will be more concerned with giving convincing answers to the following research questions:

- 1- What might be the main causes that lie behind first year EFL university students' reluctance to read in English?
- 2- How might the implementation of an extensive reading programme -as complementary to the intensive reading one- influence these students' motivation and change their attitude towards reading in English?

#### Review of literature

Harold Palmer (1917) in Britain and Michael West (1926) in India were the first to pioneer the theory of extensive reading as an approach to foreign language teaching and to reading in particular. Palmer chose the term 'extensive reading' to distinguish it from 'intensive reading' which refers to the careful reading of shorter, more difficult language texts with the goal of complete and detailed understanding. Palmer (1917) defined ER as rapidly reading book after book where the reader's attention is on the meaning, not the language of the text. Other scholars have defined ER in different ways, but with similar ideas. For example, Robb and Susser (1989) considered ER as reading large quantities of material for global understanding with the intention of obtaining pleasure from the text since reading is individualized, i.e, students choose by themselves the books they want to read and these books are not discussed in class. In the same line of thought, Richard and Schmidt (2002) described ER as reading in quantity to develop good reading habits and encourage a love of reading. Waring (2006) explained that ER could be defined by the acronym **READ**: "Read quickly and....Enjoyably with....Adequate comprehension so they (students) Don't need a dictionary".

According to Davis (1995), an extensive reading program is a supplementary programme in which students are encouraged to read as much as possible, at their own pace and own level. Thus, in ER quantity is emphasized, with attention given to the students' choice of the reading material. Priority is placed on fluency over accuracy, and on overall comprehension rather than detailed understanding of every word or every syntactic structure. Besides, responsibility is put on students to monitor their own progress and strive to become life-long readers.

As an approach to reading pedagogy, ER has received a great deal of interest (Bamford and Day, 2004; Brown, 2009; Day and Bamford, 1998; Gilner and Morales, 2010; Grabe and Stoller, 2011; Hafiz and Tudor, 1990; Jacobs and Farell, 2012; Maley, 2005; Nation, 1997; Renandya, 2007; Renandya and Jacobs, 2002; Waring, 2009). It has been sometimes described as in opposition to IR (Robb and Susser, 1989), but most of the time as complementary to IR. Harmer (2007), for instance, advocates a balanced approach of intensive and extensive reading to get maximum benefit from the reading act. Similarly, Brown (2007: 366-567) echoes "**an extensive reading component in conjunction with other focused reading instruction is highly warranted**". Additionally, Anderson (1999) advocates the use of both approaches by teachers. Nuttall (1996) also calls for both intensive and extensive styles to improve effective reading. She argues that some language skills are trained by studying short texts, whereas others cannot be developed unless students use longer texts, including complete books.



### Extensive Reading and Reluctant Readers

One of the primary concerns of this research work is to prove how an extensive reading program may assist reluctant and struggling readers to become effective and enthusiastic readers. It is worth mentioning that there is a bulk of research supporting extensive reading role in fulfilling such a need. For instance, Day and Bamford (as cited in Powell, 2005:30) state that **"Students who read large quantities of easy interesting material will become better readers and will enjoy the experience"**. The assumption behind this is that, when students are engaged in an ER program, they are highly motivated and consequently, they develop a positive attitude towards reading in the second/foreign language. Sakai and Kanda (2005) evoke three golden rules for a successful ER program: a) students should not use a dictionary; b) if students encounter unfamiliar words, they may simply skip them; c) students can quit in the middle of reading if they find the books uninteresting and can switch to another book. The main problem of weak readers is that they may find it difficult to understand what they read. So, they read as little as possible and consequently they do not enjoy reading. In contrast to this, if a teacher provides easy to understand books, then even reluctant students will be motivated to read, and this in turn will lead them to become more enthusiastic readers( Bamford, 1984; Canstantino, 1994; Smith and Krashen, 2009; Takase, 2003; Mason and Krashen, 2009)

### Participants

To conduct this research work, eighty six (86) first year university students enrolled for the licence degree in English at the department of English, university of Djillali Liabès of Sidi Bel Abbès, participated to investigate the proposed hypotheses. Similarly, ten (10) teachers of English from the same department were requested to take part in this study.

### The students

The questionnaire was administered to approximately 100 first year LMD students in the Department of English, faculty of letters, arts and human sciences, university of djillali liabès of Sidi-Bel-Abbès, promotion 2013-2014. But after a thorough reading of the responses and after filtering them, only a number of 86 students appeared to have provided valid responses in terms of coherence and consistency.

The students were intermediate-advanced learners aged between eighteen and twenty two years old. They came from different schools. They had studied English for about seven years(four years in the middle school and three years in the secondary school). The majority of the students came from the literary and foreign languages stream(45 students which represents 52,33% of the whole population), whereas 23 students (26,74%) belonged to the scientific stream and only 18 students (20,93%) came from other technical branches. Students' admission to the Department of English was based on their grades in the 'Baccalaureate (a national examination which consists of a number of subject matters). This implies that these students have been admitted in the Department of English on the basis of their cumulative grades from different subject matters and not on the basis of their proficiency in the English language.

Even if the students had received the same education in the middle and secondary schools, it is worth mentioning that the latter differed from one another in terms of motivation, attitudes, needs, interests, reading habits, learning styles ...etc. So, if the majority of the respondents (approximately 53%) have come from the literary stream, this would imply that the latter would have a literary background that would give much importance to languages and thoughts and perhaps to reading, namely in Arabic and French, i.e, these students were expected to be heavy readers, devoted to books and always eager to read more. Yet, what results of the questionnaire showed was that only 25% of the whole respondents confessed that they often read in Arabic, 19% that they sometimes read in French, whereas 61 students(which represents 70,93% of the whole respondents) argued that the only reading experience they had in the English language was the limited number of texts they used to read in the secondary school. They also confessed that they are reading the same kind of texts in their reading comprehension session at the university. As for the socio-cultural background of



the respondents, data gathered from the students' questionnaire demonstrated that the majority of the students (80%) had parents who could read either in Arabic or French. Yet, the only materials that their parents read were newspapers. Only 27 students (31,40%) confessed that their parents liked to read 'books' in addition to newspapers and magazines.

### The teachers

Ten teachers have been requested to answer a questionnaire which consisted of fifteen questions. Their teaching experience varied from seven to fifteen years. All of them were Algerian and had obtained their degrees from Algerian universities. Three of them were senior lecturers who had already obtained their 'Doctoratd'Etat' in TEFL and applied linguistics, while the others were still preparing their doctorate in the same cited specialism.

When asked about their training or professional preparation, none of the ten teachers confessed that he/she has received any kind of training on how to teach reading comprehension. Besides, all of the teachers declared that every one of them had his/her own particular manner of how to teach this module since no shared or common program is set for them.

Because they lacked training, many teachers viewed reading as an end product to reach, a thing which lead some students to regard the reading course as laborious and tedious, and consequently demotivated them to learn in general and to read in particular.

### Research instruments

For the sake of having a triangulation of data , many research instruments have been used in this current investigation. These include observations, two questionnaires, an extensive reading treatment, and an interview at the end of the study.

**1-Observation:** The first research instrument in this investigation was classroom observation . To this end, three reading comprehension sessions were observed for data collection as they provided the researcher with the opportunity to notice and examine the students behaviour in a naturalistic setting. In other words, observation was useful for the researcher in a variety of ways. It provided opportunities to check the nonverbal expressions of feelings of the students, determine who interacts with whom, grasp how participants deal with the reading material, check how much time was spent on the different classroom activities, examine students participation and interests, detect the teaching strategies and much more. Consequently, the purpose of classroom observation in the context of the present study was not to evaluate or judge how reading is taught at the English department, but rather to describe 'objectively' the learning/teaching of reading as they occur in the classroom to help the researcher have a better understanding of the context and phenomenon under study.

**2-Questionnaires:** Questionnaires are doubtless one of the primary sources of obtaining data in any research endeavor. They are a valuable method of collecting a wide range of information from a large number of respondents with a minimum of time and effort . Questionnaires are also useful in gathering data on phenomena which are not easily observed, such as attitudes, motivation, and self-concepts. Therefore, when properly constructed and responsibly administered, they become a vital instrument that provides valid and reliable information for making decision , testing a theory, or investigating a topic of research.

As far as the present research work is concerned, two distinct questionnaires were designed as another tool for collecting data. The first one was intended to the students, whereas the second was administered to ten teachers of English. Both students' and teachers' questionnaires were administered for a variety of purposes. For example, the questions which were addressed to the students were meant to have an idea about their profile and their reading background, namely in the secondary school, to get some information about their needs, expectations, motivation, and preferences, to identify the reasons behind their reading difficulties, to



be informed about their reading habits, and at last to collect some data about their socio-cultural milieu, i.e, if they come from environments that encourage reading or not.

As for the teachers' questionnaire, the researcher's objectives were to collect data about their profile, their teaching background, their experience in teaching reading, their approach to teaching reading. The questionnaire was also meant to identify the difficulties these teachers face with their students while teaching the reading skill, and the alternatives these teachers could propose to encourage reluctant readers and instill a love for reading in them inside and outside of the classroom.

**3-The extensive reading treatment:** To determine whether the implementation of an out of class extensive reading program could contribute to improve EFL students' reading ability and increase their reading motivation, an extensive reading treatment was adopted as another tool for gathering data. In this way, twenty students were randomly divided into experimental and control groups each of which was comprised to ten participants. The participants of the experimental group (EG) were encouraged to read large quantity of reading materials extensively at home along with the main reading program which was taught intensively by their teacher. The control group(CG) received no extensive reading as they followed the usual instruction, studying the main intensive reading course in the classroom.

The reading materials for ER consisted mainly of a collection of graded readers from publishers such as Oxford University Press. The stories level of difficulty was a little above the students' linguistic competence in order to provide comprehensible input. In the first day of the program, students of the experimental group were informed of the importance of ER and its vital role in motivating learners and establishing a reading habit among them. It was then the teacher's responsibility to explain to the students the importance of reading for pleasure. Not only does it help improve the students' vocabulary and understanding of the structure of the language, but it also gives a feeling of satisfaction to be able to read a book in English. Similarly, it was the teacher's duty to specify to the students that there was a wide range of books to choose from, with topics of interest for them at all levels. Students were advised to start with reading books which are interesting and not difficult for them, because if they find that there are too many difficult words in the story, reading will become too frustrating and this will not encourage them to read any more. The program lasted for about twelve weeks (3 months) during which the students of the EG were advised to read one short story per week if they could. To create an ER friendly environment, students could choose books from a range of topics they were interested in. They also had the chance to change the stories if they felt they did not like them.

When borrowing the books, students wrote their names and the title of the books they took in the loan notebook. Students were also asked to write a report as a way for the researcher to check the amount of reading completed. In their reports, the participants wrote the title of the book, the name of the author, and a very brief summary about their view on the story.

The extensive reading treatment aimed at making students read a lot outside of the classroom to improve their reading ability, changing their traditional way of reading only short texts, changing their beliefs that reading is a matter of decoding every single word in the text, helping them employ different strategies for good reading, and before all instilling a love of reading in them.

**4-The interview:** After three months, the ten students of the experimental group were interviewed at the end of the programme to know how they perceived the programme as well as how their attitudes towards reading have improved. The interview questions varied from yes/no to open-ended to give students opportunities to express their opinions more freely. The interview was recorded and analyzed.

#### Findings of the study

The research work started by identifying some of the reasons that lied behind first year EFL students' reluctance to read in English. In this way, three reasons were proposed as hypotheses that had to be either confirmed or disconfirmed all along the investigation. The first reason that lied behind students' reluctance to



read in the target language was attributed to the EFL teachers and their perception of reading instruction. Indeed, it was shown through this work that the teachers' approach to teaching EFL reading demonstrated a kind of misunderstanding of the reading process and its 'interactive' nature. According to the students' and teachers' questionnaires, it was shown that the practice in teaching reading had always been associated with the teaching of reading in terms of its component skills or other language aspects. So, it was more common to see EFL teachers select and control reading activities that focused on grammar and vocabulary, which is in contrast with the real nature of reading as an interactive process. In secondary schools and even in universities, EFL students were trained to pay attention to each word and grammatical structure. They were encouraged to consult a dictionary each time an unknown word was encountered. Besides, students were usually provided with a one-or-two page English text that was followed by comprehension questions. Most of the time, this text took two or more sessions to finish it. This implied that even after years of studying English, students did not read that much as reading this way proceeded extremely slowly.

In addition to this, students were never involved in the choice of the materials they had to read. It was always the teacher who controlled everything in the classroom, and most of the time, this teacher selected texts that were beyond his/her students level of comprehension. Consequently, students were often bored and tired for spending too much time struggling with texts that they did not even find interesting. No one likes to do things that are difficult or boring. Therefore, obeying to the law of least resistance, it was more common to see students developing a kind of hostility towards the act of reading and avoiding reading and resorting to other ways of entertainment and distraction.

Distraction, then, was proposed as another reason for students' reluctance to read in the foreign language. Indeed, one of the hypotheses of this study was that students may have lost their passion to read in English because there were several other exciting options available, aside from reading books. It is well known that, when there were no televisions, handsets, and computers, students spent hours reading books and travelling to lands far away in their minds. Nowadays however, students prefer to glue more to screens as a way of enjoyment rather than reading a book. Distractions seem to prevent the smooth flow of reading. Indeed, in this modern multi-media world, televisions, cell phones, computers, and the Internet seem to have captured a big slice of time in students' life to the extent that reading has taken a back seat. Students are really caught between the real world of school and an addictive 'virtual world'; a world where books and the weighty ideas they contain have no place. The World Wide Web, with all the facilities it provides, has captured a big slice of students' time to the extent that reading had taken a back seat. Students are hooked on online chat rooms, instant messaging, and interactive games resulting in poor reading performance on their part.

The socio-cultural milieu and its impact on instilling a reading habit among students was proposed as another reason for EFL students' reluctance to read. To say that the reading culture is one of the students' strong suits is a big understatement. Reading, either as a means of self-improvement or as a way of escapism or relaxation, has never been the 'cup of tea' of Algerian students. Results of the students' questionnaire demonstrated that, in their free time, these students will rather engage in activities such as eating, talking to friends, watching television, playing football, or face-booking, all of which they find more enjoyable (because they require little demand on their intellect) rather than sitting in a corner and reading a book. The questionnaire results also showed that parents' responsibility in establishing a reading habit among their children could be another cause for students' unwillingness to read. Indeed, this investigation has shown that the majority of the students who participated in this research work came from a socio-cultural milieu which did not encourage reading. Readers are not born, they are made. And parents' responsibility in making these readers is of paramount importance. The more parents read in front of their children, the more they will be able to instill the love for reading in the heart of their children. Unfortunately, this was not the case for the





students who participated in this study as the majority of them confessed that their parents were not 'reading models' for them.

The habit of reading should begin at an early stage and should be imbibed throughout students' life, and parents and other siblings have a role to play in this. At their formative age, children should acquire the love for reading books. This will contribute to their subsequent reading success. What happens to children in their early years will influence them for the rest of their life. It is commonly admitted that children learn predominantly by association. Therefore, if books are part of a parent-child interaction from an early age, this child will certainly associate the presence of books with all the positive feelings of being held and loved. Consequently, reading culture and love of books should be first developed at home, i.e., parents should read to/in front of their children. If reading is declining so drastically among EFL students, this may be due to the fact that these students have never had reading models neither at school (teachers) nor at home (parents and other siblings).

To find an alternative to students' unwillingness to read in English, the researcher proposed the implementation of an extensive reading programme as an extra-curriculum activity which could be complementary to the already existing intensive reading programme. Integrating intensive and extensive reading was expected to develop an overall positive affinity towards reading. The extensive reading programme was implemented for a period of approximately three months. During this time, students were encouraged to read as much as possible. They were free to choose the reading materials by themselves. They had the right to stop their reading if these materials did not appeal to them. They were not tested for what they read. They were only asked to fill in a reading report paper each time they finished reading a book. In this report, they had to write a brief summary of the story and give their opinions about it. At the end of the programme, some of the students were interviewed to have some feedback about their experience with extensive reading.

Results of the interview showed that although the students were resistant to the idea of reading in the foreign language, they became proponents of the extensive reading approach once they experienced pleasure reading. They also expressed a fondness for graded readers as opposed to the complex texts they were used to read because of the simplified language and appealing themes that characterize such reading materials. Students also recognized that they developed positive attitudes and a sense of accomplishment as they could finish reading a whole book without consulting the dictionary or answering comprehension questions. Their motivation to read increased and their desire to engage in reading self-selected materials on their own also enhanced as the programme progressed. All in all, the programme was a useful and a pleasant experience for these students who expressed a kind of enjoyment, satisfaction, and positive attitudes towards its implementation.

### Conclusion

There is no one recipe that will make all reluctant readers excellent and avid readers. However, there are ways and methods that can be used to improve and strengthen students reading skills. One of these might be the use of extensive reading as a reading strategy as complementary to the intensive reading approach mostly employed in EFL classes. Extensive reading might be the "missing ingredient" in foreign language instruction as it might also be the "key to unlocking the all-important taste for foreign language reading among students" (Bamford and Day, 2002), i.e., it might promote positive attitudes towards reading and consequently help unmotivated and reluctant students to enjoy reading in the foreign language classroom. Yet, it should be mentioned that this study does not present extensive reading as a one-for-all solution to students reading problems. Moreover, the researcher does not pretend to have found the 'magic wand' which would transform those reluctant readers into engaged, avid, and life-long readers. Indeed, this investigation is just an attempt to propose an alternative that might help these reluctant readers to improve in their reading. It is undeniably



true that more causes may lie behind students' reluctance to read in the foreign language (beside those proposed in this research work). It is also necessary to admit that the findings of this investigation are suggestive rather than conclusive, i.e, they cannot be applicable to all learners of English because of the limited number of students who participated in the study. Yet, it would be beneficial if this study could be conducted for a longer time and with a wider population. Extensive reading is time demanding and requesting many resources. Yet, it is a challenging and rewarding activity that can offer a wide range of possibilities to be exploited by both EFL students and EFL teachers. So, why not trying it with Algerian students in Algerian schools?

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