

**THE EFFECTS OF EXTENSIVE READING ON
FLUENCY AND COMPREHENSION**

**Sınıf İçi Serbest Okuma Saatlerinin Akıcı Okuma ve
Okuduğunu Anlama Becerileri Üzerine Etkileri**

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Abstract

This study aims at finding the effects of extensive reading on students' reading fluency and comprehension. For this study, with the participation of 32 pre-intermediate level university prep class students, an-8-week experiment was conducted. During the experiment, the researcher asked the participants to read graded readers which were chosen by them according to their interest and level of proficiency. Every week, the students were given a separate lesson hour to do the extensive reading. Both at the outset and at the end of the experiment, a reading passage was given to the participants to test their comprehension and fluency. In order to test fluency "word counting" was preferred, and some comprehension questions were used to see how much they understood from what they read. At the end of the experiment, the results of two tests were compared by utilizing repeated measures t-tests, and the difference between two experiments was found to be statistically significant. In other words, the results of this study revealed that extensive reading practice was helpful to improve L2 readers' reading fluency. Furthermore, in order to see the relationship between fluency and comprehension, Pearson correlation analysis was conducted and a strong relationship between these variables was also reported.

Keywords: extensive reading, reading comprehension, fluency, prep class students

Özet

Bu çalışma, sınıf içi serbest okuma saatlerinin, akıcı okuma ve okuduğunu anlama becerileri üzerine etkilerini bulmayı amaçlamıştır. Çalışma kapsamında, "pre-intermediate" seviyesindeki 32 katılımcı ile 8 haftalık bir deney yürütülmüştür. Katılımcılardan kendi ilgi ve seviyelerine uygun okuma kitapları seçmeleri istenmiş ve her hafta 1 ders saati bu kitapların okunması için ayrılmıştır. Deneyin hem başlangıcı hem de sonunda öğrencilerin akıcılıklarını ve anlama becerilerini ölçmek için seviyelerine uygun okuma parçaları verilmiştir. Akıcılığı test etmek için kelime sayma yöntemi kullanılırken, okuduklarını ne kadar anladıklarını görmek içinse parçayla ilgili kavrama soruları sorulmuştur. 8 haftanın sonunda, elde edilen verileri karşılaştırmak için "Tekrarlı Ölçümler t testi" uygulanmış ve sonuçların anlamlı olduğu, diğer bir ifadeyle serbest okuma saatlerinin öğrencilerin akıcı okuma ve okuduklarını anlama becerileri üzerinde olumlu etkisi olduğu görülmüştür. Aynı zamanda yapılan "Pearson Korelasyon" analizi sonuçları da akıcı okuma ile okuduğunu anlama becerileri arasında pozitif bir ilişki olduğunu göstermiştir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: serbest okuma, akıcı okuma, okuduğunu anlama, hazırlık sınıfı.

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Introduction

Reading is a complex process which requires managing many different skills at the same time. (Grabe, 2009) One of the most important features which enhances “reading proficiency” both in L1 and L2 has been known to be the lexicon size. As L1 readers have already got a big and effective lexicon, they may be considered to be better readers as opposed to L2 readers who are not that proficient in the target language. For this reason, any kind of strategies which have been found to be improving students’ vocabulary size, is thought to be beneficial to enhance students’ reading skills. Therefore, the effect of extensive reading practice on L2 readers’ fluency is the focus of interest for this study.

Extensive Reading

As Bamford and Day (2003, p. 1) define “extensive reading is an approach to language teaching in which learners read a lot of easy material in the new language.” Starting with the idea of “book flood”, extensive reading programs have been reported to be beneficial practices for language learning contexts. According to Nation (1997), extensive reading practice provides language learners with a lot of advantages; not only in reading, but also in any other areas of language. It improves students’ proficiency in all language skills.

Since reading is an individual activity, in which readers like going on with the texts suitable for their proficiency level, it is not surprising that extensive reading has something to say on students’ improvement. By giving the language learners the opportunity to read individually and to read whenever and whatever they like, extensive reading programs help language learners improve themselves in the target language. Furthermore, they also provide psychological wellbeing which leads to positive attitudes towards language learning. When students become more successful by the help of extensive reading, they feel more motivated and positive towards learning the target language (Nation, 1997, pp. 13-15).

According to Nation (2001, pp. 149-150) though they seem to be similar, there is a distinction between extensive and intensive reading. During the intensive reading, the main purpose is to understand the text by focusing on the vocabulary, grammar and discourse of the text. In other words, there is a conscious attention to the language mechanisms, which may be related to the language-focused learning. As there is a process of conscious attention, it is possible to say that intensive reading aims at intentional learning rather than the incidental one. Furthermore, the texts chosen for the aim of intensive reading may not necessarily be long. On the other hand, extensive reading requires practice as much as possible by focusing on the meaning rather than the language mechanisms. In extensive reading, the learners read mostly for enjoyment or information, and they choose the material according to their interest and proficiency level. If they think that the reading material is too difficult or boring, they should have the chance to change it. As Bamford and Day (2003) claim that there are some criteria which are needed to define any kind of reading as “extensive reading.” Among these criteria; reading for pleasure, self-selection of the material, reading silently, reading a good amount of material and reading fast take part. According to Waring and McLean (2015), there are some core and variable elements of extensive reading, and these are the determiners while deciding whether any kind of program could be called as extensive reading program or not. They claim that fluency, comprehension, reading a large amount of materials, reading extensively and longer texts are the core features without which any kind of reading program could be called as “extensive” reading program. Besides this, they also suggest that there are some other variables which may be included into the extensive reading programs. They clearly make the difference between extensive and intensive reading by giving the core and non-core elements of extensive reading because they complain about the confusion on the term “extensive reading”. Therefore, they highly

recommend that any researcher should verify which core and non-core elements of extensive reading will be included in their study.

As a result, it is good to verify that all the core elements of extensive reading were included in the current study. The only concern might be the duration of the practice and the amount of materials that are going to be covered. However, as Waring and McLean (2015) state there is not a consensus on the exact time and amount of reading. Furthermore, Waring and Mclean also (2015) claim that, neither the material nor the teacher, it is the learner who is the determiner of the extensive reading process. Besides this, comprehension and fluency are the key goals to be fulfilled which makes the extensive reading practice meaningful.

All in all, it is possible to say that extensive reading is a kind of practice which provides the learner with the feeling of freedom and enjoyment, which in turn leads to better readers who have a good level of language proficiency. These students feel more motivated and eager to learn the target language. That's to say, by the help of extensive reading "language learners develop positive attitudes and increased motivation towards learning a new language" (Anderson, 2012 and Bamford & Day, 2003, p.1). Extensive reading also enhances the vocabulary growth as in any other reading practice; however, as opposed to some other practices, it provides the learners with the opportunity of incidental learning, which is thought to be more long-lasting.

Reading Fluency

An effective reader has been defined as the one who reads accurately, rapidly and fluently (Grabe, 2009, p. 289); therefore, the issue of fluency seems to be playing an important role to develop reading proficiency. As Grabe (2009, p.291) defines "reading fluency is the ability to read rapidly with ease and accuracy and to read with appropriate expression and phrasing."

According to Kuhn and Stahl (2000) reading is a complex process which requires going through different stages. While reading, the reader has to fulfil different duties simultaneously, they have to recognize the word automatically and at the same time, according to the context, they try to make up a meaning from these words. If the word recognition process may not be overcome automatically, the reader has to depend on the contextual cues, which necessitates more time and mental effort. Therefore, automaticity may be accepted as the determiner of reading fluency (Kuhn & Stahl, 2000, pp. 1-6).

Even though there are different approaches dealing with these stages, most of them weigh in with the idea that the first stage of reading is "phoneme awareness", which is followed by "word recognition" and later comes the meaning making process. The word recognition stage has been known to be very fast for advanced readers, it is an automatized and unconscious process which leads to fluency (Grabe, 2009, pp. 289-304). In the absence of this automatic processing, it is not possible for the readers to comprehend the text quickly because they have to focus and spend some time on the decoding process before moving up into the comprehension stage (Kuhn & Stahl, 2000, pp. 1-4).

Though fluency has been widely accepted and reported to be an important feature of reading proficiency, it has been difficult to come together on a common reading rate which may be accepted as the ideal and expected one. The findings of different studies on the ideal reading rate are inconsistent. The average rate, as defined by He (2014), varies between 180 wpm and 600 wpm. According to Anderson (2012) a good reader is capable of synthesizing the information given in the text with his/her background knowledge, and developing a meaning by using different strategies. He also claims that good readers read

fluently, accurately and strategically. As a result, fluency has been acknowledged to be very important for improving reading proficiency.

Statement of the Problem

Since reading is seen as the main determiner of language proficiency, developing a good reading ability seems to be important in foreign language classes. When students do not understand whatever they are reading, they do not feel comfortable about the target language. Therefore, there should be a close relationship between reading proficiency and students' beliefs, motivation and attitudes towards language learning. The more proficient they are, the more they want to read. For this reason, it is vital that language students like reading and become fluent in L2 reading. In line with these ideas, the present study aims at observing the effects of extensive reading which may be thought as an alternative practice to enhance students' reading proficiency and fluency.

Justification of the Problem

Research shows that becoming a fluent reader is associated with the readers' vocabulary size (Grabe, 2009, pp. 265-285). In addition to this, the effects of extensive reading both on the vocabulary growth and fluency have been reported in many different research studies so far (Yamashita, 2007; Guthrie et al, 2004). For this reason, the relationship between extensive reading and fluency was the focus of interest in this study.

Significance of the Study

Among many other classroom practices, extensive reading is accepted to be one of the most important ones because of its effects on the development of vocabulary size. As indicated in many different studies, vocabulary size may well be a determiner of reading fluency. Therefore, in this study the exact effects of extensive reading on students' reading fluency and comprehension, which in turn leads to reading proficiency, was studied. In addition to this, the relationship between fluency and comprehension before and after the extensive reading practice was tested.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

The following research questions were formulated for this study:

RQ 1: Does extensive reading practice affect students' reading fluency?

RQ2: Is there a relationship between reading fluency and comprehension?

Method

Participants

Participants of this study were chosen among pre-intermediate level students who were attending the prep school of a state university. While 15 of 32 participants were female, 17 others were male students. Their departments were Biology, Computer Engineering, Physics, Material Science and Engineering and Mathematics. The age rank of the participants varied between 18 and 25.

Data Collection

For this study, two different reading texts which were chosen by the researcher accordingly, were the main instruments for data collection. The texts which were in line with students' proficiency level were chosen from the workbook of Total English course book series. The course book that was followed during the term was a different one; therefore, the effect of text familiarity was thought to be diminished. At the end of each

text, there were 5 comprehension questions in order to see how comprehension was affected.

The Procedures

The participants were informed about the extensive reading practice at the outset of the term. They had been announced that, the effects of extensive reading practice on their fluency were going to be measured. Therefore, they were ready for the experiment from the very first week. During an ordinary session on the second week of the term, the experiment started. The participants were given the first reading text and required to read at their normal pace for 90 seconds. When 90 seconds finished, the researcher asked them to stop and count how many words they could read. This was necessary in order to see how fluent the participants were. They were also required to answer the comprehension questions at the end of the text, which was thought to be the indicator of comprehension. After that, until the second experiment, an 8-week-long extensive reading program, in which the students were given a full lesson hour every week to read the graded readers which were chosen by them according to their interest, was followed. Finally, the same procedure was repeated with a different text at the end of 8 weeks, and the results were compared to see how much the extensive reading practice had to say on reading fluency and comprehension. During the extensive reading practice, the students were supposed to finish reading at least two graded books; however, as the in-class time was not enough to read that much, they were also required to read outside the class. Extensive reading was encouraged by informing the students that “reading a lot” would be rewarded.

Analysis

In order to analyse the data, *repeated measures t-test* was utilized. The results of the first experiment were compared with the results of the second experiment to see if there was a significant difference between them. In other words, this analysis was conducted to see how much difference the extensive reading practice made on students’ reading fluency.

Results

The results of the statistical analyses which were conducted by using the **S**tatistical **P**ackage for the **S**ocial **S**ciences (SPSS) are presented in this part.

Results of Repeated Measures t-test:

The first analysis was conducted by utilizing the *repeated measures t-test* because the fluency scores of the students gathered from the first and second experiments were going to be compared. The table 1, 2 and 3 below show the results of this analysis:

Table 1: Paired Samples Statistics for Fluency

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	experiment1	214,4688	32	28,61647	5,05872
	experiment2	230,4375	32	45,35447	8,01761

Table 2: Paired Samples Correlations for Fluency

		N	Correlation	Sig.
Pair 1	experiment1 & experiment2	32	,569	,001

Table 3: Paired Samples t-test Results for Fluency

		t	Df	Sig. 2 tailed
Pair 1	experiment1 & experiment2	-2,414	31	,022

According to the results, the mean of the fluency score was 214 and 230 respectively after the experiments, which showed that there was a little improvement after the extensive reading practice. However, in order to see if this difference was statistically significant, repeated measures t-test, which is also known as paired samples t-test, was also conducted. The results of the t-test are presented at table 3 above. As it is clear from the table, p value has been found to be ,022 ($p = ,022$), which is smaller than 0,050. Therefore, it is possible to say that, there is a significant difference between the participants' fluency scores gathered from experiment 1 and 2. In other words, the participants benefited from the extensive reading practice by improving their fluency rate.

Comprehension Scores

After conducting the first analysis to see the effects of extensive reading on reading fluency, it was time to see if there was a significant difference between the participants' comprehension scores. For this reason, another repeated measures t-test was conducted, and the results are as follows:

Table 4: Paired Samples t-test Results for Comprehension

		t	Df	Sig. 2 tailed
Pair 1	experiment1 & experiment2	-1,939	31	,062

As it is clear from table 4 above, the difference between the participants' comprehension performance was not statistically significant because the p value was found to be higher than 0,050. ($p = 0,062 > p = 0,050$), which meant that the extensive reading practice did not have much to say on the participants' comprehension performance.

Results of Correlation Analysis:

The last analysis conducted for this study was a correlational analysis because the second research question focused on the relationship between fluency and comprehension. Therefore, Pearson correlation analysis was conducted and the results were shown in table 5 below.

Table 5: Correlations for Experiment 1

		Experiment 1	Comprehension 1
Experiment 1	Pearson Correlation	1	,189
	Sig. (2-tailed)		,299
	N	32	32

Table 6: Correlations for Experiment 2

		Experiment 2	Comprehension 2
Experiment 2	Pearson Correlation	1	,531**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		,002
	N	32	32

As indicated in the above tables, there was a positive correlation between the participants' reading fluency rates and comprehension scores. Table 5 shows the correlation between the variables after the first experiment. In table 5, the correlation has been found to be $r = .189$ which shows a weak positive relationship. However, for the second experiment the correlation was found to be $r = .531$ which showed a strong and significant relationship between the variables. In the light of this information, it is possible to say that there is a positive relationship between reading fluency and comprehension.

Discussion and Conclusions

The results of this study revealed that extensive reading practice was really helpful to improve language students' reading fluency. Besides this, it was indicated with the results that there was a positive correlation between reading fluency and comprehension, which was in line with the previous research studies (Burrows, 2013; Yamashita, 2007). The relationship between fluency and comprehension also showed that fluency had really something to say on reading proficiency. Therefore, it should be dealt with care.

Fluency has been known to be one of the most important features of effective readers. Therefore, any kind of attempt which is thought to be beneficial for improving reading fluency has the utmost importance both for L2 readers and the instructors.

For this reason, this study seems to be really beneficial because it provides the readers with the importance of extensive reading on fluency/comprehension. Furthermore, it also indicates the relationship between fluency and comprehension. As a result, it can be said that, this study shed some light on the importance of extensive reading in classroom practice. In the light of these results, the language teachers and administrators should think about the importance of extensive reading again, and should insist on including this practice into their syllabus.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

Though this study revealed significant results, the amount of extensive reading practice might not be enough. Therefore, the participants were required to read outside the class because they had to finish two graded readers at least. However, with a more comprehensive extensive reading program in which at least 2 lesson hours would be allocated weekly, the results might be more significant. Besides this, the duration of the

experiment was only 8 weeks, and all the participants were from pre-intermediate classes. However, with a longer term experiment and with more participants from different proficiency levels, it would be possible to make comparisons and stronger claims about the issue. The same study may be replicated at different universities and high schools where more comprehensive extensive reading programs are run. Following that, the results may be compared to see the effect of extensive reading practice on different student groups.

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