

Developing Learners' Vocabulary Acquisition Through Extensive Reading In Efl Classrooms

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Abstract: Many studies have been carried out on the benefits of extensive reading regarding learners' vocabulary acquisition for reading comprehension and writing as well as limited studies on the effect of vocabulary acquisition on speaking fluency through extensive reading. In fact, this study focused on the usefulness of extensive reading for vocabulary acquisition with a special reference to the Beninese EFL learners' oral fluency. The purpose of the current study is to investigate teachers' perceptions of the effect of extensive reading on vocabulary acquisition to help learners achieve a higher level of proficiency in oral communication. To conduct the study, a qualitative approach was used. Fifteen EFL teachers teaching intermediate classes in five private and public schools participated in the study. The findings from the investigation revealed that teachers have positive views about the benefits of extensive reading for vocabulary development and speaking fluency. Nevertheless, it is noted that extensive reading is not widely practised in the EFL classrooms because it requires time which, teachers claim, is not readily available as they are pressured to complete the syllabus. The participants revealed that students are often loaded with assignments in various subjects, which makes it difficult for them to read short stories or graded readers for extensive reading. Students were generally lazy towards reading and they only read to go to get promoted to a higher class. The participants were of the opinion that extensive reading goes hand in hand with motivation. Accordingly, extensive reading could only have an impact on vocabulary acquisition in learners' fluency when they have the motivation to do so. The study concludes that teachers have a responsibility to motivate their students, and they could develop interest in extensive reading through the usage of short stories and graded readers.

Keywords: Extensive reading, vocabulary acquisition, oral fluency, English as a Foreign Language (EFL)

1. INTRODUCTION

Davies and Pearse (2000) stated that "real success in English teaching and learning is when the learners can actually communicate in English inside and outside the classroom" (as cited in Mart, 2012, p. 91). Vocabulary knowledge is the backbone of an effective communication and its acquisition has been one of the major focuses of researchers in recent decades. Cook (2013) states that "many researchers indicate that real communication is a result of suitable and adequate vocabulary learning as compared with learning grammar rules only" (as cited in Khan, *et al.*, 2018, p.407). While many studies have been carried out on the benefits of extensive reading to improve vocabulary acquisition for reading comprehension and writing skills (Liu & Zhang, 2018; Wang, 2013; Riazi & Moghimizadeh, 2014; Hussein, 2013; Teng, 2015; Yang, 2014; Alsaif & Masrai, 2019; Ahumada, 2015), limited studies have been carried out on the usefulness of extensive reading on vocabulary improvement for oral fluency with students based on the context of EFL (English as a Foreign Language). "One important way to develop vocabulary knowledge is through extensive reading. By reading extensively, students will be exposed to various new scopes of vocabulary..." (Pazhakh, as cited in Riazi & Moghimizadeh, 2014, p.51). Extensive reading (ER) is a "pleasurable reading which exposes learners to a massive amount of reading texts that are appropriate to the learners' language proficiency and linguistic competences" (Grabe & Stoller, as cited in Hussein, 2013, p.3). Wojtowicz (2017) states that "using ER to strengthen oral fluency and increase spoken output quality and

quantity has been mostly neglected in ER research” (p.109). According to Ur (1996), “of all the four skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing), speaking seems intuitively the most important” (as cited in Mart, 2012, p.91).

While the overall aim of learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) is to be able to speak and communicate with it, it has been neglected in most EFL classes in Benin. Students cannot speak English language because they do not have suitable vocabulary to express their thoughts or ideas in the language. Vocabulary is taught in the classroom, of course, especially in reading comprehension, but using it to help students speak English Language remains the main question. This research paper highlights the usefulness of extensive reading on vocabulary acquisition but with a special emphasis on oral fluency improvement with Beninese EFL students. Very few studies have been carried out on EFL teachers' perspectives on extensive reading for vocabulary acquisition and oral fluency with learners in Benin. By using a qualitative research method, this article has conducted an interview with fifteen EFL teachers teaching lower-intermediate and upper-intermediate classes in five secondary schools in the *Littoral' region of Benin*. In this regard, the study aims to seek EFL teachers' opinions on the extent to which extensive reading could promote vocabulary acquisition in EFL students and also aims at finding out teachers' perceptions on the benefits of extensive reading for a higher level of oral proficiency with Beninese EFL learners.

2. PROBLEM STATEMENT

Vocabulary and grammar are the most important components of English language that are normally taught in the classroom, especially during reading comprehension, but unfortunately, these important components of the language are neglected. This study aims at developing in EFL students the appropriate ability that can allow them to read, decode, and understand a passage or text fully and build sentences that are grammatically correct. Although vocabulary is an integral part for EFL teaching curriculum, it has failed to bring students to communicate in the target language. This means that the vocabulary, which is sometimes taught during reading comprehension activities, has not helped students to produce meaningful sentences when they are faced with real life situations of their pronunciation and meaning inadequacy. Students cannot express themselves in English when they do not know the words they must use or when they have a limited knowledge. This inadequacy or lack of vocabulary leads to a breakdown in communication. Generally, it has been observed that extensive reading is not practised with teachers and students in the EFL classroom in most Beninese EFL classes. Extensive reading which is said to boost vocabulary development for a higher level of reading and writing proficiency could also help to boost and improve learners' spoken fluency, but the question is on whether Beninese EFL teachers view extensive reading in a positive light. In view of this, the present study attempts to find out not only EFL teachers' views about extensive reading in relation to students' vocabulary build up and oral performance, but also the possible factors that could hinder its effectiveness on the EFL learner's oral fluency.

3. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The purposes of this research work are:

- To assess teachers' perceptions about the benefits of extensive reading on EFL learners' vocabulary acquisition.
- To collect EFL teachers' views on the possible impacts of extensive reading on their learners' oral performance to find out the factors that could be conducive to its effectiveness with EFL learners.

4. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In order to achieve the above objectives, the research attempted to answer the following questions:

- What are EFL teachers' views on the usefulness of extensive reading on learners' vocabulary acquisition?
- What are teachers' views on the impacts of extensive reading on vocabulary acquisition for EFL learners' oral fluency?

5. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

5.1. Extensive Reading

Extensive reading is “a type of reading instruction program that has been used in ESL or EFL settings, as an effective means of developing reading fluency, comprehension, and vocabulary development” (Bell, as cited in Riazi & Moghimizadeh, 2014, p.51). Extensive reading can be said to mean reading for pleasure, that is, there is no focus on testing or evaluation. Grabe and Stoller (2002) point out that extensive reading is aimed “to expose learners with large amount of interesting texts, so as to read for pleasure” (as cited in Hussein, 2013, p.11). Liu and Zhang (2018) define “extensive reading as a type of reading instruction providing a large number of reading materials to learners independently” (p.2). The primary aim of extensive reading has been said to be for learners to acquire appropriate vocabulary. It could “theoretically result in substantial vocabulary learning, which seems difficult to achieve with explicit teaching during the relatively short period of time that Second Language (L2) learners spend in the language classroom” (Pigada & Schmitt, 2006, p.2). Extensive reading develops good reading habits. Consequently, through extensive reading, learners can develop good reading habits and vocabulary. Learners can come across “more unknown words when reading independently, which brings opportunities to infer the unknown words in specific contexts and thus learn their meanings” (Krashen, as cited in Liu & Zhang, 2018, p.2). In the same vein, The Extensive Reading Foundation (ERF) (2011) provided benefits of extensive reading by pointing out that “it allows students to meet the language in its natural context, and see how it works in extended discourse beyond the language met in textbooks” (p.1). Extensive reading can be a “major factor” in students’ success in learning a second or foreign language (Subramaniam & Zainal, 2016, p.67). Since extensive reading is said to be a pleasurable activity, it is important for learners to be left with the choice of what they want to read.

5.2. Vocabulary Teaching and Acquisition

Vocabulary refers to a collection or knowledge of words that a person uses. It could also be a set of words used in a particular field. Liu and Zhang (2018) describe vocabulary as the “*knowledge of words and word meanings*” (p.2). Vocabulary is the backbone of a meaningful speech. Vocabulary is, most of the times, wrongly taught by exposing learners to words out of their authentic context. Ahumada (2015) cites Harmer by stating that “vocabulary teaching is not about teaching isolated words, learners need to know the meaning of these words in context, their use, formation, and grammar” (p.4). The rate of growth of vocabulary knowledge with EFL learners is quite slow. This is due to some inter-related factors such as “insufficient input, lack of opportunities to use the language outside the classroom (insufficient output), teaching methods used (communicative language teaching vs. grammar-translation method), amount of time dedicated to the English language in general, amount of time dedicated to vocabulary learning in particular...” (Siyanova-Chanturia & Webb, 2017, p.229). Vocabulary acquisition in the EFL context cannot be fully achieved in the language classroom because the time devoted to teaching it is limited. Other aspects in the curriculum such as grammar and language functions must also be taught and, therefore, class time cannot be used for only vocabulary learning. As a result, teachers need to find a way of helping students build their vocabulary alongside the others. Siyanova-Chanturia and Webb (2017) advise that it is important to “encourage EFL learners to engage in a number of extracurricular, out-of-classroom activities that focus on and promote the acquisition of new vocabulary” (p.233). In addition, Nation (2001) is of the opinion that indirect vocabulary learning should gain more attention than direct vocabulary learning usually taught in the classroom, pointing out extensive reading as a good example of indirect activities. Though extensive reading is a good source of vocabulary acquisition, it is preferable to select texts that largely contain words based on the level of the learners. Frequency plays a major role in vocabulary acquisition. The more frequent words appear in a text, the more familiar students become with them.

5.3. Relationship between Extensive Reading and Vocabulary Acquisition for Oral Fluency

Reading is a major source of vocabulary acquisition because extensive reading is a pleasurable activity. It is a valuable medium that allows learners to encounter a variety of words and expressions. Extensive reading advances learners’ ability of “guessing the meanings of unknown words and phrases from clues in the context...students who read a lot outside the classroom may increase their comprehension of the context and also improve their vocabulary, which are essential elements to

advance speaking skills” (Hedge as cited in Mart, 2012, p.93). Since learners cannot be fluent without adequate vocabulary knowledge, “integrating speaking and reading skills deepens students’ understanding of the reading material, reveals any problem they have in understanding a text, and, most importantly, lets them apply the information they have read into authentic speaking practice that improves their fluency” (Zhang, 2009, p.34). Mart (2012) cites Laufer, who pointed out the importance of vocabulary knowledge, by commenting that “without words to express a wider range of meaning, communication in a second language cannot happen in a meaningful way. Learners will improve their speaking competence if they have better vocabulary knowledge which they can get through reading” (p.94). Moreover, studies by Khan *et al.* (2018) reveal that “insufficient vocabulary is a main hindrance and affects greatly in lower performance in speaking skill which is one of the most important parts of language proficiency and development” (p.107). In conclusion, Mart (2012) provides a good summary of what has been put down so far by stating that “communication without vocabulary will break down. One of the most useful ways to improve your communication skills is extensive reading. Extensive reading will help you develop your ability to express ideas, whilst also enlarging the size of your vocabulary” (p.95).

The literature review has mainly provided the significance of extensive reading by previous researchers and has highlighted the impacts of extensive reading on learners’ vocabulary acquisition and speaking fluency. This study will help to ascertain if Beninese EFL teachers have different views regarding extensive reading and its influence on learners’ vocabulary acquisition and oral proficiency.

6. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A qualitative method was used for this study. A qualitative research method is “an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single entity, phenomenon, or social unit” (Merriam, as cited in Nurhadi & Larasaty, 2018, p.144). This research method was adopted due to the nature of the research questions. Its aim is to collect views, opinions, and perceptions of EFL teachers regarding vocabulary acquisition for speaking fluency in learners through extensive reading.

6.1. Participants

A total number of fifteen (15) EFL teachers teaching intermediate classes participated in this study. There were four (4) females and eleven (11) males’ teachers randomly selected from five (5) public and private secondary schools in the *Republic of Benin, West Africa*. They all have an average of five (5) years teaching experience in intermediate classes. Intermediate classes were chosen for this study because students of this level have an average proficiency and ability to read on their own. The teachers were informed about the purpose of the research and were reassured that every step will be taken to preserve their anonymity. The teachers were also encouraged to feel free to express themselves in either English or French in order to provide insight into the research through their views on the subject-matter. Prior to the investigation, a request letter was sent to the school authorities of the selected schools where the study was conducted.

Table1. Gender distribution of participants

		Gender			
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Male	11	73.3	73.3	73.3
	Female	4	26.7	26.7	100.0
	Total	15	100.0	100.0	

6.2. Research Instruments and Data Collection Procedures

The instrument that was designed to collect information for the research is interview. An interview is a conversation for gathering information. A research interview involves an interviewer, who coordinates the process of the conversation and asks questions, and an interviewee, who responds to those questions. Interviews can be conducted face-to-face or over the telephone. The internet is also emerging as a tool for interviewing people. The interview as a whole was semi-structured in order to be more specific with the questions and was administered to only EFL teachers in some Beninese secondary schools. The questions for the interview consisted of five open-ended questions. It is important to report that the interviews with each teacher were carried out based on their own availability. The duration of the field investigation lasted for four (4) months.

For the data collection, each interview with the EFL teachers was audio recorded and the relevant and useful parts of the interviews were written down and developed to check out for similarities and differences in their views. Only the main ideas from the interviews were picked out and presented as findings for this study.

7. PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS OF THE RESULTS

The main findings from the interviews with the EFL teachers have revealed that all the interviewed teachers provided a good account of the benefits of extensive reading for vocabulary acquisition. They stated that good vocabulary development and acquisition can be achieved through extensive reading. One of the interviewees stated that *"introducing students to extensive reading will help them improve on their vocabulary because they will come across numerous words"*. Another interviewee mentioned that *"it could enable students have a positive attitude towards reading English."* The participants mentioned that extensive reading of *"interesting books"* will help them acquire more vocabulary to express themselves in English. This agrees with the findings of Robb (2001) who noted some benefits of ER, including increased reading comprehension level, speed, reading vocabulary, and grammatical structure. However, most teachers revealed that they are aware of the benefits of extensive reading for vocabulary acquisition but it could be a challenging task for teachers to use it as a way of promoting spoken fluency with their learners. A lady from a public secondary school stated that *"extensive reading could be beneficial to students; it is difficult to be implemented in EFL classes in Benin because students do not like to read even in French, how much more in English"*? This lady teaching upper-intermediate students seems to imply that students generally have a lazy attitude towards reading. She revealed that since students find it hard to study books even in French, which is their first foreign learned language, it will be much more difficult to have them read extensively in English. This observation tallies with the study of Anderson (2008, p. 4) who states that *"in many places of the world, reading is not an integral part of people's lives."* Hence, the students' reading attitudes and habits towards reading are poor compared to people who are enthusiastic readers. On the other hand, another participant made a similar claim by saying that students do not even actively participate in intensive reading activities in the classroom. He said they are generally unwilling to participate and in his own words *"are forced to participate because they have to pass their exams."* Most students study English in order to pass tests and exams so as to move to the next class. This finding is confirmed by Maxim (2002) who reported that *"it was likely that students equate reading in English with reading short passages, which naturally kept them away from book-length reading, and they did not have any intention to approach such a mysterious task"*. Maxim's observation agrees with the current result that some of the students believe that time spent on reading would not benefit them in preparation for the standardized English exams. Still, some of the participants blamed the fact that students have been made to lose motivation in the target language because of the nature of examinations and tests. They argued that since most exams are grammar- and written-based, students will only read to pass these exams. A participant acknowledged this by saying that *"teaching English should be to help students speak fluently and accurately"* but that the nature of schools' curriculum does not enable teachers to achieve this goal through extensive reading. Five interviewees gave similar claims revealing that teachers are under pressure to complete the syllabus in time and should ensure that students received good grades at the end of the term. In addition, they specifically reported that limited time is devoted to English lessons. As a result, it would be difficult for teachers and learners to practice extensive reading in the classroom. This also concurs with Davies (2007) who states that *"learning a foreign language is not an easy matter, especially if this learning has a mandatory status in the curriculum"*. Fortunately, some participants provided solutions that could help in the use of extensive reading effectively. They suggested that teachers could motivate and encourage their students to spare some time to read short story books or graded readers at home. ERF (2011) defines graded readers as *"books written for language learners to build their reading speed and fluency, and to give them chances to practice 'real' reading for pleasure. They are called 'graded' readers because they are written according to a pedagogical syllabus which has increasing grade, or level, of difficulty"* (p.2). Graded readers are controlled in terms of vocabulary in order *"to get rid of low frequency words and to make useful words appear more frequently to help learning"* (p.2). In this regard, one of the participants mentioned the role of government in providing libraries with English short stories and graded readers to encourage their learners.

8. DISCUSSION

This study was guided by two main research questions. First, to find out teachers' views about the usefulness of extensive reading on students' vocabulary acquisition and, second, to assess their views on the impacts of extensive reading in relation to students' vocabulary acquisition for spoken fluency. Findings from the study have provided some accounts about teachers' positive views regarding the importance of extensive reading for vocabulary acquisition and speaking fluency; although it is not a common practice among EFL teachers and their learners. Teachers attributed its non-practice in secondary school mainly to student's unwillingness and lack of motivation regarding the English language and, secondly, to pressure from school authorities to finish lessons' planning and syllabuses. This finding is in line with the finding of Huang (2015), whose study revealed that "more than half of student participants in the study were found to be unmotivated readers" (p.10). Also, in the same study, teachers were under the pressure of "finishing the syllabus in time and enhancing students' grades" (p.10).

From the interview with teachers, lack of motivation is a major factor that could impede extensive reading. Motivation is a major issue that needs to be addressed for a successful implementation of extensive reading in the classroom. Nurhadi and Larasaty (2018) states that, "in terms of extensive reading, motivation plays an important role for students. Since it is important, the higher the motivation the students have, the better their achievement in extensive reading" (p.142). Moreover, some interviewees defined the role of teachers in motivating their students to read not just to pass exams or tests, but for their own pleasure and vocabulary acquisition, otherwise students' oral fluency cannot be achieved through extensive reading.

To sum up, extensive reading is supposed to be seen as a pleasurable activity by learners. Familiarising students with extensive reading can promote their speaking ability. Consequently, teachers have the role of capturing students' interest to read for their own pleasure, vocabulary acquisition, and speaking skills. Although there are challenges to be overcome, capturing students' interest is the key. As suggested by the participants, there is a need for teachers to assume full responsibility for their learners' motivation, stimulating them to read short stories or graded readers at home. It is important that the government should play the role of providing school libraries with books for learners.

9. CONCLUSION

Extensive reading is widely acknowledged by a number of researchers as an effective method to boost strong language skills. Though it is widely known for its impact on reading and writing skills, its effect on vocabulary acquisition for speaking fluency has not received great attention. This study has focused on the usefulness of extensive reading on EFL learners' vocabulary acquisition. More precisely, it has paid special attention to the acquisition of vocabulary for oral fluency with Beninese EFL learners through extensive reading. The purpose of the study was not only to find out EFL teachers' perceptions about the impact of extensive reading on learners' vocabulary acquisition for oral fluency but also to find out if there are other issues that need to be addressed to ensure its effectiveness on EFL learners. The literature review has provided an account of previous research on the issues of extensive reading, vocabulary, and speaking skills. To carry out the study, a qualitative approach was used to find answers to the research questions. The interview was the only research instrument that was used to collect data. Fifteen (15) EFL teachers teaching intermediate classes from five public and private schools participated in the study. In summary, the findings have revealed that extensive reading is highly beneficial to students, but factors such as students' lack of motivation, and limited class time are central issues to be addressed for it to have positive impact on learners' spoken ability. The participants suggested the introduction of short story books and graded readers for learners. The teachers pointed out the role of the government in providing schools with libraries fully equipped with English books for EFL learners.

In conclusion, it is important to state that this study has only investigated EFL teachers' perceptions and views on the usefulness of extensive reading on learners' vocabulary acquisition and oral fluency. Due to the small-scale population that was sampled for the study, it might not fully represent teachers' views on the effectiveness of extensive reading on Beninese EFL learners' vocabulary acquisition. More investigation on both teachers and students' views on extensive reading should be carried out in other parts of the country. Similarly, experimental studies can also be carried out to measure the effectiveness of extensive reading on EFL learners' oral performance in *Benin*.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on previous research on vocabulary acquisition in the EFL context, and on the results obtained from the current study, it can be concluded that students cannot solely depend on the classroom activities to improve their vocabulary knowledge for oral fluency. As reported by the interviewed EFL teachers, extensive reading can constitute a springboard for building learners' vocabulary, but some basic issues need to be addressed for it to be, and have a positive impact on EFL learners. In view of these findings, it is firstly recommended that schools should be provided with libraries equipped with English short stories or graded readers for learners. Also, since teachers are responsible for guiding students in their learning, workshops should be organised in raising teachers' awareness about extensive reading, and on how they could promote its practice with their EFL students. Secondly, concerning school curriculum, extensive reading programs should be included, organised, and structured for learners with teachers helping in monitoring and guiding them to ensure that reading takes place. Teachers could create extra-curricular activities such as debates or role play where students can play and at the same time have the opportunity to practice the English language outside the classroom. Finally, Motivation is a major factor that determines the success of extensive reading in EFL learners' vocabulary acquisition. Therefore, encouraging students to read for their own sake becomes a responsibility teachers need to take upon. Teachers are expected to motivate their learners and make them aware that learning English is not only for taking and passing tests and evaluations, but for them to be able to use the language for real life purposes.

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