

Extensive Reading as a Means of Vocabulary Development amongst English Language Learners in Nigeria: Consolidating on Knowledge

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Abstract

Mastery and fluency in a language interestingly, requires vocabulary development which entails learning of multiple active and passive vocabularies in that language. Language is built on words which are essential for communication with symbols of meaning. Reading is a receptive linguistic process that involves interpretation of written symbols which are meaning preserving. In our contemporary times, the act of reading is gradually going extinct, because of obvious reasons – advancements in Science and Technology which has given rise to computer-assisted learning, social media support in information dissemination, high cost of publishing, time constraints and lack of interest in reading, especially amongst youths who prefer accessing information through social media. However, a common saying adjudges great readers to great minds with great experiences, akin to an extensive traveler. This paper ascertains the importance of extensive reading in vocabulary development for academic success, with positive implications for language learners of English.

Keywords: reading, extensive reading, vocabulary development, learning, English as a second language (ESL)

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

In recent times, the issue of vocabulary development, especially amongst second language learners has gained preponderance, owing to rapid changes and advancements in Science and Technology, resulting to new terminologies in the English language. Though the issue of vocabulary development was relegated in the past, as a result of shortcomings of communicative language teaching and the underlying assumptions that second language (L2) vocabulary can be developed through natural, communicative exposure, as in first language (L1) vocabulary development (Horst 2005, Scherfer,1993); researches in this area of study in recent times has greatly advanced.

The growth of classroom-centered research started from late 1980s, with vocabulary development becoming an integral part of language teaching and learning (Apple, 2007).

Knight (1994: 286) observes that “not only do the majority of students studying foreign languages cite vocabulary as their number one priority, but [sic] it is often considered a priority by teachers as well”. This is why the issue of how to better acquire L2 vocabulary has increasingly drawn the attention of learners and teachers (Almasi & Fullerton,2012; Pavicic -Takac,2008).

Due to time constraint in the classroom, ESL/EFL teaching usually relegate extensive reading activities– reading textbooks, journals, newspapers and commentaries– as take home exercises and effective means of vocabulary development for students (Oxford, 1990).

Extensive reading covers a wider scope than intensive reading, because it is relatively faster and more effective in activating already acquired knowledge, as well as facilitating prediction skills in language learning (Ogbodo, et al; 2015).

1.2 The Concept of Reading

Reading can be viewed as the ability to assimilate and understand accurately, any printed material or writings, as well as to recall much of what has been read.

Collins and Cheek (1999) describe reading as a process that requires the use of complex thought processes to interpret printed symbols as meaningful units and comprehend them.

Okebukola (2004) affirms that reading avails humans, the ability to transmit knowledge as well as wisdom of generations to succeeding generations, in a written form. This complements the oral and traditional forms of transmitting culture, such as folklores, proverbs and songs.

In a broader sense, Rubin (2002) opines that reading is a total integrative process that starts with the reader and ends with an intended message, including the affective, perceptual and cognitive domains. The ability to read well is indispensable in human life and must be nurtured from a child's earliest years.

Tracey (2017) views reading as the 'only form of entertainment that is also an essential life skill.' However, the main purpose of reading is to gain comprehension in varying degrees, depending on one's goals.

1.2.1 Levels of Reading

Reading comprehension involves three levels: the factual, inferential and conjectural levels.

- (1) The factual level is geared towards understanding the surface or denotative meaning of what is read.
- (2) Inferential (connotative) level involves creating mental images from the information presented and relating the implications of the ideas communicated.
- (3) Conjectural level aims at developing new ideas and adopting a critical stance on what has been read (Ogbodo et al, 2010).

Effective reading must therefore be an embodiment of these three levels for effective comprehension to take place.

Reading can be broadly divided into Intensive and Extensive reading (Nnamani, 2010).

1.2.2 Intensive Reading (IR)

This type of reading is a slow and thoughtful reading which involves maximum concentration. Nnamani (2010) refers to it as a study type of reading. This type of reading is aimed at grasping the full content of a reading material, for the purpose of examination and other academic purposes.

1.2.3 Extensive Reading(ER)

Extensive reading is the type of reading that is generally done for knowledge and relaxation, with limited concentration. It is not aimed at an indepth grasp of the reading material, but a general understanding of the main ideas expressed—such as reading of magazines, comics, newspapers and commentaries—which involve reading strategies like skimming and scanning. Wodinsky & Nation (1988) opine that extensive reading is important in consolidating previously learned knowledge, as they support new language forms by repeating adequately.

Additionally, it encourages learners to reflect on their interests and needs in vocabulary learning. Nnamani (2010: 148) differentiates between the types of reading in these words:

'Reading is extensive when you read vastly in order to have a general idea of many subjects while reading is intensive, when you read a subject closely for the purpose of retaining most of its contents.'

Extensive reading is the focus of this work, as it guarantees a richer level of vocabulary development in the learners' language repertoire.

1.3 The Concept of Vocabulary Development

Vocabulary development is simply the addition of new words to the already existing words in a reader's repertoire of language. This is different from vocabulary acquisition which implies the learning or acquisition of new words in a language, to form one's collection of vocabulary.

The goal of teaching vocabulary is to create storage of words, meanings and the information relating to those words in the learner's long-term memory, which facilitates students' comprehension (Knight, 1994). Learning from context is not a short-term process. Without a good vocabulary instruction, it is difficult to stimulate learning from context but if taught properly, it is possible for students to learn words in a shorter period (Stahl, 1999).

Dataworks Educational Research (@<https://dataworks.com>) identifies three types of vocabulary as follows:

(1) Academic vocabulary which consist of words that are not attached to a particular area of study and are regular in most academic texts or contexts, for example- expatiate, elucidate, and others. This can be used for evaluation in any given subject.

(2) Content vocabulary refers to words that are used specifically in a given subject area. In Medicine, we have such words as diagnosis, anesthesia; in English, such words as affixation, morphological and others. This can also be referred to as the 'register' of a particular subject area.

(3) Support vocabulary –These are words that are not identifiable in any given area but need to be understood, for effective communication to take place in a sentence. For example – bonds, merchandise, etcetera.

However, vocabulary development in this study accommodates these types of vocabulary, since the essence of vocabulary development is to enhance communication.

Generally, there are many ways of developing one's vocabulary-such as the use of dictionary, reading, ICT-assisted learning, audio clips and others.

This study prioritizes on extensive reading as a means of consolidating students' already acquired knowledge in English as a second language.

1.4 Learning

Learning can simply be defined as the acquisition of new knowledge. A more generally accepted definition according to Ani (2010:76) is that 'Learning can be a relatively permanent change in behavior of an individual, due to experience....Any learning experience that does not achieve this objective is not meaningful...Learning can be casual or deliberate....Deliberate learning takes place in any formal or non-formal educational setting which normally consists of the teacher, the taught and the learning environment.'

This study therefore refers to deliberate learning within and outside the classroom, in an academic context.

1.5 Aim of Study

The study aims at ascertaining the extent, extensive reading can serve as an effective means of vocabulary development especially amongst young learners of the English language in Nigeria.

1.6 Significance of the Study

(1) The study may motivate learners to engage in extensive reading, as a way of improving their language repertoire.

(2) It will also help in revitalizing the reading culture amongst youths, which is currently going into extinction.

(3) Readers, especially students will have a rich collection of both active and passive vocabularies in their language expressions, for better communication.

(4) Teachers will be encouraged to develop the skills of extensive reading amongst students, within and outside the classroom.

(5) Educational curriculum planners will gain the knowledge to inculcate extensive reading in the language policy of the educational system in Nigeria.

2. Literature Review

The importance of reading in vocabulary development have been discussed by many researchers, because of the richness and variety of vocabulary in written texts compared to oral discourse (Krashen 2004; Mason 2005; Nation, 2001, Day & Bamford 1998, Ogbodo et al 2010).

According to Day and Bamford (1998), Palmer first applied the term, extensive reading (ER) in foreign language pedagogy in the early 20th century, to distinguish it from intensive reading (IR) which is reading word for word; and in Palmer's view, extensive reading is 'real-world reading but for a pedagogical purpose.' Although the reader's attention is not on the language but the content, the texts are read for pleasure and information.

Extensive reading is planned for the purpose of language learning which involves learners, reading texts for enjoyment and to develop general reading skills. Although little is known about the average language-user's vocabulary, twenty thousand to a hundred thousand words (20,000-10,000) could be considered adequate for a person's receptive vocabulary.

Nation (2001) views receptive vocabulary as a way of perceiving the form of a word while listening or reading and retrieving its meaning, whereas productive vocabulary involves expressing meaning through speaking or writing, retrieving and producing the appropriate spoken or written forms. Receptive and productive vocabularies are synonyms for passive and active vocabularies respectively. In addition to Nation's assertions, active vocabulary can be described as the ability to use the words in speaking and writing, which is related to passive vocabulary that entails having the knowledge of a word, which is related to reception. Thus, knowing a word means knowing and using it actively and productively, as well as receptively (Reads, 2000).

Many studies have been carried out on vocabulary development amongst language learners (Elley, 1991; Xu, 2010; Newton, 2013; Cho & Krashen, 1994.)

One of the notable studies was done by Horst (2005) who investigated the extent, learners can achieve vocabulary development through extensive reading—specifically on the attitude of learners in deciphering unknown words, through observation, negotiations and the like—which determine the effectiveness of extensive reading in vocabulary development.

In spite of numerous studies in this field, there are very few studies focusing on second language learners of English, especially in Nigeria.

To fill this gap, the study explores the process of English vocabulary development through extensive reading, amongst learners in Nigeria.

2.1 Vocabulary Development Through Extensive Reading in Nigeria

Despite the importance of vocabulary development in language learning, it has been understudied majorly on the basis of the erroneous assumption that learning a language can meaningfully occur in a formal setting, making learning activities outside the classroom seem less important (Lightbrown et al 2002; Stefansson, 2013).

Stahl (1999) emphasizes that the goal of teaching and learning vocabulary is to create a storage of words and their meanings in the learners' long term memory. It is difficult to stimulate learning when students cannot comprehend the medium of instruction, hence the need to extend vocabulary development outside the classroom through the use of relevant materials, such as books, newspapers, novels, comics and the like; in a pleasurable environment outside the regimented activities of the classroom.

The effectiveness of ER in language learning has become a major phenomenon in subsequent studies that followed Palmer's work, such as Hafiz & Tudor, 1989; Camiciottoli, 2001; Leung, 2002; Bell, 2001; Hitosugi & Day, 2004; Yamashita, 2004.

Most of these researchers have examined the relationship between vocabulary learning and reading, instead of measuring vocabulary growth through ER (Moroishi Wei, 2006; Waring & Takaki, 2003, Sahin, et al; 2014). In these studies, the researchers chose the reading materials and administered a general vocabulary test only.

In Nigeria, vocabulary development in the English language which is the official language amongst three major languages in a multi-cultural society, can be a daunting task.

Ani (2010: 77) notes that 'the teacher should recognize these limitations (in vocabulary development) and adjust his vocabulary to meet the needs of the learners....Inappropriate vocabulary militates against achieving the teacher's objectives and those of the taught, because the students cannot learn. Where meaningful vocabulary are used, there is high degree of meaningful learning'.

Extensive reading is therefore geared towards encouraging learners to improve their vocabulary (by acquiring more words and their meanings outside the classroom), in line with their level of education.

According to Renandya and Jacobs (2002), one of the basic characteristics of a successful ER program is that learners read large amount of materials that impact on their instructional output. Extensive reading can therefore cause an increase in the range of vocabulary the learner possesses, unlike direct vocabulary instruction.

However, a lot of factors come to play, such as the readiness of the teacher to see the need for ER; applying and evaluating strategies that promote vocabulary development amongst students; the motivational factors that encourage students to engage in extensive reading; and the extent to which extensive reading impacts on the overall academic success of students, especially in achieving language proficiency.

The above considerations go to show the extent that ER enhances L2 vocabulary development, which up to our present times is still debatable. This study is therefore an attempt to contribute towards this area of research, by going beyond establishing the nexus between reading and vocabulary development, to ascertaining the extent extensive reading can impact on language abilities and the overall and academic success of students in Nigeria.

3. Area Description

The study was conducted in two secondary schools (public and private owned) in Enugu metropolis, Nigeria. These samples were randomly selected to give a more holistic approach to the study.

4. Research Methodology

The research uses a quantitative method, with well-designed questionnaires; aimed at eliciting important responses for the study. A few private interviews were conducted to further validate the completed questionnaires. The sampling accommodated both private and public schools to get a clearer picture of the gains of reading, amongst students in both contexts.

4.1 Presentation of Tasks

The study administered a hundred questionnaires amongst fifty teachers in each school and another hundred questionnaires for fifty students in each of the schools under review.

The teachers' questionnaires tested the importance of vocabulary development and its impact on students' academic performance, especially in a second language learning context.

The students' questionnaires tested the awareness and practice of vocabulary development amongst students and the extent it has aided in their overall academic success.

A total of two hundred responses were received from the administered questionnaires, with respect to the study.

5. Results

5.1 Results on Questionnaires for Teachers

Table 1.

Questions	Variables	Percentage
1. What aspect of English language do you teach?	Elements of Grammar	25%
	Spellings and Punctuation	20%
	Vocabulary development	20%
	Language skills	30%
	Others	5%
2. Do you teach other subjects?	Yes	60%
	No	40%
3. Which?	Art subjects	35%
	Science	15%
	Business related	8%
4. Do you consider vocabulary development essential amongst students?	Others	2%
	Yes	95%
	No	0%
5. How do you encourage this?	Not sure	5%
	Reading comprehension & take home exercises	60%
	Novels and magazines	70%
	Group reading	40%
	Textbooks	30%
6. Where do you think students benefit more?	Journals and other reading materials	10%
	Reading within the classroom context	15%
	Reading outside the classroom/home	85%
7. Why?	There is time constraint in classroom instruction.	
	Students have more time to compile vocabulary notes and internalize it at home.	10%
	Students study better in the company of teachers in the classroom.	75%
	Critical thinking and Summarization skills	15%
8. What language skills do you think can be achieved amongst students through extensive reading?	Spelling correctly	48%
	Rapid reading	22%
	Good pronunciation	15%
	Others	13%
		2%
9. Do you think extensive reading impacts on the overall learning outcomes of students?	Yes	95
	No	0
	Not sure	5
10. In what areas?	Broadened knowledge	30%
	Improved reading and writing skills	30%
	Critical thinking.	20%
	Increased creativity	75%
11. Rate the effectiveness of reading in the overall performance of your students.	Enhanced cognitive development	45%
	Very high	85%
	High	10%
	Average	1%
	Low	3%
	Very low	1%

The above result showed that extensive reading amongst students impacts positively on their learning outcomes, as teachers who assess the students attest to a significant ratio of 96:4 in the rating of its effectiveness in the overall performance of students in the L2 context.

5.2 Results on Students' Questionnaires

Table 2.

Questions	Variables	Percentage
1. Do you engage in reading in school or at home?	School	20%
	Home	35%
	Both	45%
2. Does your teacher encourage you to read in class?	Yes	40%
	No	30%
	Not sure	30%
3. Where do you read more?	In school/classroom	30%
	At home	70%
4. Do you choose your reading materials yourself? Your teacher chooses for you. I and my teacher, parents/choose for me.	Yes	20%
	Yes	30%
	Yes	50%
5. Do you own a vocabulary book?	Yes	75%
	No	25%
	For general knowledge and overall academic success	60%
6. What are your purpose for reading?	For increased vocabulary	25%
	For pleasure	5%
	Improved writing skills	10%
7. Do you find extra-curricular reading (extensive) useful in your language learning of English?	Yes	98%
	No	2%
	Composition	40%
8. In which areas?	Reading	30%
	Spelling	20%
	Others	8%
9. Does your extensive reading improve your performance in other subjects?	Yes	98%
	No	2%
	Very high	85%
10. Rate the effectiveness of extensive reading in your overall academic performance.	High	5%
	Average	6%
	Low	2%
	Very low	2%

The above results reveal the extent that extensive reading contributes to the overall learning process of students, with a very encouraging rating of 96% amongst ESL learners.

6. Discussion of Findings

Data collected from the teachers' questionnaires accorded high premium to extensive reading amongst students, especially in the language learning environment. A very significant number of the teachers (85%) opine that extensive reading is more rewarding, as it gives students the time and freedom to read and explore at their own pace. However, a negligible percentage of teachers (15%) opine that students should be encouraged to read more in the classroom, as the presence of the teacher will give students better guidance, especially in the area of pronunciation. Ultimately, the consensus (95%) is that students should engage in reading, especially outside the classroom and seek guidance from experienced language users, to achieve language proficiency which ultimately impact positively in their overall academic performance.

Results from students' questionnaires confirm that reading (both inside and outside the classroom) is important for improved language learning in English. While majority of the students read more outside the classroom (70%), a fewer number (30%) tend to read more in school, for varied reasons that bother on environment and guidance.

The result shows a lop-sided ratio of 70:30 in preference for extensive reading to class room (intensive) reading exercises.

In summary, the results obtained from the data from both questionnaires, show the perspectives of students and teachers on the usefulness of extensive reading in improving the academic performance and language learning skills of students, especially in learning English as a second language.

7. Conclusion

Extensive reading is crucial for better learning outcomes amongst students, as it helps in improving various aspects of their academic and personal development. The study tries to ascertain the degree of effectiveness of ER in the learning outcomes of students, especially in the L2 environment.

For a progressive extensive reading program, there should be a wide range of reading materials available for learners to choose from –books, magazines, newspapers, comics, and online content– and learners should be encouraged to choose their own reading materials, based on their interests and reading level. Sufficient time should be allocated for extensive reading programs to allow learners to read at their own pace and to achieve their reading goals. Generally, a successful ER program is aimed at achieving reading fluency, vocabulary, spelling, oral proficiency and writing.

In summary, the study confirms that teachers/mentors understand the importance of giving support and guidance to help students choose appropriate materials and develop their reading skills. In addition, the results showed that extensive reading contributes to a high degree towards learners' engagement, especially in a second language context, compared to a stereotyped reading exercise in the classroom.

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