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The Placement of Strategic Design of Extensive Reading Program (ERP) as an Approach in an ESL/EFL Context to enhance autonomous learning

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ABSTRACT

Extensive Reading Program (ERP) as an approach in ESL/EFL context is aimed at helping learners to evolve as autonomous learners. The argument is that in spite of the hours allotted for reading in their designed syllabus in L2 classrooms learners show poor comprehension and communicative skills and hence the paper is problematising the context and seeks the need of ERP in L2 classrooms. The probe ends up in framing objectives for the stated ESL classroom and inculcates strategies and activities for the effectiveness of the program. The experience of conducting an Extensive Reading Program in the Middle East is inculcated for reference.

Keywords: Extensive Reading Program, autonomous learners, problematising, approach, strategies

Introduction

An era when Learning English as a second or foreign language has attained the status of a life skill, the modalities required for the acquisition of the stated status vary according to the given contexts and the requirements. Learning English in the ESL/EFL contexts demands a paradigm shift from the conventional and teacher centered classrooms to the out of the box and learner centered classrooms where the emphasis is on learner autonomy and strategies like need/task based learning which foster the critical thinking skills to make it emerge as a life skill. Our conventional classrooms teach readymade knowledge. Teachers who are filled with knowledge concentrate on teaching that is nothing much more than conditioning, memorizing and belief making thus neglecting the awakening, exploring and the creative spirit that determine the essence of learning. Interactive and learner centered classrooms are emerging in the present scenario to inculcate

learner autonomy among students. More democratic and critical approaches and methods are getting employed in the ESL/EFL classrooms to enable students "to take charge of one's learning" (Holec 3)

Here comes the role of Extensive Reading (ER) as an approach that helps the foreign language learners to acquire language skills (Day & Bamford, 1998). It acknowledges the learner's needs and foster learner autonomy. ER allows the learner to select the reading material so that it encourages independent reading. EFL students can thus make use of this approach to read and understand materials in target language independently and they can read at their own pace. ER is a language teaching procedure that can be introduced to any kind of EFL class with only one condition—students should be literate in the target language and its primary aim should be obtaining pleasure from reading a text (Bamford, 2003). The reading is individualized and learners read large quantities of

text material voluntarily and it becomes a proof of their general reading ability. Reading speed is enhanced along with their exposure to new vocabulary and usage (Tanaka & Stapleton, 2007). Increasing confidence in using the target language is counted as another benefit of this approach.

Literature Review

“The best way to improve your knowledge of a foreign language is to go and live among its speakers. The next best way is to read extensively in it” (Nuttall 128). The philosophy of ER is well stated here implying the numerous benefits of reading extensively. ER facilitates students’ learning and thinking enabling them to communicate in the foreign language. Slater supports the faculty of reading,

Reading a substantial and contextualized body of text, students gain familiarity with many features of the written language—the formation and function of sentences, the variety of possible structures, the different ways of connecting ideas—which broaden and enrich their own skills. The extensive reading required in tackling a novel or long play develops the students’ ability to make inferences from linguistic clues, and to deduce meaning from context, both useful tools in reading other sorts of material as well” (Slater 5)

ER familiarizes the learner to understand and deal with the language used by the native speakers and enable them to use it in their productive skills of writing and speaking. Krashen’s Affective Filter Hypothesis (1982) and Comprehension Hypothesis (2003) need mentioning here. According to Krashen’s Affective Filter Hypothesis, the presence of an affective filter is detected act as a mental obstacle preventing the language learners from fully imbibing and using the input they receive. But when the filter is inert or less active, the learner is able to understand the received message and use it as an input to improve the language competence. This hypothesis recommends a low-anxiety environment for the students to learn better. ER creates this environment that is congenial for learning. Students select their own texts according to their taste, aptitude, level and inclination and read them at their own pace for pleasure. “Incidental learning” (*Modern Language*

Journal 440) occurs and the language acquisition happens subconsciously. Krashen also stresses the need of facilitating students with comprehension input. In Comprehension Input Hypotheses, Krashen states that language is acquired by understanding messages. In other words, we acquire language when we obtain comprehensible input. In ER programs, as L2 learners select the reading material according to their taste, aptitude, level and inclination they get a great deal of comprehensible input. The input in an environment where the affective filter is low or in a tension-free milieu enhances language acquisition.

Effectiveness of ER can be elaborated further here to show its role in complementing or backing up some second language acquisition theories and hypotheses. The L1=L2 Hypotheses and Interactive Model are some of them. L1=L2 Hypotheses suggests that the experience of second language acquisition can be made similar to that of the first language for which conditions have to be approximated. ER may be regarded as a stake for the stated approximation. ER helps the learner to read for pleasure and with its comprehensible input subconsciously helping the student to achieve native like competence in a classroom. Interactive Model proposed by Rumelhart (1980) refers to the complex task of combining the bottom-up processes and top-down processes in reading. Bottom-up process gets the reader to analyze text in small pieces and to arrive at the meaning using the pieces as building blocks. Top-down process gets the reader to make guesses about the content. Learners in ER program get the benefit of using the comprehensible input in large quantity to attain the automaticity of the top-down and bottom-up processes thus becoming an exemplification for Rumelhart’s Interactive model. As pointed out by Day and Bamford, “reading gain without reading pain,” (*Extensive Reading in the Second Language Classroom* 121) the effective implementation of ER program will help the learners to enjoy reading even after the formal courses on their second language learning and thus ending up in increasing their language proficiency.

ER in EFL contexts has shown significant and relevant progression in the comprehensive learning of English as a second language.

Improvement of L2 learners' reading comprehension rooted in their improvement in vocabulary resulting in the enhancement of their skills in writing and oral proficiency are the desired results of the autonomous learning stature of External Reading.

A Sample/Specimen of Extensive Reading Program (ERP) Framework

External Reading Program (ERP), therefore, has to become an integral part of second language learning to improve the communicative skills of the students. A careful and well knit program has to be envisaged for the implementation of ER. To begin with, one has to problematize the context, should investigate why there is a need for ERP in L2 classrooms as there are hours allotted for reading in their designed syllabus.

1. Why students do not show any adequate L2 reading ability in spite of the regular reading classes?
2. Do students actually read much in reading classes?
3. Can the readers decide on their reading?
4. Are the readers free to decide on different conditions of reading (i.e. how, when, how long, what for etc.)?
5. Hasn't reading been cornered by using it only as a vehicle for information about language?
6. Aren't we using it only as stimuli for a series of integrated skills activities?
7. Aren't we concentrating too much on skills and strategies deriving from 'top down' views of reading (predicting, skimming, scanning etc) without reference to 'bottom-up' processes?
8. Is reading fluency a stated aim of reading classes?

When probing is done into these essential features of reading it is observed that classes by themselves do not offer enough practice in the business of real reading. Here comes the role of Extensive Reading Project (ERP).

Objectives of ERP

While designing an ER program desirable objectives have been listed to facilitate and empower students.

1. To improve the ability to read fluently by

- following and identifying main ideas and specific information in short and simple texts
 - with high frequency everyday language with a relatively wide vocabulary range
 - achieving general and detailed understanding.
 - following short dialogues, instructions, and conversations when clearly articulated.
 - assessing their prior knowledge of content.
 - relating personal experiences to topics.
 - applying information from other sources to their own situation.
 - analyzing reasons/causes and results/effects
2. To train to employ all the strategies associated with good readers by
 - identifying specific information by scanning a text
 - locating desired information by scanning a text
 - identifying the gist by skimming a text
 - identifying the main idea by skimming a text
 - identifying the purpose of the text by skimming
 - identifying text organization
 - identifying fact and opinions in a text
 - making inferences when reading a text
 - working out the meaning of a word using context clues in a text
 - using any form of a monolingual dictionary to check their understanding of a word
 3. To encourage students to read a lot
 - choosing reading materials proportional to their level of intelligence.
 - reading without anybody's help.
 4. To motivate learners to read outside class hours independently and extensively
 - making the exercise a student-centered activity devoid of complexities
 5. To enable them to find reading in English an enjoyable experience
 - selecting their reading.
 - reading extensively.
 - Choosing materials that are really engaging and entertaining at the same time informative and comprehensible

Strategies and Activities

To materialize the stated objectives, strategic planning followed by activities demonstrating the plan of action is necessary. Here are some recommended activities.

a) Introduction of the reading material

This phase matters a lot where the teacher should make the learner comfortable in choosing his or her reading material. The teacher should organize and introduce the materials suitable for the students for which the learner's proficiency in the language counts. Access to a variety of texts is desirable where the students can select their reading material to have an easy and enjoyable reading experience. Tips can be provided to the learners in identifying the books from their titles, how titles and genres are related, how to surf a library and create logs, and finally how to order and buy books.

b) How to motivate and support reading?

Continuous motivation is the strong factor that supports learners in an Extensive Reading Program. They should be enthused to read and read. There should be a flood of books where the students can access—where they are able to choose their books according to their will and pleasure. Interactive storybook reading, reading with partners, book reviewing sessions, rating the books they read, questionnaires that check the reading comprehension can be some strategies that can be used in supporting students in their extensive reading.

c) Conferencing

An inevitable and thus effective way to monitor individual progress providing the teacher to build rapport with the learner that result in giving exposure to the students to world of reading as the teacher can understand the interest of the students. This regular teacher-student conferencing foster positive attitudes and becomes a platform for continuous motivation.

d) Refrain from the Over-Use of Dictionaries

Dictionary should be used in an intelligent manner. Every unfamiliar word should not be looked up for meaning. It will end up in

slow, inefficient reading and would kill the pleasure of reading.

e) Reviewing and documenting

ER would result in shaping the thoughts of the reader that can lead them to respond in writing and discussion. Activities like listing new vocabulary, summary writing, short presentations and documenting students' progress are encouraged. Students may keep vocabulary journals where they can write down a new word or phrase that is important with their own definition based on context clues and an example sentence. Later they can check it up in a dictionary for reference. A regular feedback in the form of summary would allow the learners to improve comprehension and their writing ability. Short presentations by the learners on the books they have read demonstrate the essence and reach of their work and can be viewed as a leap in the areas of student independence and learner autonomy. Students' progress in ER has to be traced and documented for it would help the learners to balance their individual needs and manage the reading resources.

f) Role of the teacher

There is no doubt that the teacher's role is very crucial in ERP. It would be advisable that the teacher too read books from the ERP listed library so that students can be very well guided and encouraged to read. The teacher can demonstrate the rationale for what, why, and how to read. Book talk can be made more effective when the teacher participate in it creating a congenial environment for the learners to read extensively.

g) Role of Students

Students should take the complete responsibility of their learning. They should choose their own material to read extensively at their own pace by guessing meanings of the words from the contexts and should be receptive and cooperative to the activities envisaged in the ER program.

Experience of using the specimen in a classroom in the Middle East

An Extensive Reading Program following the stated framework to achieve the mentioned objectives has been conducted in one of the vibrant language centers in the Middle East. The class

consisted of 30 students and the students were motivated to take their responsibility in reading extensively. Assessment criteria were framed where the students were assessed for their Biweekly Journal, Book Report and Presentation.

Assessment Criteria

1.	Biweekly Journal	5 marks
2.	Book Report	2 marks
3.	Presentation	3 marks
	Total	10 marks

Biweekly Journal

New word	Page no#	Part of speech	Dictionary definition	Other forms	Synonym	My own sentence

The journal emphasized on new vocabulary and student’s reflection on what they read. Students were encouraged to table the new words they encountered in their reading experience. As part of their weekly reflection students were asked to summarize the sections of the book that they have read in three sentences.

Book Report

To support, motivate and monitor the learners, students were assigned to submit a book report giving importance to plot, character development, content, organization, general information, mechanics etc. A rubric has been designed to evaluate the same.

Name: _____ Date: _____ Section: _____

Final Grade: Out of 20 divided by 10 = _____

CRITERIA	5	4	3	2	1	POINTS
Plot Summary / Character Development	The plot or conflict / resolution was clearly stated and summarized. Main characters are thoroughly developed and described.	The plot or conflict/resolution was clearly stated and summarized. Main characters are adequately developed and described.	The plot or conflict / resolution is briefly, but clearly stated. Most main characters are described, but not developed.	The plot was not clearly stated or the conflict / resolution was not clearly stated. Some main characters are described, but not developed.	Information covered does not describe the plot, conflict or resolution. Main characters are not developed or described.	_____
Content/ Organization	All necessary information was presented logically and recorded properly. Maintains clear focus.	Necessary information was covered logically and recorded in the proper paragraphs. Maintains clear focus.	Necessary information was covered, but not presented logically or recorded in proper paragraphs. Maintains adequate focus.	Some necessary information was covered but not in a logical sequence or recorded in the proper paragraphs. Attempts to focus.	Minimal necessary information was covered but not in a logical sequence or recorded in the proper paragraphs. Little or	_____

					no focus.	
General Information	All general information is included and completely accurate.	All general information is included and mostly accurate.	Some general information is included and accurate.	Some general information is included, but inaccurate.	General information is missing several parts and inaccurate.	_____
Mechanics Usage Grammar Format	There were no errors or evidence of corrections in the report. Paragraphs were properly indented. Words were well chosen and sentences were concise.	A couple errors occurred in capitalization, punctuation, word usage, sentence structure. Paragraphs were properly formatted. Proofreading evident.	A few errors occurred in capitalization, punctuation, word usage, sentence structure. Paragraphs properly formatted. Proofreading inadequate.	Some errors occurred in capitalization, punctuation, word usage, run-on sentences, and sentence fragments. Paragraph formatting inconsistent. Proofreading questionable	Numerous errors in spelling, capitalization, punctuation, word usage, run-on sentences, sentence fragments. Paragraphs not indented. No evidence of proofreading.	_____
Total out of 20						-----

Presentation

Individual presentation sessions were conducted where the students were given the opportunity to talk about the content and reflect on

their reading. Students were encouraged in using power point presentations. Presentation rubric gives emphasis on their productive skill, namely, speaking.

Name: _____ Section: _____
 date _____:
 Final Grade: Out of 18 divided by 6 = ____/3

Content	Reflection on the book	Grammar	Organization	PowerPoint Presentation	Time	Total
(Introduction to the book and its general overview)	(What they liked/disliked about the book and why)	(Use of simple past and simple present)	(Start, body and end of presentation)	(How much of the relevant content is being put on slides)	(3-5 minutes)	
_____/3	_____/3	_____/3	_____/3	_____/3	_____/3	Total ____/18

The response shown by the students were overwhelming as they selected books according to their choice and read them with great enthusiasm. They maintained their biweekly journal regularly thus equipping them with required vocabulary. They came up with book reports that included the summary and their reflection on plot and characters. As many of the reports were edited individually students got more practice in the production skill, namely, Writing. Presentation skills of the learners were nurtured when the students did their presentations based on their book reports. They were becoming autonomous learners who can be seen taking charge of their own learning.

Conclusion

Extensive Reading Project (ERP) while initiating and implementing as an approach should complement learner autonomy in principle so that the learners would be able to mobilize resources effectively at their disposal during their free-time which in turn facilitate them to get exposed even to the nuances of the target language. The project can support the learners to manage and thus sustain their motivation (by setting short term, yet achievable goals) and becoming a platform where the learners can regularly engage in creative reflection and evaluation of their reading. Imbibing the true spirit of the extensive reading principles, the ER program should employ strategies and activities as solutions to the dilemmas that may precipitate and by developing right attitudes in relevant contexts, to update and make it a practical, communicative, democratic as well as an intellectual engagement.

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