Reading beyond the classroom. Effects and advantages of extensive reading practice focused to be part of the english programs at the Universidad Santo Tomás, Tunja

Nery Yolanda Ruiz de Guerrero, Gladis Leonor Arias Rodríguez[*]

Resumen

El propósito de este trabajo es observar y describir los efectos de aplicar lectura extensiva a un grupo de estudiantes de quinto nivel de Inglés de la Universidad Santo Tomás, dirigido a hacer parte del programa de Inglés. Este proyecto proporciona a los estudiantes un ambiente adecuado para el desarrollo de lectura extensiva por medio de textos reales, que se caracteriza por la práctica de lectura libre y controlada, en la cual los estudiantes tienen la oportunidad de tomar sus propias decisiones bajo la supervisión del profesor. La información fue recolectada a través de los diarios de los profesores, de los reportes orales y escritos de los estudiantes y de las entrevistas realizadas a éstos.

Palabras clave
Lectura extensiva, reportes orales y escritos, lectura libre y controlada, motivación.

[*] Universidad Santo Tomás, Sede Tunja. Departamento de Idiomas. Línea de Investigación: Innovaciones pedagógicas en la enseñanza del Inglés. Grupo de Investigación: English skills in action. Correos electrónicos: garias@ustatunja.edu.com, nruiz@ustatunja.edu.com.

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Abstract

This works intends to observe and describe the effects of doing extensive reading to a group of students who are taking the fifth level of English at Universidad Santo Tomás, this process is part of the English program. This project supplies students a proper environment for the development of the extensive reading through authentic texts, characterized by the free and controlled practice, where students have the chance to take their own decisions under teacher's supervision. The information was collected through teachers' diaries, oral and written students' reports, and from interviews to the same students.

Key words:
Extensive Reading, Oral and Written Reports, Free and Controlled Reading, Motivation.

Introduction

As teachers of the Universidad Santo Tomás; we have the experience to teach English to students from different programs and we observed their interest for developing reading with more intensity. It enhanced us to think that reading is a relevant tool for being developed from the classroom; so we focused our attention in observing the effects of extensive reading with the purpose to be part of the English program, it was done under the parameters of a descriptive Case Study.

The idea that originated this project comes from the need of a group of students of fifth level of English to improve their abilities in reading real English with a high level, to acquire reading strategies useful for their lives as professionals and also know new ways of approaching to knowledge.

Literature review

Three main topics are essential to analyze the effects of extensive reading in the context of this research: Extensive reading definitions and characteristics, learning styles in extensive reading and the integration of extensive reading into the English programs.

Extensive reading definitions and characteristics

Reading has been the most emphasized skill in traditional FL (*Foreign Language*) teaching, universities usually emphasize in *intensive reading* procedures which include short passages, syntactic, semantic and lexical analysis and also translation, nowadays,

extensive reading opens our minds to work beyond the classroom where students have the chance to choose their own resources and are not limited for grammar contents. This kind of reading is not only developed in class but also in students' homes, in the cafeteria, in the park or wherever students prefer according to their own time.

Researchers advise this kind of reading because it easily encourages learners in reading habits; Susser and Robb (1990, p. 15) argue: "Extensive reading evolves reading a large quantity of material or long texts for global or general understanding, with the intention of obtaining pleasure from the text. Further, because reading is individualized, students choose the books they want to read".

Extensive reading generates some contributions in the process of foreign language acquisition such as the learning of new concepts that contributes to reinforce the students' schema-building; Susser and Robb (1990, p. 25) remark: "Extensive reading provides an excellent means of building schema, with this procedure, teachers can expect that their students will come to read English not only skillfully, but with pleasure as well". So knowledge depends on the authentic materials students are exposed to and also the motivation students have to perform this skill.

Day and Bamford (1995:125) suggest the following characteristics of *Extensive reading* that help us to understand the wide range of applying it in our classrooms:

- *Students read as much as possible*. Students have the appropriate environment for reading as much as possible according

to their capacities, habits of reading, interest and motivation; it can be done in or out of the classroom.

- *A variety of materials on a wide range of topics is available.* Material is relevant in this study taking into account that is a significant important aspect for motivating students to read. Moreover Thomson (1983: 58) says "reading can be studied more effectively and enjoyably when students use easy material that they can understand and enjoy."

- *Students choose what they want to read.* Learners have freedom to stop reading material that fails with their interest or level and look for another.

- *The purposes of reading are usually related to pleasure, information and general understanding*. These purposes are started by the nature of the material and the interests of the student.

- *Reading materials are well within the linguistic competence of the students*. The material that students choose to read must be adequate to their proficiency or level of comprehension; the teacher can guide students to do it.

- *Reading is individual and silent.* Students own pace is important during reading; the pace can be into or outside classroom. However there are moments to share the readings among the students.

- *Reading speed is usually faster rather than slower.* Students must do a faster reading taking into account that the material is amazing for them and also most of the vocabulary is recognized by them. Mark (2005:21) suggests "The most important thing about choosing the materials for extensive reading is that they are at least 98% comprehensible to the students. There should be very little new vocabulary and very little new grammar. If the

students can already understand that much of the text, new words can often be learned entirely through context".

- *Teachers guide students to the goals of the program* and *explain* the methodology; teachers *keep track* of what each student reads, and *advise them* in getting the most out of the program.

Teacher not only provides 4the environment for carrying out the extensive reading processes but also guides students, he or she is in charge of following the principles of this discipline; in this way Robb (1990) manifests:

> The teacher's role in the extensive reading procedure is to encourage and help students with their reading, by conferences during of or after class time, and by checking and commenting on written summaries that students do of their reading. Oral or written summaries give students an opportunity to what they are, in fact, doing their reading (p. 7).

Learning styles in extensive reading

What is a learning style? Ellis 1985 describes a leaning style as the way in which a person perceives, conceptualizes and recalls information.

Where do learning styles come from? The students' learning styles are influenced by their genetic make-up, their previous learning experience, their culture and the society they live in.

What kind of learning styles exist? There are many ways of looking at learning styles. This is the classification that Dr's Bander,

R. and Grinder, J. (1995) have done on the Field of Neuro - Linguistics:

- *Auditory Learners* learn best when information is presented in an auditory language format such as teachers' lectures, class discussions, listening to audio tapes, reading aloud or talking.
- *Visual Learners* learn best when information is presented in a written language format or in another visual format such as pictures and diagrams.
- *Tactile/Kinesthetic Learners* learn best in hands-on learning settings in which they can physically manipulate something in order to learn about it.

In this sense, in all academic classrooms, there will be students with multiple learning styles and students with a variety of major, minor and negative learning styles. Teachers can take advantage of these styles and create strategies in order to provide a variety of activities, useful for students to develop their capacities.

Then all the students will have at least some activities that appeal to them based on their learning styles, and they are more likely to be successful in these activities.

In the development of this research there were a lot of techniques or strategies used by students through several reading exercises and students chose their own according to their learning styles.

While reading students took notes, completed graphic organizers, and engaged in other activities that helped them to remember the content they were reading. Also they filled a matrix of key ideas contained in the text. The teachers gave the students some advise about some de-

tails as a mean to differentiate instruction and meet individual students' needs as well.

Some other used worksheets and teacher discussion but the graphic organizers allowed students to translate concepts into visual drafts that could more easily be understood and retained. Graphic organizers also tended to focus students attention to the most important parts of reading passages.

Other students made paragraphs that had a beginning, middle and end. Often, the first sentence gave an overview that helped to provide a framework for adding details. Most of the students emphasized more in looking up difficult words in English Spanish dictionaries, and asked the teachers to translate every sentence into Spanish. However, excessive use of dictionaries puts too much stress on students and keeps them from leaning English.

The integration of extensive reading into the English programs

Some reading activities have been included in the English program of many institutions, one of the most common is the intensive reading that is remarked in specific, detailed and short pieces of reading focused on academic purposes but *extensive reading* hasn't been worked meaningfully in institutions of our continent, different from Asiatic countries which have it as a strength in their programs. Brumfit in Robb (1990, p. 2) noted: "The role of extensive reader in the English programs has been surprisingly little studied". The decision to incorporate extensive reading in the English program

is proposed through this study due to the long term benefits that students receive with this practice.

Moreover Tsang's (1996, p. 4) study contributes to enhance the use of extensive reading as part of the programs when concludes "Extensive reading programs can provide very effective platforms for promoting reading improvement from elementary levels upwards" .Although students and teachers require meaningful investment in time, energy and resources; it contributes in benefits in terms of language and skills development for learners. Davis (1995) also agrees in the integration of extensive reading to the English programs, particularly in countries and institutions where materials and financial resources are adequate.

Further some authors such as Hill and Lewis(1997), Bell (1994), Davis (1995), Elley and Manfghbai (1983), Dubravcic (1996) among others think that extensive reading is not only an optional activity in the classroom but also an indispensable part of any language program due to its contributions in language learning and in the acquisition of knowledge, at the same time, Green (2005, p. 120)proposes "Extensive reading should be incorporated fully in the language programs as a vital component of a task-based approach to second language learning". Through this study it is patent to observe the students' improvement in terms of knowledge because most of the students decided to read about topics of their own career or about general knowledge.

Extensive reading also contributes to improve the use of other skills such as speak-ing, listening, and writing because they make part of communication as Dubravcic (1996, p. 25) states "it combines speaking and reading practices while adding the tone of entertainment to class."

Through extensive reading students also acquire habits of exploring the world by their own and get a positive attitude towards reading which is going to be strength in their life as professionals. Within the benefits of applying extensive reading, this study verified that learners not only improved reading but also their knowledge on the issues they preferred to deepen.

Reseach development

This research is carried out under the parameters of the *Qualitative Descriptive Case study*, according to Merrian and Nunan's concepts. Merrian (1988) asserts that Case Study is an intensive holistic description and analysis on a single entity, phenomenon or social unit. On the other hand, Nunan (1992) argues that Case Study involves a detailed description and analysis of an individual subject from whom observations, interviews, and stories provide the database.

According to the last assumptions, this research has defined some goals objectives and research questions that guide the procedures for collecting data and making the analysis of a specific situation. Due to the characteristics of this study, the researchers choose students' samples, semi-structured interviews and researchers' journals to analyze the effects of applying extensive reading to a group of students of fifth level of English.

Methodology

This study is organized following a logical order under the parameters of extensive reading with spaces for motivating students to read for pleasure, and teachers monitoring the students' work. This chart below shows the description of the principal activities developed in the English classes.

ACTIVITIES	DESCRIPTION
Project presentation	Researchers introduced the project to the students and persuade them on the benefits of developing extensive reading practices as motivation to be involved in the study.
Basis for developing extensive reading	Researchers presented some reading comprehension strategies as tools to develop extensive reading. (explained below this chart)
Extensive Reading practice	Students read long real texts using their own reading comprehension techniques and make summaries and reports to be presented in written and oral way to teachers.
Listening activities	Some real articles were selected to be worked as listening support.
Teachers' role	Researchers checked students' work and enhanced them to read the material, did corrections to the written production, and motivated students throughout a reading environment and the texts.
Students' role	During reading, students chose their own techniques and read as much as possible according to their capacities, habits of reading, interest and motivation; it can be done in or out of the classroom.

To achieve this reading practice, some reading comprehension techniques were given to students in order to start the process and they chose the best for them according to their learning styles:

- *Preparation stage:* this first step helps develop skills in anticipation and prediction for reading a graphic material.
  - Brainstorming to generate ideas that have a high probability of occurrence in the text.
  - Looking at visual, headlines, titles, charts, or other contextual aids that are provided with the text.
  - Predicting or hypothesizing on the basis of the title or first line of a text.
- *Identify the purpose of the reading:* efficient reading consists of clearly identifying the purpose of reading something. In this way you know what you are looking for.

- *Use efficient silent reading techniques for relatively rapid comprehension:* Identify as many cognates as possible (cognates are words that are similar in form and in meaning in both English and Spanish) you do not need to pronounce each word to your self. Try to visually perceive more than one word at a time preferably phrases. Unless a word is absolutely crucial to global understanding, skip over it and try to infer its meaning through its context.
- *Guessing or inference:* this is an extremely wide category, learners can use to their advantage to: Guess the meaning of a word, guess a grammatical relationship, infer implied meaning, guess content message.
- *Skimming:* it consists of quickly running one's eyes across a whole text to get the gist. This strategy gives readers the advantage of being able to predict the pur-

pose of the passage, the main topic or message, and possibly some of the developing or supporting ideas.

• *Scanning:* this is the most valuable category; the purpose of scanning is to extract certain specific information, definitions, key concepts, supported details, names or dates without reading through the whole text.

• *Semantic mapping, clustering or outlining:* these strategies help the reader to provide some order to the chaos. *Semantic maps* are used to make graphics with the relevant information from the text and outline is an organized list of related items or ideas.

• *Vocabulary analysis:* One way for learners to make guessing is to analyze the words according to the function of words into the sentences for example looking for prefixes, suffixes, nouns, adjectives, verbs, adverbs, prepositions, determiners or connectors.

Analysis

Main question: What are the effects and advantages of applying extensive reading to a group of learners from fifth level of English at USTA University, focused to be part of the English program?

Sub-questions
• How does extensive reading contribute with the students' use of English language?
• What are the reading comprehension strategies and communicative strategies most used by the students in developing extensive reading texts?
• In which way does extensive reading contribute to the English program?

Categories*:*
• Extensive reading Contributions in the process of second language acquisition.
• The use of extensive reading into the English program as motivation and tool for acquiring new concepts and improving English use.
• First category: *Extensive reading Contributions in the process of second language acquisition.*

Through data analysis, the effects of extensive reading practice focused to be part of the English program are evident, having in mind that reading is a permanent task in students' life; so the characteristics of extensive reading and the constant contact with a foreign language facilitate the acquisition of this one; in this way Krashen in Bell says (2007, p. 1)"Extensive reading will lead to language acquisition, it includes adequate exposure to the language, interesting material, and a relaxed, tension – free rearming environment"

The students involved in this research were conscious that reading is a *way to acquire new vocabulary* which is useful in their process of learning a foreign language, so in the interview the students manifested their perceptions about the contributions of practicing extensive reading:

Interview, question 3:

"El enriquecimiento de vocabulario ha sido muy importante, he sentido que he aprendido más vocabulario a través de este tipo de lectura"

(Student 1, students' interview, may 21st 2007)

Teachers' journals about acquisition of new vocabulary.

"Students have acquired new vocabulary through reading different texts which are used in their oral reports" (researcher 1, journal, April 24th 2007).

The acquisition of new vocabulary is a tool that makes students feel secure in the moment they write or speak. Nagy and Herman (1987)in Bell argues "traditional approaches to the teaching of vocabulary, in which the number of new words taught in each class was carefully controlled, is much less effective in improving vocabulary growth than simply getting students spend time on silent reading of interesting books or magazines such as in extensive reading practices."

Researchers agree about the use of extensive reading to improve students' background or schema, so Susser and Robb (1990:12)remark "We now teach learners reading skills/strategies for understanding such as content, textual features, theoretical elements, and cultural background", and (1990:25)"Extensive reading provides an excellent means of building schema."

In fact this research shows how students are conscious of their knowledge acquisition through extensive reading:

"Este tipo de lectura me ha servido para enriquecer mi conocimiento sobre mi carrera" (Student 7, students' interview, may 21st 2007).

Also the researchers evidence the students' acquisition of knowledge with this practice:

Teachers' journals about acquisition of knowledge.

"In fact this kind of reading makes students learn new concepts and information, in general, according to the topics they are interested in" (researcher 1, journal, March 20th 2007).

Through this study, students evidenced that reading is the principal means to *acquire information* which will be so useful for their personal and professional life.

At the same time other contribution of applying extensive reading is the acquisition and implementation of useful techniques for reading, writing and speaking. In this way, before starting to read, students acquire extensive reading techniques such as skimming, scanning, analysis of vocabulary, outlining, summarizing, among others, and for speaking they made graphic organizers, semantic maps, pictures or friezes.

These techniques above were implemented to make reading an easy task, avoid the use of dictionary and persuade students to read real texts in English, taking into account that they can be used not only in English but also in Spanish. Bell (2007: 54) points out:"A large number of EFL/ESL requires reading for academic purposes, and therefore needs training in study skills and strategies for reading longer texts and books."

So students spoke about their use of various techniques during extensive reading practices:

"Pues alguna vez utilicé un esquema, parecido a un mapa conceptual con dibujitos que me ayudaron mucho y otras veces uti-

licé palabras importantes, key words" (Student 9, students' interview, may 21st 2007).

Different techniques were given to the students but they chose the best for them, according to their styles of learning, their capacities and preferences.

Researchers manifest in the journals that during this study student used different these:

> First of all, most of the students preferred to read alone, however they used different reading comprehension techniques such as skimming, scanning, analysis of vocabulary, semantic maps and summaries. For presenting oral reports, students used pictures, maps, or just learnt the principal ideas from the written summary (Researcher 1, journal, May 25th 2007).

This study was based on the four skills (listening, reading, writing and speaking). The product of students' reading was demonstrated with the written summaries and also the oral reports which demonstrate if students really did the task. Susser (1990, p. 15) remarks: "Oral or written summaries give students a chance to demonstrate that they are, in fact, doing their reading. They also allow the teacher to determine if students understand their books at an acceptable level"

Second category: The use of extensive reading into the English program as motivation and tool for acquiring new concepts and improving English use.

Teachers often look for ways to motivate their students in their classes, but when they find that through reading itself, it is possible to do this, they can think that it is

meaningful. According to the characteristics of extensive reading, students read for pleasure, they choose the texts they prefer to read, in this way reading is the motivation for students. Day and Bamford (1998:5) "Reading materials select for extensive reading programs should address students' needs, tastes and interests, so as to energize and motivate them to read the books"

The interviewed students recognized extensive reading as motivation to read:

"Extensive reading nos ha servido para desarrollar gusto por la lectura porque escogemos los textos que deseamos leer y esto se nos ha convertido en un habito haciendo que el Inglés sea menos monótono" (Student 16, students' interview, may 18th 2007)

In this study the researchers created the adequate atmosphere for developing extensive reading where the material was the principal motivation factor to develop it, so they documented this in the journals:
"Students feel enthusiasm doing extensive reading, and one of the principal factors was that they chose their own materials and they read for pleasure" (Researcher 2, journal, May 25th 2007).

Finally, extensive reading produced positive changes in students' reading habits such as attitudes towards reading, as well as in the amount of reading that they completed during the process.

Reading has been worked just in specific academic purposes in our schools and universities. Now, analyzing the advantages of this, it is necessary to suggest strongly the implementation of Extensive reading practice into the curricula. Day & Bamford (1998),

Grave (1995) and Krashen (1982) emphasize: "Extensive reading has gradually been gaining popularity as one of the most effective strategies for motivation second language learning at various proficiency levels. Many researchers have emphasized the importance of including extensive reading in foreign language acquisition".

According to students' experiences in this study, most of them claimed the importance to include extensive reading as part of the English program, not only in the last level but also since the beginning of the foreign language learning program.

> Sin duda pienso que este último semestre ha sido muy importante, si bien es cierto que los cuatro primeros han sido significativos en una escala, que nos han enseñado varias cosas, éste ha recogido a todos y nos ha enseñado mucho mas, sin duda alguna pienso que desde el primer semestre se debe empezar con lecturas, o sea incluir dentro de las clases estas lecturas extensivas (Student 4, students' interview, may 21th 2007).

The aspects mentioned before show that extensive reading can favorable affect students' reading, understanding and production, developing the ability to read large quantities of materials in little time; likewise, researchers approve the implementation of extensive reading into the curricula as a way to improve the four abilities belonged to the English learning.
Students claim the need to include the extensive reading practice since the first level as an attempt to improve oral fluency as a way to motivate those students who show little or no interest in studying English programs mainly through grammar contents (Researcher 2, journal, May 26th 2007).

The previous considerations demonstrate that the implementation of extensive reading into the curricula is a gain for our students' acquisition of a foreign language and also an approach to be used in the different fields of study.

To conclude, this data analysis shows that the extensive reading practice permits students to learn new incidental vocabulary in context, to acquire new knowledge, to use different study techniques, to develop motivation towards reading and develop the four language learning skills.

Findings

The effects of extensive reading practice focused to be part of the English program are reveled in the following characteristics:

It is easy to conclude that a successful way to decrease students' negative feeling towards studying English and to improve their reading proficiency is the implementation of a real extensive reading into the English program at the Universidad Santo Tomas.

It is evidenced that students' motivation greatly facilitates readers' engagement in reading and also it is relevant to mention that the students' habits and the social environment are other important factors in the development of reading practice.

Keeping in mind that we learn to read by reading, the amount of reading learners did during this experience was crucial. So learners were encouraged to read as much as possible, at their own pace; written summaries and oral reports were required after their reading. They also were taught to be responsible for their own reading, to admi-

nistrate their time in order to increase their confidence and motivation to read.

Data analysis showed that this group of students, through reading, gained in acquisition of knowledge, vocabulary and also practiced useful techniques to be applied in reading, writing and oral reports.

This study had several limitations: it had limited materials to be used by the students during the experience process, the participants were heterogeneous in terms of educational experiences because they were enrolled in different English courses and their reading experiences differed from one to another; at the same time there were some others difficulties found through the study such as: too many difficult words, overwhelming reading amount, lack of

time for reading, sentence complexity ,no willingness to read long passages, unable to find the main idea, poor grammatical competence and lack of writing ability. In relation to these aspects, authors such as Jacob, G. (2002) says "Extensive reading program has been less than a complete success a problem in lack of reading materials and inadequate preparation of teachers"; and Pickard (1996, p. 155) notes "The use of the dictionary disputes with the main focus of meaning"; because while dictionaries certainly have a place in the development of reading where detail study of the lexical content of texts is appropriate but if learners turn to the dictionary every time they come across unfamiliar word, they will focus only in the language itself and not on the message conveyed. This will result in slow, inefficient reading and minimize the pleasure of reading.

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