

The Effect of Extensive Reading on Developing the Grammatical Accuracy of the EFL Freshmen at Al Al-Bayt University

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Abstract:

The study aimed at determining the degree of the effect of extensive reading on developing the grammatical accuracy of the EFL freshmen at Al-al-Bayt University (a public university in Mafraq city in Northern Jordan). The study sample consisted of 60 male and female students distributed in two groups: the experimental group and the control group; each group consisted of 30 students. The two groups were randomly selected as representatives of the whole population which includes (158) freshmen students. The subjects in the two groups were given a writing test in which a short paragraph was required to be written. Then the researchers started to assign several extensive reading tasks of various topics. These readings were read and summarized in written forms by the subjects in the experimental group. After a period of 6 weeks, (20/3 – 1/5) in the second semester of the academic year 2011/2012, the subjects in both groups were given the same test in which they write a short paragraph about: "The difficulties they face in their university life". The two tests (pre and post) were corrected and the researchers compared their results in order to measure the effect of the treatment, which is extensive reading, on the students' writing grammatical accuracy. The scores' mean value and standard deviation in each group were calculated. The study yielded the finding that extensive reading had a positive impact on enhancing the grammatical accuracy of the EFL freshmen at Al al-Bayt university.

Key Words: Extensive Reading, Grammatical Accuracy.

1.Introduction and Literature Review

Writing has always been a heavy task and a burden over the shoulders of foreign language learners. This might be due to the fact that this skill can be described as the accumulative and final harvest of gaining and acquiring other skills such as reading, listening, and speaking. As a productive skill, writing can represent an obstacle in the process of L2 development since it requires that formal, content, and cultural schemata are obtained and presented appropriately, cohesively, and accurately.

Powell (2006) states that the term "extensive reading" was originally coined by Palmer (1917) to distinguish it from "intensive reading" which is : The careful reading of short, complex texts for detailed understanding and skills practice. It has since acquired many other names such as "pleasure reading", "sustained silent reading", and "free reading".

Regardless of the different names, the characteristics generally include the relatively fast reading to understand material, with the reading done mostly outside of the classroom and at each student's own pace and level. There are few, if any, follow – up exercises, because the aim is for overall understanding rather than word – by – word decoding or grammar analysis. For the same reason, there is minimum use of dictionaries. Most importantly, instead of an inflexible curriculum saddling students with texts they neither enjoy nor understand, with extensive reading the material is generally chosen by the students themselves, who can thereby enjoy some small measure of responsibility for decisions affect in their learning, a basic tenet of communicative teaching (Thompson, 1996).

Hedgcock and Ferris (2009) suggest that extensive reading promotes various types of the needed schemata necessary for writing. They believe that having the types of background knowledge through reading extensive reading is not only helpful to L2 production but indispensable to it. They added that where well-established in L1 and L2 research that, although successful readers may not necessarily be effective writers, it is virtually impossible to find successful writers who are not also good reader. Extensive reading provides writers with material to write about, linguistic tools with which to express ideas, and rhetorical models to learn from.

Hedgcock and Ferris (2009) believe that L2 learners' exposure to L2 input through interaction with native speakers, listening to teacher, radio, and television may improve their comprehension and confidence.

However, these forms of input and interaction are not sufficient to help learners become proficient L2 writers (or readers). Because written text exhibits unique characteristics, only by reading texts ,intensively and extensively , L2 readers build the necessary schemata.

Day and Bamford (1998) present examples on some studies on the reading – writing connection in which the influence of extensive reading extends to writing, supporting the widely held notion that we learn to write through reading. Among these studies they present Hafiz and Tudor's (1989) in English where they were impressed by the gains their subjects made in writing in English, even though they were not given any particular writing tasks in the United States. Michael Janopoulos (1986), in an investigation of university ESL students, found a significant relation between pleasure reading and proficiency in written English. Another example is cited from Fiji in which Elley and Mangubhai (1981) reported that the young children made significant improvement in learning written English structure through reading.

Krashen (1989) studied the power of reading on language acquisition on the basis that reading becomes comprehensible input provided that texts are both interesting and understandable so that they capture the learners' attention. His research on reading exposure supports the view that it increases not only reading comprehension and vocabulary acquisition, but it improves grammatical development and writing style.

Tsang (1996) carried out an experiment comparing the effectiveness of an extensive reading program and a frequent writing program on the acquisition of descriptive writing skills in English by a group of Hong Kong secondary students. His findings show the importance of linguistic input in the acquisition of writing abilities, questioning whether students' writing can improve with activities that exclusively focus on output. Tsang's study shows that, in the area of language use, the reading program was the only one of the three he administered to students which proved to be significantly effective on the acquisition of writing skills.

Escribano (1999) states that through reading we have the opportunity of being exposed to well – organized and well – written pieces of writing which help us to improve our language abilities and to build writing schemata. He emphasizes the idea that through writing we acquire the habit of expressing our ideas in a clear, correct and coherent way, fulfilling a double purpose: to be a medium of communication with others and a means of personal intellectual growth.

Chuenchaichon (2011) investigated the development of paragraph – writing skills in EFL writers through the use of a reading – into – writing method. The study's results show that the reading – into – writing method had a positive impact on the paragraph – level writing development of these learners. The students of the experimental group tended to use more compound sentences and more complex sentences in their writing. This might be attributed to the fact that they had more chance of reading (and working with) texts containing compound and complex sentences.

1.1 Problem Of The Study

The researchers, being instructors of writing courses, noticed that EFL learners at Al al-Bayt university, especially freshmen, face a difficulty in paragraph writing. This difficulty emerges from the fact that most of them are not used to write paragraphs in English at schools. Most of them confront difficulty in organizing ideas, using correct structure, employing English writing styles, and finding suitable vocabulary to express these ideas.

1.2 Question Of The Study

The study raised this question:

To what extent does extensive reading enhance the grammatical accuracy of Al Al-Bayt University EFL freshmen students?

1.3 Purpose Of The Study

This study aims to investigate the degree of impact of extensive reading, which is implemented outside the classroom as an extracurricular activity, on the development of paragraph writing in terms of grammatical accuracy of the EFL freshmen at Al al-Bayt university.

1.4 Significance Of The Study

The significance of the present study emerges from the belief that it, hopefully, provides experimental evidence and support to the proposition that extensive reading, as a free and pleasure type of reading, may improve the EFL learners' grammatical accuracy through reading – writing connection activities such as summaries to overcome some of the difficulties that they face specifically when grammatical accuracy is emphasized.

2.Methods And Procedures (Participants, Variables, and Treatment)

2.1 Participants

The participants in both the control and experimental groups are EFL freshmen who study at Al al-Bayt university which is located in Mafraq city / Jordan. They were randomly chosen to represent the whole population which consists of (158) students. Each group consists of 30 students who share the characteristics below:

- a. The majority of them studied at public schools before attending the university. So they are all Jordanian students with lower intermediate nonnative English who have taken the same academic courses.
- b. They are taught reading courses, which is an obligatory major course, by two instructors who hold the same degree, which is an MA in English language.
- c. They take the same number of periods each week (3 hours).
- d. They study the same reading material (a collection of texts and passages, and same units that include scanning, skimming, summarizing, organization patterns... etc).
- e. They combine males and females of similar distribution (1/5 males, 4/5 females).

2.2 Variables

The variables of the present study are:

- a. Independent variable: Extensive reading.
- b. Dependent variable: Grammatical accuracy of the students.

2.3 Definition of Terms

In this study, grammatical accuracy indicates using correct sentence structures which implies avoiding fragments, run-ons, wrong deletions or insertions, ungrammatical word order, wrong forms, misuse of subject-verb agreement, using incorrect verb tense or verb voice, incorrect plural, and unsuitable articles or pronouns. It is measured by using Storch (2009), Appendix (2).

2.4 Procedures

The researchers pre – tested the subjects in both groups (control and experimental). They were required to write a ten – sentence paragraph about the main difficulties that they face in their university life Appendix (1). The subjects in the experimental group were asked to read several and various reading assignments on different topics along a period of six weeks that extended from the 20th of March to the 1st of May in the academic year 2011/2012. In each assignment, the subjects were asked to read a certain text of two pages and then summarize it and bring it back in the next class. Some sample assignments are provided in Appendix (3). On the other hand the subjects in the control group were only asked to read the course required passages without being asked to read any further extracurricular assignments. After the end of the six weeks, the subjects in both groups were post – tested in writing a paragraph on the same topic of the pre – test. Papers of both tests for both groups were corrected and the results were compared through finding the mean values and standard deviations which are illustrated in Table (1).

The texts produced by both groups in the pre – test and the post – test were analyzed and compared to assess whether or not there was any significant difference between these groups in terms of grammatical accuracy. The researcher used the t- test to estimate the statistical difference in the scores' means in both tests in the two groups.

Grammatical accuracy was measured using Storch (2009) by looking at the total number of errors per total number of words (E/W ratio). It was also decided to look at the 13 errors types presented in Chandler (2003) whose rating instructions are listed in Appendix (2).

3.Results And Their Discussion

Table (1) shows the two groups' total scores in the two tests with their errors of words, means, standard deviations, and minimum and maximum scores.

Table 1: The scores' means, standard deviation, minimum and maximum scores in both the experimental and the control groups in both tests.

Group	Test	E/W	Mean	Standard Deviation	Min.	Max.
Experimental	Pre-test	316	10.53	3.98	5	23
	Post-test	290	9.66	4.43	3	24
Control	Pre-test	265	8.83	3.16	2	14
	Post-test	261	8.70	4.46	2	22

Table (2) presents the results for grammatical accuracy in the experimental group, showing the scores' mean, standard deviation, minimum and maximum scores.

Table 2: Experimental group results for grammatical accuracy.

Test	Mean	SD	Min.	Max.
Pre – test	10.53	3.98	5	23
Post – test	9.66	4.43	3	24

The grammatical accuracy scores for the experimental group are summarized in Table (2). The mean value of the total number of errors per total number of words ratio (E/W) shows an increase in grammatical accuracy in the post – test stage. The difference is statistically significant since the (E/W) of the pre – test results is 10.53 while the (E/W) of the post – test results is 9.66.

Thus, it is noticed that the writing proficiency of the learners in the experimental group has developed due to the exposure to extracurricular reading assignments through a period of six weeks (20/3 – 1/5/ 2012) during the second semester of the academic year 2011 – 2012. Appendix (4) shows each subject's scores in both tests in this group.

The experimental group members were acquired to write summaries for the given assignments in order to connect reading with writing (reading – writing connection activities). Each subject read 10 passages of various topics, then a written summary was presented.

When correcting the participants' post – test writings, the researchers focused on their improvement in terms of grammatical accuracy focusing on the 13 errors in : sentence structure, fragments, run-ons, deletions, insertions, word order, wrong forms, subject – verb agreement, verb tense, verb voice, plural, articles, and pronouns; ignoring awkward sentences, idiom, redundant/ repetition, and problems with capitalization and spelling.

The difference in scoring between the pre and post tests in the experimental group can be mainly attributed to the fact that subjects in this group were exposed to more quantities of readings regardless of the types of topics that were read and summarized.

Table (3) shows the scores' mean, standard deviation, and the maximum and minimum scores achieved in the control group.

Table 3: Control group results for grammatical accuracy.

Test	Mean	SD	Min.	Max.
Pre – test	8.83	3.16	2	14
Post – test	8.70	4.46	2	22

Table (3) summarizes the control group grammatical accuracy scores. The mean value of the total number of errors per total number of words ratio (E/W) shows no statistically significant difference. The (E/W) of the pre – test scores in this group is 8.63 whereas the (E/W) of the post – test scores is 8.60. This clearly indicates that the less exposure to extensive reading as an extracurricular activity may play a role in weakening the degree of improving the writing proficiency development.

The subjects in the control group were not exposed to more quantities of readings as the subjects in the experimental group. This distinction is supposed to be a primary cause of their different results which yielded distinct averages of the pre and post tests between the two groups. Since the subjects in both groups study the same material of Reading Skills under very similar circumstances, the researcher believes that the major reason of the subjects' higher scores' average in the experimental group can be due to their extra exposure to different reading passages as graded assignments. The researcher chose the topics according to the learners' proficiency levels, common preferences, and common learning styles that were noticed by the researcher from the beginning of the semester until the end of the study. Moreover, most of the subjects are familiar to the researcher since she taught them in previous semesters, which means that she knows their levels and most of their interests and preferences. The errors that they made can also be attributed to the fact that most of them have not taken a grammar course yet. Similarly, most of the subjects in the experimental group have not been enrolled in a grammar course; nevertheless, they committed fewer grammatical errors. This can be strongly related to gaining the chance of being exposed to more reading – writing activities. Appendix (5) shows each subject's scores in both tests in the control group.

4. Conclusion

The present study examines the development of paragraph – writing grammatical accuracy in EFL learners through the use of reading – into – writing method via exposure to extracurricular extensive reading. It examines variations in the learners' written performance in terms of grammatical accuracy, which is one of other indications of effective paragraph writing. Two groups of Jordanian EFL learners were compared: an experimental group which was exposed to extensive reading in which assignments were read and then summarized in written forms, and a control group which was taught the required course of reading without being asked to read and summarize extracurricular readings. Both groups were taught a "Reading" course which is a compulsory course in the Department of English Language and Literature at Al al-Bayt University.

The results suggest that the reading into – writing method, or exposure to extensive reading, had a positive impact on the paragraph- level writing development of these learners, who are lower – intermediate EFL undergraduates.

Grammatical accuracy of the experimental group results was higher than that of the control group. A possible reason for this might be that the learners had more chance of reading and working with texts of various structures, word forms, referential words...etc. Thus, extensive reading had a major impact on the participants' written performance in the experimental group.

It is hoped that these findings will contribute to our understanding of the reading/ writing relationship and the adoption of paragraph – writing instruction in EFL university contexts. They may also be useful for the development of paragraph – writing teaching activities that are directed to lower – intermediate learners or even lower level learners in EFL contexts. More specifically, this kind of research may help writing teachers in Jordanian universities to recognize the importance of reading tasks in the EFL writing classroom, as the results point to the positive impact of reading on the development of students' writing skills.

Moreover, exposing EFL learners to a quantity of reading texts of different structures may contribute in reducing the anxiety of confronting the task of writing, which is considered as the most difficult experience in producing L2. Reading can decrease the degree of stress during writing because it offers the L2 writer the bulk repertoire of vocabulary, structures, idioms, discourse connectors, stylistic devices----- etc. Learners will deal with writing in a less confused manner due to the fact that they are ready to produce and express their thoughts and feelings through exploiting familiar and relevant vocabulary and grammars derived from the rich source, which is reading.

Appendix (4)
Experimental Group Scores In Both Tests

Subject Number	(E/W) Pre – test	(E/W) Post – test	Subject Number	(E/W) Pre – test	(E/W) Post – test
1.	13	8	16.	8	6
2.	12	6	17.	10	14
3.	12	3	18.	8	11
4.	9	9	19.	11	13
5.	8	12	20.	5	5
6.	17	24	21.	5	10
7.	14	12	22.	13	13
8.	6	11	23.	10	5
9.	11	6	24.	6	11
10.	7	3	25.	14	10
11.	11	14	26.	11	6
12.	14	10	27.	10	14
Subject Number	(E/W) Pre – test	(E/W) Post – test	Subject Number	(E/W) Pre – test	(E/W) Post – test
13.	23	12	28.	5	4
14.	11	14	29.	15	7
15.	11	11	30.	6	6

Appendix (5)
Control Group Scores In Both Tests

Subject Number	(E/W) Pre – test	(E/W) Post – test	Subject Number	(E/W) Pre – test	(E/W) Post – test
1.	12	4	12.	6	5
2.	13	9	13.	3	3
3.	6	11	14.	12	22
4.	7	15	15.	12	14
5.	7	12	16.	6	6
6.	10	11	17.	8	4
7.	11	8	18.	13	4
8.	14	10	19.	8	10
9.	6	7	20.	2	2
10.	13	15	21.	6	7
11.	9	11	22.	7	9

Subject Number	(E/W) Pre – test	(E/W) Post – test	Subject Number	(E/W) Pre – test	(E/W) Post – test
			28.	9	13
23.	12	6	29.	9	7
24.	13	6	30.	9	13
25.	9	5			
26.	5	8			
27.	8	4			

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