



L1 reading factors in extensive L2 reading-while-listening instruction



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ABSTRACT

Extensive reading has been used as an approach to L2 instruction in foreign language contexts, where there is a need to provide rich and extensive input to learners. Previous research has shown that this type of instructional intervention is associated with improved performance in L2 reading comprehension and writing, as well as with increased positive attitudes toward L2 reading. However, not enough research has investigated the factors that mediate its effectiveness with young L2 learners. This study investigated the role of L1 reading-related factors in L2 learning under extensive reading-while-listening instruction. The findings of the study indicated a relationship between L2 learning gains in writing and positive L1 reading attitudes, a supportive reading environment at home, mother's reading interest, and parents' education level. The study concluded that extensive L2 reading-while-listening instruction allows some learners to gain additional benefits, but without disadvantaging the others. This has implications for teaching programs in the primary school context investigated, which should take learner background profiles into account when implementing this type of L2 instruction.

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1. Introduction

Extensive reading involves reading a relatively large number of texts in order to obtain a general understanding of what has been read (Richards & Schmidt, 2002). In school-based settings, extensive reading has been used as an instructional approach to second language (L2) learning in order to provide learners with rich and extensive input. Research carried out in Canada with primary school Francophone children learning English as a second language (ESL) showed that it was an effective method of instruction (Lightbown, 1991). Trofimovich, Lightbown, and Halter (2013) further showed that different learner background factors interacted with the effectiveness of extensive reading in the Canadian context; a finding consistent with the idea that different types of instruction match different types of learner profiles (Cronbach & Snow, 1977). Similarly to Trofimovich et al. (2013), the present study investigated the role of individual factors in an extensive L2 reading-while-listening program with young learners, but did so in a foreign language (FL) context. As argued by Trofimovich et al. (2013) (see also DeKeyser, 2012), there is a need in the second language acquisition (SLA) field to investigate interactions

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between individual differences and learning outcomes under different types of instruction in order to inform educational practice. The effectiveness of instruction may be relative and depend on certain individual learner variables. The individual factors investigated in this study were first language (L1) reading factors. These are factors identified in the literature as important predictors of L2 achievement (e.g., Sparks, 2012; Sparks, Patton, Ganschow, & Humbach, 2009). In addition, these are factors that may be especially relevant in L2 reading programs involving young learners, since these learners are still in the process of developing L1 literacy skills and may, therefore, display various degrees of ability.

This study aims at contributing to the study of individual differences in L2 instruction. By investigating whether the benefits of extensive reading-while-listening in English as a FL are the same regardless of individual differences in L1 skills or different depending on the learners' level of L1 ability, this study can inform schools and instructors about the appropriateness of extensive L2 reading-while-listening instruction for their students and about the factors they should take into account in order to implement this type of instruction successfully.

2. Literature review

2.1. Extensive reading as an instructional intervention

According to Richards and Schmidt (2002), extensive reading means “reading in quantity and in order to gain a general understanding of what is read” (p. 193). In extensive reading programs, learners read a relatively large number of texts compared with intensive reading, which involves slower reading of a small amount of materials. The goal is that learners enjoy reading and “develop good reading habits, to build up knowledge of vocabulary and structure, and to encourage a liking for reading” (Richards & Schmidt, 2002, pp. 193–194).

In a FL context, where access to input is typically poorer than in other contexts, an extensive reading program can be an effective intervention to maximize learners' exposure to input, both quantitatively and qualitatively. This is an idea compatible with Krashen's (1981) Comprehensible Input Hypothesis (see Krashen, 2008, for an extended version) and his argument that language acquisition takes place through exposure to large amounts of input that we understand and from which we learn incidentally without being aware that we are learning.

Research that has examined the effectiveness of extensive reading in pretest-posttest designs, usually classroom-based studies with high school and adult learners (see reviews by Horst, 2005; Nakanishi, 2014), has shown that extensive reading is associated with significant gains in reading comprehension and writing, as well as with increased positive attitudes toward reading (Day & Bamford, 1998; Waring, 2001; Yamashita, 2004) and considerable gains in vocabulary learning (Webb & Chang, 2015).

Further evidence in support of extensive reading was found in Canada, where an instructional program based on reading-while-listening was successfully implemented with primary school Francophone children learning English as a second language (ESL) (Lightbown, 1991). The program included a combination of simultaneous reading and listening activities that involved reading stories and listening to accompanying audio recordings for 30 min a day. Learners worked individually and independently. As part of a longitudinal study, learners' performance was evaluated at several points of time over the course of six years and results showed that comprehension-based learning was as effective as regular audiolingual ESL programs on comprehension, receptive vocabulary, L2 pronunciation and some measures of oral production (Lightbown, 1992). In addition, the learners in the comprehension-based learning program reported enjoying this type of instruction more than the learners in the regular program.

Motivated by the effectiveness of comprehension-based learning, the importance of such instruction for beginner-level learners (see Shintani, Li, & Ellis, 2013), and the scarcity of recent extensive reading literature related to school-based learners (Nakanishi's, 2014 meta-analysis does not include any studies from primary education), a year-long, small-scale, reading-while-listening intervention program was designed and implemented in Barcelona, Spain (Tragant, Muñoz, & Spada, *in press*). The study included an intervention group, similar to that in the Canadian program, which engaged in independent reading-while-listening practice, and a comparison group, which followed regular teacher-led classes. The groups were compared for linguistic gains in a pre-posttest design (Tragant et al., *in press*). There were 28 learners in each of the two groups. All of them were 5th graders (age 10–11) at the time of the study. The results of the study revealed that participants in both groups made significant pre-to-post learning gains. However, the groups were not significantly different from each other on most of the tests: a sentence imitation test, a listening comprehension test, and a written production task. Significant differences were only found in one of the written production measures (total number of strips filled in) in favor of the comparison group, and in a dictation and a reading/listening comprehension task, in favor of the intervention group (though in this case only posttest scores were available). In terms of attitudes and motivation, the results of a questionnaire showed more positive attitudes in the intervention than the comparison group. For example, 44% of the learners in the intervention group reported English to be among their favorite subjects and 59% said they liked learning English with audiobooks a lot, while none of the learners reported having not liked the sessions. On the other hand, only 16% of the learners in the comparison group reported English to be among their favorite subjects. Similarly, only 16% said that they liked English lessons a lot and 16% that they did not like them.

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