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Utilizing Alternative Reading Resources to Enhance Students' Reading Proficiency at a University in Hanoi

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ABSTRACT:

The aim of this research was to assess the effectiveness of supplementary reading materials in enhancing students' reading abilities. Fifty-eight second-year students from the Accounting faculty participated in the study, which spanned ten weeks. The research employed pre-test and post-test assessments, along with a questionnaire, to gather data. Analysis of the test results, conducted using the t-test for correlated means, revealed that supplementary reading materials within an extensive reading program indeed facilitated improvement in students' reading skills. The questionnaire analysis provided insights into students' attitudes towards reading skills and texts from their textbook, English File Elementary. Moreover, it assessed the efficacy of students' reading strategies prior to the extensive reading program, demonstrating their positive perceptions of supplementary reading materials. The study's findings offer implications for teaching reading skills and recommend avenues for enhancing students' reading proficiency, while also suggesting directions for future research.

Keywords: reading skills, supplementary reading materials, intensive reading, extensive reading

1. Introduction

In recent years, the field of language education has witnessed a growing interest in exploring alternative approaches to enhance students' reading proficiency. Recognizing the importance of fostering effective reading skills among university students, particularly in an academic context, this study investigates the effectiveness of utilizing supplementary reading materials to augment students' reading abilities at a university in Hanoi.

The impetus for this research stems from the need to address the challenges associated with traditional reading instruction and to explore innovative strategies that promote meaningful engagement and skill development. The aim of the study is to assess the efficacy of supplementary reading materials within an extensive reading program in facilitating improvements in students' reading skills.

Specifically, the study focuses on fifty-eight second-year students from the Accounting faculty, spanning a duration of ten weeks. Utilizing a combination of pre-test and post-test assessments, along with a questionnaire, the research gathers comprehensive data to evaluate the impact of supplementary reading materials on students' reading proficiency.

The analysis of test results, conducted through statistical methods such as the t-test for correlated means, offers insights into the effectiveness of the extensive reading program in enhancing students' reading skills. Additionally, the questionnaire analysis provides valuable insights into students' attitudes towards reading and their perceptions of supplementary reading materials, including their strategies and preferences.

By examining the efficacy of students' reading strategies prior to the implementation of the extensive reading program, the study offers a comprehensive understanding of the potential benefits of incorporating supplementary reading materials into language instruction. Furthermore, the findings of the research hold implications for teaching reading skills and offer recommendations for enhancing students' reading proficiency in university settings.

In light of the study's contributions to the field of language education, including its insights into effective reading instruction and its potential to inform future research directions, this investigation serves as a valuable endeavor in advancing pedagogical practices and promoting student success in reading comprehension and academic achievement.

2. Literature review

Reading is a fundamental cognitive process exclusive to humans, serving as a gateway to the vast reservoirs of knowledge humanity has amassed. Proficient reading skills not only propel academic advancement but also foster personal enjoyment and enrichment. It's undeniable that mastering these skills is essential.

Reading skill plays a crucial role in language learning for several reasons:

Vocabulary Expansion: Reading exposes learners to a wide range of words in context, helping them to build their vocabulary more effectively than simply memorizing word lists. When encountering words repeatedly in different contexts, learners better understand their nuances and usage.

Grammar and Syntax: Reading provides exposure to correct grammar and sentence structures. By seeing how sentences are formed naturally in written text, learners absorb grammar rules intuitively, which aids in developing their own writing and speaking skills.

Comprehension: Reading comprehension is a fundamental aspect of language learning. It involves understanding the meaning of written text, which is essential for communication in any language. Through reading, learners improve their ability to understand main ideas, infer meanings, and grasp details.

Cultural Understanding: Reading exposes learners to the cultural nuances and customs of the language they are studying. Literature, news articles, and other written materials often reflect the cultural context in which the language is used. Understanding these cultural aspects enhances language comprehension and fosters cultural sensitivity.

Critical Thinking Skills: Reading requires learners to analyze, evaluate, and interpret information. Engaging with complex texts encourages critical thinking skills, such as inference, analysis, and synthesis. These skills are transferable to other areas of language learning and beyond.

Authentic Input: Reading authentic materials, such as newspapers, novels, and websites written in the target language, provides learners with real-world language usage. This exposure to authentic language helps learners develop a more natural and fluent speaking and writing style.

Motivation and Engagement: Reading interesting and relevant material in the target language can enhance learners' motivation and engagement. When learners enjoy what they are reading, they are more likely to spend time immersed in the language, leading to improved proficiency over time.

Overall, reading skill is a cornerstone of language learning, facilitating vocabulary acquisition, grammar comprehension, cultural understanding, critical thinking, and motivation. Integrating regular reading activities into language learning programs can greatly enhance learners' proficiency and fluency.

In the realm of English education, reading stands as one of the four cornerstone skills. However, the efficacy of teaching and learning reading remains limited in many educational institutions. Numerous works and studies on reading methodology exist, authored by notable figures such as Nunan (1991, 1999), Brown (1994), and Anderson (1999). These scholars advocate that employing appropriate strategies, including both intensive and extensive reading, can significantly enhance students' reading prowess.

Traditionally, many educators have been influenced by the Grammar-Translation method, which emphasizes vocabulary and grammar instruction alongside translation into students' native languages. However, the available reading materials often lack adequacy, relevance, and engagement, leading to student disinterest and demotivation in reading.

3. Methodology

To explore the efficacy of utilizing supplementary reading materials for improving students' reading skills, this research was conducted at a university in Hanoi. The aim was not only to bolster the effectiveness of reading instruction but also to reignite students' enthusiasm for language learning.

Teaching materials being used in the university are basic, consisting primarily of cassettes, textbooks, and traditional classroom tools like chalk and boards. The college library lacks comprehensive reference materials. Additionally, class sizes are large, typically comprising 50-60 students, further complicating English teaching and learning efforts.

Upon enrollment, students at the university exhibit varying levels of proficiency in the English language. While most have studied English, some have also been exposed to languages such as French, Chinese, or Russian during their high school education. However, due to the absence of formal proficiency examinations, students are not sorted into groups based on their language proficiency levels.

This action research project involved 58 out of 65 second-year students within the Accounting Faculty. The participants, evenly split between male and female students (30 males and 28 females), range in age from 19 to 22 and hail from various provinces across northern and central Vietnam. Participation in the study was voluntary.

The study adopted a descriptive approach employing a quantitative methodology, utilizing tests and a survey questionnaire administered to second-year non-major English students at the university. The aim was to evaluate their English reading proficiency before and after the Extensive Reading Program, as well as their perceptions of supplementary reading materials. The primary data collection instruments were the pre-test and post-test.

Initially, the pre-test was administered to gauge students' English reading proficiency prior to the implementation of the Extensive Reading Program. Following eight weeks of Extensive Reading Program, the post-test was conducted to assess any improvements in students' reading skills.

In addition to the tests, a questionnaire was employed to gather quantitative data and provide students with an opportunity to express their attitudes towards any challenges they encountered. This approach allowed researchers to obtain both necessary quantitative data and insights into students' perspectives on their reading experiences.

4. Findings, results and discussion

Table 1 presents the test results, indicating an overall improvement in post-test scores compared to those of the pre-test. The data show shifts in the distribution of students across three categories: Bad readers (BR), Medium readers (MR), and Good readers (GR).

In the pre-test, the majority of students were classified as BR, accounting for 55.2% of the total sample. However, following the implementation of the intervention, this percentage decreased to 37.9% in the post-test. Conversely, the proportion of students classified as MR increased from 36.2% in the pre-test to 46.6% in the post-test. This shift suggests that a significant number of students moved from the BR category to the MR category, indicating an improvement in their reading skills.

Of particular note is the increase in the percentage of students classified as GR. In the pre-test, only 8.6% of students fell into this category, but this percentage rose to 15.5% in the post-test. This finding underscores the effectiveness of the intervention in not only moving students from lower proficiency levels to medium proficiency levels but also in elevating a notable portion of students to higher proficiency levels.

Overall, the data from Table 1 demonstrate a positive trend in students' reading proficiency, with a reduction in the number of bad readers and an increase in the number of medium and good readers. These findings suggest that the utilization of supplementary reading materials within an extensive reading program has had a beneficial impact on students' reading abilities, contributing to their overall improvement in reading proficiency..

Table 1: Test Results of the Three Groups: BR, MR, and GR

N=58	Bad readers	Medium readers	Good readers
Pre-test	32 55.2%	21 36.2%	5 8.6%
Post-test	22 37.9%	27 46.6%	9 15.5%

Results of the questionnaires

- Students' reading strategies before ERP

Table 2. Students' orientation before reading

N$_o$	Questions	Never (%)	Sometimes (%)	Usually (%)
7	Do you typically examine the title and images of a text before reading it to anticipate what the content might be?	30	38.2	31.8
8	Do you review the questions beforehand to help you concentrate on key information in the text before reading?	45	35.5	19.5
9	During reading, do you tend to skim for general concepts initially and then read more attentively?	36	39.1	24.9

Table 2 provides insights into the reading strategies employed by students before the implementation of the Extensive Reading Program (ERP). The data reveal patterns in students' orientations to reading, specifically in three key areas: examining title and images, reviewing questions beforehand, and skimming for general concepts during reading.

For question 7, which focuses on utilizing title and images to anticipate content, 30% of students never employ this strategy, while 38.2% sometimes do. This suggests that a significant portion of students may overlook valuable cues provided by the title and images when approaching a text.

In question 8, regarding the review of questions beforehand, the majority of students (45%) never engage in this practice. Only 19.5% of students usually review questions before reading, indicating a lack of pre-reading strategy to concentrate on key information.

Regarding question 9, which assesses students' tendency to skim for general concepts during reading, 36.2% of students never utilize this strategy, while 39.1% sometimes do. Only 24.9% of students usually skim for general ideas before reading more attentively.

Overall, the data suggest that many students lack effective strategies for orienting themselves to the reading topic and comprehending the text. A substantial portion of students do not utilize pre-reading strategies such as examining title and images, reviewing questions beforehand, or skimming for general concepts during reading.

In summary, the analysis of students' reading strategies before the ERP provides valuable insights into areas where students may require additional support and instruction. By identifying gaps in students' reading orientations and comprehension strategies, educators can tailor interventions to address these

deficiencies and better prepare students for effective engagement with reading materials during the ERP. Additionally, the findings underscore the importance of implementing targeted instruction and providing opportunities for students to develop and practice effective reading strategies to enhance their overall reading comprehension skills.

- Students' Attitudes towards the Extensive Reading Program (ERP)

Table 3 provides insights into students' attitudes towards the Extensive Reading Program (ERP), revealing overwhelmingly positive perceptions among participants.

Table 3. Students' attitudes towards Extensive Reading Program

N_o	Questions	Yes (%)	No (%)
11	Do you believe it's beneficial to utilize additional reading materials to enhance reading skills?	92	8
12	Engaging in extensive reading can cultivate a stronger interest in learning English.	92	8
13	After engaging in extensive reading, your reading skills will improve.	98	2
14	Extensive reading expands your background knowledge.	94	6
15	Extensive reading offers you a wealth of new vocabulary and grammatical structures.	94	6
16	Reading extensively outside of class offers enjoyment and a friendly environment, free from work pressure.	95	5
17	Once this program concludes, you'll likely continue engaging in extensive reading.	85	15

In response to question 11, which assesses the perceived benefits of utilizing additional reading materials, a striking 92% of students agree that supplementary reading materials are beneficial for enhancing reading skills. This high percentage suggests a strong endorsement of the efficacy of supplementary reading materials in supporting language acquisition and skill development.

Similarly, in question 12, focusing on the cultivation of interest in learning English through extensive reading, 92% of students affirm that engaging in extensive reading can indeed foster a stronger interest in learning the language. This finding underscores the motivational potential of extensive reading in promoting student engagement and enthusiasm for language learning.

The data from question 13 further reinforce the positive impact of the ERP, with an overwhelming 98% of students reporting an improvement in their reading skills after participating in the program. This high percentage reflects students' confidence in the effectiveness of extensive reading as a means of enhancing reading proficiency.

Moreover, students acknowledge the broader educational benefits of extensive reading in questions 14 and 15, with 94% agreeing that extensive reading expands their background knowledge and offers a wealth of new vocabulary and grammatical structures. This acknowledgment highlights the holistic nature of language acquisition through extensive reading, encompassing not only language skills but also cultural and contextual knowledge.

Furthermore, students express enjoyment and satisfaction with the ERP in question 16, with 95% indicating that extensive reading outside of class provides enjoyment and a friendly environment, free from work pressure. This positive perception of extensive reading as an enjoyable and fulfilling activity speaks to its potential to foster intrinsic motivation and lifelong learning habits among students.

Finally, in question 17, a majority of students (85%) express their intention to continue engaging in extensive reading beyond the conclusion of the program. This commitment underscores the enduring impact of the ERP in instilling a lasting appreciation for extensive reading as a valuable learning tool.

Overall, the data from Table 3 highlight the overwhelmingly positive attitudes of students towards the ERP, underscoring its perceived benefits in enhancing reading skills, fostering interest in language learning, and cultivating a lifelong habit of extensive reading. These findings provide valuable insights into the motivational and educational value of extensive reading programs in promoting student engagement and academic success in language education.

Table 4. Students' suggestions for good supplementary reading materials

Priority	Items
1	A glossary should accompany each reading text.
2	Reading texts should encompass a variety of types, including articles, short stories, letters, emails, advertisements, diaries, and more.
3	Reading texts should be pertinent and align with the reader's existing background knowledge.
4	There should be a variety of exercise types.

5	The vocabulary should be familiar to students.
6	Reading texts for elementary students should be of appropriate length
7	A designated time should be allocated for each reading text.

Table 4 presents students' suggestions for desirable features of supplementary reading materials to improve reading skills, prioritized based on their preferences and needs. The data highlight several key recommendations put forth by students to enhance their reading experiences and foster skill development.

At the forefront of students' suggestions is the provision of a glossary accompanying each reading text, ranking as the top priority. This feature is deemed essential for facilitating comprehension and understanding of new vocabulary encountered during reading activities, thereby supporting language acquisition and skill development.

Furthermore, students advocate for a diverse range of text types encompassing articles, short stories, letters, emails, advertisements, diaries, and more. This variety allows students to explore different real-life contexts and genres, enhancing their engagement and exposure to diverse linguistic structures and styles.

The alignment of reading texts with students' existing background knowledge emerges as another crucial consideration, emphasizing the importance of relevance and applicability in promoting comprehension and retention. Students also underscore the need for a variety of exercise types accompanying reading materials, enabling them to practice and reinforce their skills through different modalities.

Additionally, students emphasize the importance of familiarity with vocabulary, suggesting that reading texts should incorporate language that is accessible and comprehensible to learners. This ensures that students can effectively engage with the material and focus on developing their reading skills without being hindered by unfamiliar vocabulary.

Moreover, students highlight the significance of appropriate text length and difficulty level tailored to elementary students, ensuring that reading materials are accessible and conducive to skill development. Lastly, students recommend the allocation of designated time for each reading text, facilitating structured and effective engagement with the material.

In summary, students' suggestions underscore their desire for improved supplementary materials that cater to their diverse needs and preferences, while also prioritizing features that enhance comprehension, engagement, and skill development. By incorporating these recommendations, educators can effectively support students in their reading journey and create enriching learning experiences that promote language acquisition and proficiency..

5. Conclusion and recommendations

In conclusion, this study has provided valuable insights into the effectiveness of supplementary reading materials (SRM) within the framework of an Extensive Reading Program (ERP) in enhancing students' reading skills. The key findings shed light on several important aspects of language learning and teaching, as follows:

Firstly, the study revealed students' dissatisfaction with the content and workload of their textbook, English File, underscoring the need for alternative resources to supplement and enrich their learning experience. This dissatisfaction highlights the importance of providing diverse and engaging reading materials that cater to students' interests and learning preferences.

Secondly, the examination of students' pre-ERP reading strategies uncovered the limitations of employing a bottom-up reading model, indicating the ineffectiveness of existing approaches in promoting comprehension and skill development. This insight emphasizes the importance of adopting a holistic approach to reading instruction that encompasses both bottom-up and top-down strategies to support students' reading proficiency.

Thirdly, the data analysis confirmed the positive impact of supplementary reading materials on students' reading skills, providing empirical evidence of the efficacy of SRM in enhancing comprehension, vocabulary acquisition, and overall reading proficiency. This finding underscores the importance of integrating diverse and authentic reading materials into language instruction to support students' language development effectively.

Finally, students' positive impressions of the ERP and their valuable suggestions for improving supplementary reading materials highlight the significance of student engagement and feedback in shaping instructional practices. By actively involving students in the learning process and addressing their needs and preferences, educators can create more meaningful and impactful learning experiences that promote student success and satisfaction.

In summary, the study contributes to our understanding of effective language teaching practices and underscores the importance of incorporating supplementary reading materials within an ERP to enhance students' reading skills. Moving forward, it is essential for educators to continue exploring innovative approaches and resources that cater to students' diverse needs and foster a positive and supportive learning environment conducive to language acquisition and proficiency..

Recommendations:

To improve the selection and adaptation of SRM, the following recommendations are proposed:

Careful Selection: Teachers, leveraging their professional experience and language proficiency, should assist students in selecting SRM that align with their age, language proficiency, and interests.

Accessibility: Chosen materials should be accessible to students, with teachers ensuring that students possess some background knowledge of the topics to aid comprehension.

Adaptation or Compilation: In institutions with limited access to reading materials, teachers can adapt or compile in-house materials tailored to students' needs. These materials should include a variety of text types and tasks to maintain student engagement.

Incorporate Varied Tasks: SRM should incorporate diverse tasks such as reordering, role-play, and problem-solving, catering to students' preferences for interactive and imaginative activities.

By implementing these recommendations, educators can enhance the effectiveness of SRM and foster a more engaging and enriching reading experience for students at the university.

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