



**EXTENSIVE READING: A STRATEGY TO IMPROVE
VOCABULARY, READING SKILLS AND MOTIVATION
IN AN EFL B2 COURSE AT THE NATIONAL UNIVERSITY
OF EDUCATION (UNAE) IN ECUADOR**

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Abstract:

Virtual and online classes have added a new level of difficulties to teaching and learning EFL. Teachers must constantly work to find innovative and new practices to engage students and help them improve their English language skills. The professor of an upper-intermediate university level cohort in Ecuador has chosen to do action research in her classroom to improve students reading skills, vocabulary building and motivation to achieve the set competencies of the B2 level. Based on previous experiences the teacher chose to implement extensive reading throughout the semester to improve the mentioned areas. The teacher first observed the areas the students needed help in, implemented a new strategy and activities, reflected on those activities, and implemented a final exam to see if students improved in reading and vocabulary. Through qualitative data analysis, the teacher was able to see students were more motivated, they improved in reading and vocabulary, and they were beginning to learn autonomously. The implementation of extensive reading was a success for most of the students to improve their English skills and can be a strategy that can be utilized in the future.

Keywords: virtual learning, extensive reading, motivation, reading skills, vocabulary

1. Introduction

English as Foreign Language (EFL) learners rarely have authentic opportunities to practice English in authentic settings. Drbseh (2019) completed a study in Saudi Arabia where English is also taught as a foreign language and students do not have many authentic language opportunities outside of the classroom. He explained that students struggled to find authentic learning opportunities for practicing English language skills. This phenomenon was also observed in the professor's classroom in all areas of English language learning including reading and vocabulary learning. The teacher of this study

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found that since students do not have many places outside of the classroom to practice real-life English, retaining and using vocabulary in various contexts could be challenging for many students. Chavangklang et al. (2019) were also struggling with their students to improve in reading and vocabulary. They found that students' vocabulary grew due to the implementation of extensive reading with the participants of the study. They also found that the ability of their students to comprehend authentic texts also improved due to extensive reading in the course. Extensive reading can be a challenging activity to implement throughout the course but can also give them opportunities to practice English authentically which can improve vocabulary intake and reading skills.

This was seen in an upper-intermediate classroom where students were struggling to obtain the level of B2 in reading and use of English at a university level in the major of English language teacher training (PINE). This level of English in PINE is sixteen weeks long and meets for eight face-to-face classes a week for two hours each day. However, with the COVID pandemic limiting face to face meetings, classes have been primarily virtual. Mahyoob (2020) brings up the point that virtual learning due to COVID has created many new challenges for students including improving reading skills. Students studying online could not retain information or complete necessary tasks to truly improve in these areas. To answer some of the challenges students faced from learning online the teacher worked to find a solution and aid in the improvement of the students throughout an entire semester or 16 weeks of classes following exploratory action research protocol.

This paper focuses on upper intermediate university age students' experiences and the teachers' reflections on the implementation and intervention of the specific strategy of extensive reading in the classroom to see if this strategy improved vocabulary learning, reading skills and motivation in the class while learning virtually. Extensive reading was the strategy implemented by the teacher to improve reading skills since previous studies completed by Wang and Ho (2019), Bui and Macalister (2021), and Pongsatornpipat (2021) explain in detail how extensive reading in EFL classrooms can foster reading, improve vocabulary, improve in general English language knowledge and student motivation to learn autonomously. After reviewing the previously completed studies this strategy was chosen because it can not only improve reading and increase vocabulary knowledge, but it can foster autonomous learning in students, which is doubly important for learners when their classes are virtual in the National University of Education in Ecuador (UNAE).

Another reason the teacher chose extensive reading as an intervention is it has been shown to aid students in feeling motivated to learn English as a foreign language. This was found in a study done by Li, Majumdar, Chen, & Ogata (2021). The participants of this study showed much more engagement in the class and in the materials during the duration of the extensive reading activities. The teacher of the course mentioned in this paper that they were finding many students were becoming unmotivated to focus in class and study independently outside of class due to being in a virtual model of learning for an extended period of time. Therefore, the teacher decided to intervene by using

extensive reading to improve reading skills and engage students more in and outside of the classroom.

Through this classroom intervention, implementation, and reflection, the data below describe how extensive reading not only aided in improving reading skills but also improved many students' knowledge and ability to use new vocabulary words in correct contexts. Extensive reading also motivated students to push themselves to learn autonomously and continuously not only while attending virtual classes but also outside of class time.

2. Literature Review

2.1 EFL and Authentic Materials to Improve Reading Skills

Juraeva and Abdukadirova (2020) explain that in academics authenticity can have many meanings or definitions. In this paper, we will choose to follow Morrow (1977) who defined an authentic text as text that use real-life expressions, language, and manner, which were actually created for native speakers of the language being studied. The authors Juraeva and Abdukadirova (2020) also commented that these types of authentic materials can be used at various levels if they connect to the students' interests and are level appropriate. They go on to conclude that the use of authentic materials can create connections to real life, which in turn can aid students in internalizing the information being learned and can also improve students in the specific skills the authentic materials are being used for. Namaziandost et al. (2022) reiterate how authentic materials can improve students learning, however they focus specifically on authentic texts to improve reading skills and motivate students. This article explains that when students read real texts such as literature throughout the semester it shows students not only improve in reading tests but also have less anxiety and gain self-motivation for reading in English. Rusmawaty et al. (2018) describe how teachers use authentic materials for reading for various reasons such as exposing students to real-life texts, supporting their teaching styles, improving vocabulary and understanding how English is used in different contexts. They explain that teachers all believe using authentic texts can improve vocabulary learning across the board, which makes authenticity a powerful classroom resource. It can be seen how the use of authentic texts is a very important tool in EFL to give students the ability to interact with English in various forms and help them improve in English language learning.

2.2 Extensive Reading and Vocabulary

Research has shown that EFL students benefit from reading for pleasure or reading texts that students find interesting outside of the classroom. Renandya et al. (2019) wrote about two EFL language learners' experiences in two separate case studies. These case studies highlighted how reading fiction or books of interest can greatly improve all aspects of English language learning in a short amount of time. This study highlighted how reading on a regular basis can aid students in not only naturally reading skills but improve

vocabulary and other English language skills as well. Therefore, the teacher conducting this study chose extensive reading (ER) as a strategy to improve English in an authentic manner in this research.

In 2002, Day and Bamford (p. 137-141) came up with 10 principles that ER are based on, and teachers and students can follow to be successful in improving English. These 10 principles were:

- 1) The reading material is easy.
- 2) A variety of reading material on a wide range of topics is available.
- 3) Learners choose what they want to read.
- 4) Learners read as much as possible.
- 5) Reading is for pleasure, and to gain information and general understanding.
- 6) Reading is the reward itself.
- 7) Learners generally read quickly and not slowly.
- 8) Reading is silent and individual.
- 9) Teachers orientate and provide guidance to students.
- 10) The teacher models being a reader.

Based on these principles the teacher enacted extensive reading in the classroom. A study completed by Liu and Zhang (2018) found that vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension were greatly improved. Though they pointed out that the student's ability to choose what they were reading and making sure that text was level appropriate were very important factors. Alsaif and Masrai (2019) describe how ER allows students access to huge amounts of new vocabulary in various contexts aiding in vocabulary learning for EFL students. When students are reading authentic texts in English, they are automatically exposed to vocabulary allowing them to learn new words in different contexts. ER can be an especially useful strategy when students are in virtual learning as it gives students access to authentic materials that they can use autonomously.

2.3 Impacts of Virtual Learning and COVID

Kassen (2022) explains that having learner autonomy is an important aspect for students to be successful in learning a language. He describes learner autonomy as students having control over certain aspects of their learning process. This control could include materials, the form in which they gain knowledge, and decision making about tasks completed. He found that learner autonomy changed due to the shift to online learning during the pandemic. Students were forced to take more control over their learning and teachers were forced to find more materials that promoted autonomous learning.

Fuentes and Flórez (2020) explained that virtual learning has been a demotivating factor for teachers and students alike. Many students struggle to improve and pay attention in synchronous classes, and they do not feel they are gaining as much knowledge as to when they were face to face. They found it is taking a lot of time for students to be in control of their learning and teachers are struggling to support their student's needs. Virtual learning has changed the way students are learning in many countries around the world. Students have had to become much more independent and

take control of their learning. Artaliawan et al. (2021) found in Indonesia that students who were taught around a curriculum based on student centered learning thrived more. This included giving students autonomous work with activities students found interest in or related to. In Bangladesh, Afrin (2020) also found similar findings. Though this study focused on the pros and cons of virtual learning in times of COVID. The researcher described that there were many impacts of online learning and one solution to difficulties would be the use of authentic and interactive materials used during synchronic and asynchronous classes. These factors were not as important to students' improvement in EFL before the pandemic but have become a cause for concern since online learning has become a prevalent mode of teaching throughout the world.

2.4 Student Perception and Extensive Reading

Kassen (2022) found that materials used that gave students more autonomy allowed for them to take more control of their learning and they began to feel more motivated to improve. This is very important when discussing student motivation and improvement in EFL classes. As Sevy-Biloon (2021) points out many students in Ecuador were not motivated in synchronic classes because of many personal factors affecting students during class time. It was explained that the teacher's role in using materials that motivated students was an important factor in student learning. Afrin (2020) also realized that for students to stay motivated they would need various activities to aid in their learning that they were interested in and can control. It has become a common observation and finding that students need to be allowed independence when learning online to improve in EFL and stay motivated.

3. Methodology

The research completed in this article was classroom-based action research in a B2 level classroom of third-year university students in UNAE. The problem that students struggled in improving reading skills and vocabulary was an area that needed to be explored because the teacher of this level repeatedly identified students' weaknesses and difficulties in reading at a B2 level. The teacher also observed students' lack of motivation in online classes. The teacher decided to explore ways to improve students reading skills and increase motivation during the third semester of teaching English B2. Once the teacher realized that reading was an area that needed to be improved the teacher planned intervention or the use of a strategy of extensive reading to improve reading throughout the semester. As extensive reading promoted the use of authentic materials this strategy could also be used to motivate students in their learning.

This intervention included students choosing a fictional book to read at their level in groups and completing scaffolded activities throughout the semester to develop reading skills, learn new vocabulary and gain the ability to read more fluently at their level through reading books that they were interested in at their own pace. Using a strategy that promoted autonomous learning by giving students more control over the

materials was thought to improve student motivation. The teacher observed the students' initial activities and throughout the semester. Students were able to reflect on the extensive reading activities and give their overall opinions on how this strategy improved their reading skills in English and motivation. The students were also given an exam at the end of the semester where they showed general improvement in reading and vocabulary. This improvement was much more than previous groups who took the exam but did not participate in extensive reading activities.

Finally, the students completed the extensive reading activities, described what they thought of the activities and took an exam. The teacher was able to reflect and analyze how the intervention of extensive reading to improve general reading skills and vocabulary was affected through the specifics strategy and activities completed throughout the semester. Each week of the intervention the teacher wrote a short journal entry reflecting on what the students were doing, the observed impact extensive reading was having on improving reading and vocabulary and areas that the teacher could improve in for future extensive reading activities. Below the findings are explained and in the discussion section, these findings are analyzed in depth.

4. Findings

Through observations and informal discussions of two upper-intermediate cohorts, the teacher realized students were struggling with reading and vocabulary improvement in English and individual motivation to learn. Therefore, the teacher implemented a plan following action research protocols to improve reading skills and vocabulary learning for the latest cohort. Below outlines the steps taken by the teacher to improve these areas of English language of the students participating in the course. The teacher first observed the need for implementing a new strategy through regular class observations, informal discussion with students and a review of final exam test scores of previous cohorts. Based on this data the teacher then implemented a plan to improve reading and vocabulary using extensive reading in and out of the classroom throughout the semester. After the implementation of the intervention, the teacher created a questionnaire where students were able to give their opinions and ideas about the new strategy used to improve reading and writing and motivation. Then the teacher also implemented a final exam to see if they not only enjoyed the implemented strategy but that they also improved their test scores as well. The teacher ended the classroom-based action research with data from her reflective journal to give ideas on the implementation of the strategy, how the strategy affected the students learning and how it can be improved in future semesters to include more interventions in future classrooms.

4.1 Comparison of Exam Scores from Two Different B2 or Upper-intermediate Semesters of Students

The researcher first compared the exam scores for reading and use of English from the previous semester of B2 where extensive reading was not utilized as a strategy to improve

reading and vocabulary to the exam scores for the current semester where extensive reading was used to improve the mentioned aspects. The teacher found that there was a significant improvement in reading and use of English showing that students’ ability to comprehend the reading and more vocabulary was internalized and improved by the cohort of students from the current semester where extensive reading was implemented.

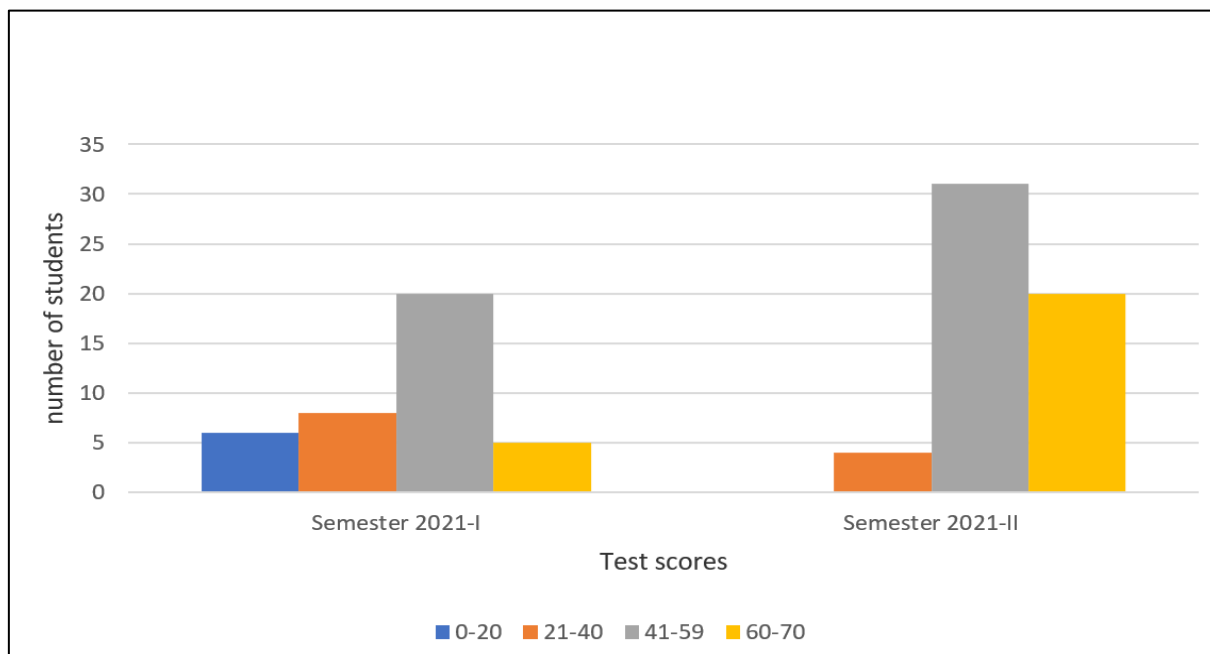
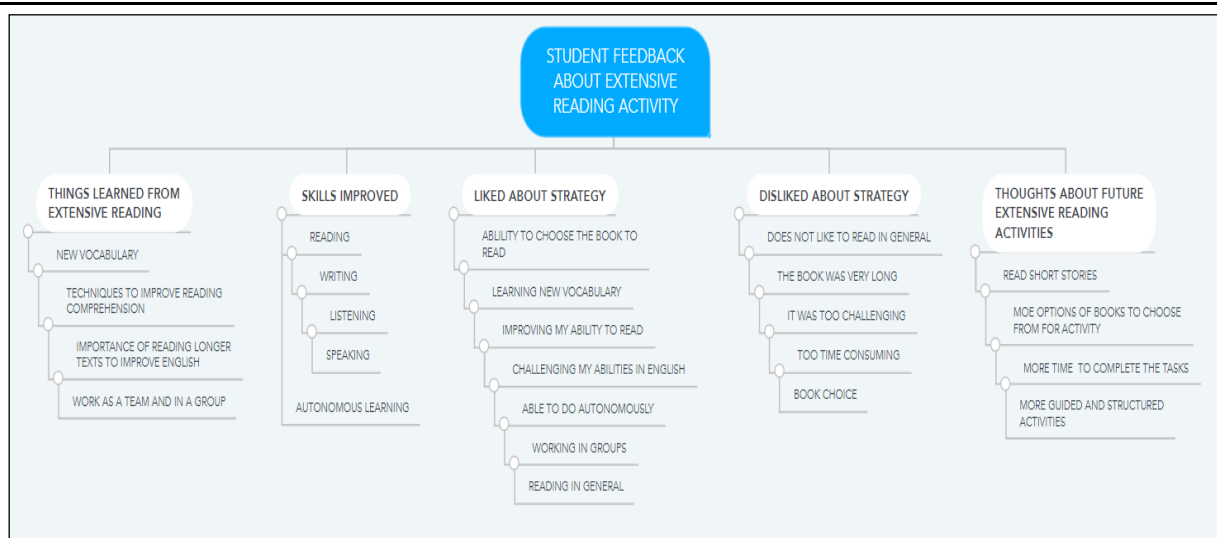


Chart 1: Comparison of Reading Scores and Use of English Scores for the Two Cohorts of B2 Students

The chart above clearly expresses how students in semester 2021-II immensely improved their scores in reading and use of English. In semester 2021-I there were 6 students who scored less than twenty points out of seventy in this section of the exam and in cohort 2021-II all students scored more than 21 points. It can also be seen that only five students score more than sixty points in cohort 2021-I, while twenty students scored more than sixty points in cohort 2021-II. This data supports the idea that extensive reading aided in this improvement.

4.2 Opinions of Students about the Implementation of Extensive Reading

Based on observations of the two cohorts during the implementation of the strategy of extensive reading during the previous semester, the teacher created and administered a questionnaire to find out the students’ opinions of the use of extensive reading throughout the semester. Through the questions about what students learned, skills that were improved, their likes and dislikes about participating in the strategy and how extensive reading will affect their future learning practices the teacher was able to find out how this strategy not only affected students’ grades in exams but also their future learning and English language improvement. The data can be seen in the mind map below.



Mind map 1: Students’ Feedback about Extensive Reading

Mind map 1 shows students’ opinions about the use of extensive reading strategies in their upper-intermediate English language classroom. It describes what the students perceived that they learned, the perceived skills that were improved, what they liked and disliked about the strategy and activities and ways extensive could be used in future classes. The students from semester 2021-II explained that they learned many things, specifically new vocabulary, techniques for improving reading comprehension, the importance of reading to improve their English language skills and working in a group or team.

Students described how they improved all four of the basic English language skills such as reading, writing, speaking and listening when reading a fictional book. They improved these skills through the various activities assigned, including reading the book and group discussion.

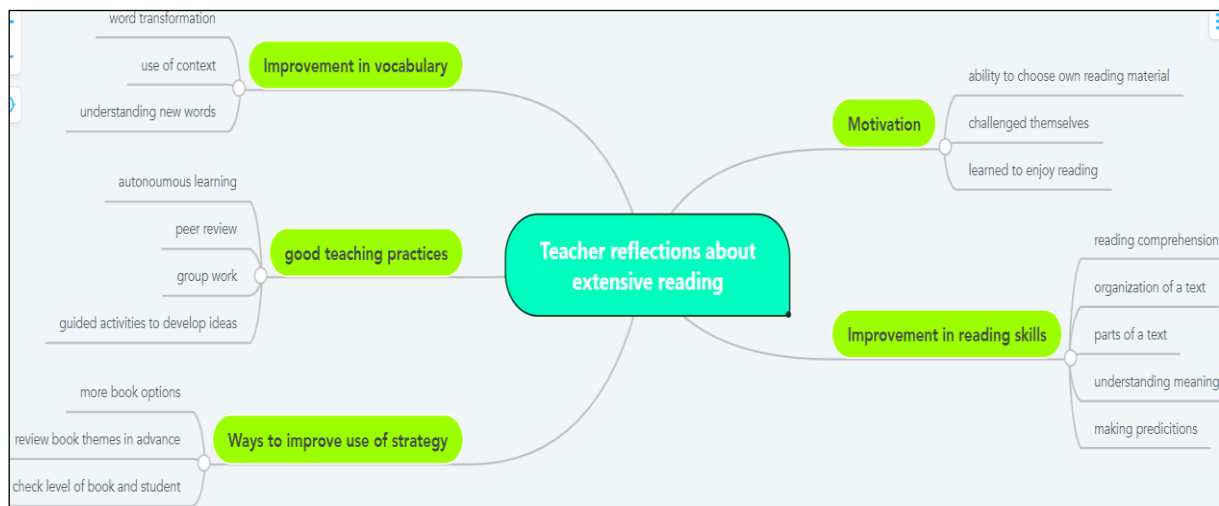
The questionnaire also gave students the space to provide feedback about areas they enjoyed and did not enjoy while participating in this intervention. Most students reiterated that they really like to have control over their learning, learning new vocabulary through reading, challenging themselves, working autonomously and working in groups. This ultimately motivated them to improve their EFL. Many students also pointed out that they do not read much, especially in English. Therefore, they really liked that they found they enjoyed reading more than they thought they would.

However, some students do not like to read and continued to feel this way and therefore did not enjoy the activities. Others did not like the book they chose and found it either too long or too difficult. Some students found reading to take up too much time and could not always read the chapters each week or finish the assigned tasks on time.

Finally, students pointed out that in the future this strategy might work better with short stories, more options of books to choose from and more guided or structured activities connected to the reading. This was the important data collected from the questionnaire.

4.3 Teacher Reflection about Extensive Reading to Improve Reading Skills and Vocabulary Learning

Throughout the implementation of the extensive reading strategy following action research protocol, the teacher kept a reflective journal about how autonomous and independent reading was incorporated into the class, how the teacher saw students' improvements throughout the class and how ER could be improved for better student engagement and learning in future classes. The findings of these journal entries are found in the concept map below.



Mind map 2: Teacher Reflections about Extensive Reading

As the map shows the teacher reflected on various topics. Those topics included areas the students improved in and the teachers' good teaching practices that were utilized during the ER activities and areas that can be improved when using ER in the future in other classes. The teacher explained that she saw students improve their motivation because they had more control over their learning, and they were challenging themselves while reading the book. The teacher also saw students improve in various aspects of reading such as reading comprehension, ability to organize and recognize parts of a text, inferring meaning, understanding the meaning of the texts, and making predictions about the text. Another aspect students improved in was vocabulary learning and retention. Students not only learned new words through reading but also were able to understand how these words could be transformed and used in different contexts. The teacher also realized there were areas to improve in for the following semester such as giving students more options for reading materials. Allowing them more time to review the book and checking that the book chosen was level appropriate for each student before they began reading.

5. Discussion

5.1 Comparison of Exam Scores from two Different B2 or Upper-intermediate Semesters of Students

The teacher of B2 or upper intermediate level taught this level for two semesters. When the first semester of teaching ended, she was reviewing the final grades and realized that most students were struggling in improving in reading and the necessary amount of vocabulary to reach a B2 level. They were also not as motivated to participate in reading longer texts during the semester. Therefore, the teacher decided to implement the extensive reading strategy for the following semester in the next cohort of upper-intermediate students. This group of students actively participated from week one to week ten of class reading a fiction book that they chose from a list of books. These books could be leveled readers or a novel in English.

It can be seen from the chart that this cohort of students greatly improved their test scores in reading and the use of English. These improvements could be in part from actively reading throughout the semester along with the guided activities provided by the teacher.

5.2 Opinions Students about the Implementation of Extensive Reading

Students improved when ER was implemented in the classroom, however, many students had various opinions about how the use of this strategy affected their learning. All the students mentioned that they improved and learned new vocabulary while reading. One student said:

"He learned many new vocabulary words that not only he can understand but also put into context."

Other students mentioned:

"They could now construct words, find the root of the words, and decipher how to define it."

Another student realized

"That he can understand words he doesn't know by reading the rest of the sentence or text."

This type of feedback from students reiterates the findings found by the classroom teacher. It can clearly be seen that students were able to improve vocabulary using extensive reading.

Students also made comments about how extensive reading motivated them to improve in their English language learning. Students mentioned different ways it helped motivate them.

Many of the students had never read a novel or literature book in English. They did not think they could do this. The comments they made showed how surprised and fulfilled they were that they were able to accomplish the task. Many students commented that:

"This was the first time they read a complete book and following the plan given by the teacher they were able to read, understand it and enjoy it."

Others recognized how reading can impact and improve other aspects of their language learning. Reading a book allows for so many ways to improve. One student commented:

"I never really liked to read so I didn't really do it. Now I realize that reading can help me not only improve my reading, but I understand English better now...."

These were just some of the comments made by the students about what they learned, how they were motivated, skills they improved in and areas they liked when participating in extensive reading.

Students also pointed out aspects of extensive reading they did not enjoy or thought could be improved. Some students chose a book that was above their level and this made it hard for them to complete the tasks and the chapters each week. Students commented:

"They got confused sometimes because the vocabulary was too difficult, and they didn't have enough time to complete the weekly tasks."

"They also found the book too long and would have liked to be able to read shorter texts."

These types of comments can help the teacher adapt and change certain aspects of extensive reading in the classroom. Below explains the teachers' reflections and how she will make these adaptations for the future.

5.3 Teacher Reflection on Extensive Reading to Improve Reading Skills and Vocabulary Learning

Throughout the semester the teacher wrote weekly reflections about how ER was improving reading and learning in the classroom. The teacher also reflected on its motivational aspects for individual students and ways it can be improved for the following semester.

The teacher noted that each week it was clear students were improving vocabulary and it was seen in the way students could recognize words, and how those words could be used in various contexts. The teacher also observed how students were able to read at a faster pace and understand various texts that were covered in the class. It was said in the reflective journal during week eight that:

“Today we read a B2 level short text about new technologies and all the students were able to understand it, answer comprehension questions correctly and complete it with the correct form of the words that were missing. I was amazed at how most of them were able to transform those words into the correct form. I am not certain that these improvements are solely from the extensive reading activities they have been doing autonomously but I really, they are playing a major role in the students’ improvements.”

When the extensive reading activity ended the teacher was happily surprised by the students’ final projects, but also reiterated some of the concerns she had about areas that needed to be improved or changed for future classes.

During week 13 the teacher wrote:

“Today the students presented their book reports about the novel or leveled reader they read in groups throughout the semester. It was clear that some students struggled with the book they chose and should have chosen a book better suited to their level of English. Next time I will need to check that students can read at the level of the book they choose. I also realized a few students did not enjoy the book they read, because they did not preview it. I will take the time to do an activity before the students finalize their chose to preview the book and give them the opportunity to change books if they want to. If I do these two things, I think the learning outcome will improve greatly.”

The teacher clearly reflected on the positives and areas for improvement during the activity. Reflection for the teacher was an important step in the action research process.

6. Recommendations and Conclusions

This paper was written in response to the need for adapting strategies in the classroom due to students’ inability to improve in reading and use of English areas. Students were struggling to reach a B2 level in their EFL classes and were showing less and less motivation to do so because of the virtual learning mode. Through the classroom-based research conducted the teacher can recommend that extensive reading and other authentic strategies can be used in the classroom to aid in EFL improvement and general motivation for English language learners. These types of real learning in the classroom can push students to learn autonomously and challenge them to want to improve in

English language skills. The researcher can also use this study to improve these authentic strategies in future B2 level classes.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

About the Author

Julia Sevy-Biloon has been working in EFL for the last 12 years at different levels of education. For the last 6 years, she has been working at UNAE as a teacher and researcher in the field of EFL. She is interested in methods and strategies for improving EFL in the classroom and in the country.

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