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**The effect of a semi-extensive reading program on the narrative
writing ability of EFL students**

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Requirements for the Degree of Master**

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In the Name of God



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To My Dear Parents
for their lifelong support &
encouragement

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Abstract

Extensive reading (ER) as a beneficial tool for improving language proficiency has drawn a lot of research attention during the last decades. Despite the countless positive results obtained by many researches concerning the overwhelming evidence in support of extensive reading, scant studies as far as EFL reading in Iran is concerned, have been carried out to probe the effect of extensive reading on language skills particularly writing ability and teachers have failed to use this powerful tool effectively. The current study incorporated a controlled semi-extensive reading program as recommended by Shillaw (1999) into the language classroom and investigated the embedded impact of the semi-extensive reading with graded readers on the students' narrative writing performance. The participants consisted of twenty students in the experimental group and twenty six in the control group who were studying English as a foreign language at intermediate level in Gooyesh Language Institute in Iran. In both groups some useful techniques concerning narrative writing were taught, whereas in the experimental group the students were exposed to a semi-extensive reading program with graded readers as well. Students in both groups were required to write three narratives throughout the term and narratives were evaluated holistically on five analytical scales (content, organization, vocabulary, language use and mechanics) by two independent raters. The scores of the two raters were averaged and entered

for statistical analysis. The findings revealed that the implementation of the semi-extensive reading program with graded readers was beneficial in improving the students' narrative writing performance since the students in the experimental group showed significant improvement in their overall narrative writing ability. However, the students in the control group did not show any significant improvement in narrative writing performance on three time intervals despite being taught the techniques of narrative writing. Therefore, it could be claimed that exposing EFL learners to large amounts of comprehensible input in a semi-extensive reading program developed their narrative writing performance. The findings of this study will be of pedagogical and practical value particularly to language teachers and administrators. They can integrate extensive reading with various types of graded readers into their curriculum so that the students can benefit from its power in facilitating the process of mastering the language.

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1.1. Preliminaries

As the world is becoming a global village with non-native speakers of English outnumbering native speakers three to one (Power, 2005), English is undoubtedly regarded as the most well-known communication medium internationally. Therefore, in ESL and EFL countries, great endeavor is being made in order to pave the way for students who are making an effort to succeed in language learning. Many researchers and scholars have recommended the implementation of extensive reading program (ERP) as a powerful strategy in accelerating the tedious, burdensome path of language learning.

Reading is a crucial activity in modern life and the skill most emphasized in EFL practice. It is a vital skill to master if a learner is going to become proficient in all aspects of language learning. Nuttall (1996) claims that next to going to live among native speakers, the best way of improving one's knowledge of a foreign language is to read extensively in it.

In recent years, educators involved in foreign language instruction have become increasingly aware of the importance of extensive reading, defined by Hafiz and Tudor as "the reading of large amounts of material in the second language (L2) over time for personal pleasure or interest". (1989, p.4)

Despite its worldwide reputation, extensive reading in English is not welcomed into the educational curriculum and language institutes in Iran. Most teachers emphasize intensive reading requiring the students to scrutinize a text or a passage very carefully and unfortunately underestimate the power of extensive reading. Many teachers and administrators do not welcome extensive reading with wide open arms since ER's immediate effect on language learning is not obvious. Moreover, because of the necessity of frequent examinations and quizzes, the teachers are under tremendous pressure to finish the textbooks and meet the needs of the syllabus.

As an English instructor, I've always had the inspiration of using extensive reading as a supplement to the fixed syllabus of the institute in my classes. During the years I was learning English at different institutes, the experience of reading simplified story books on my own proved to be absolutely invaluable in improving my English proficiency. Ever since I've started teaching English, the idea of incorporating extensive reading with graded readers into my classes has been on my brain and it was triggered when I was making a choice regarding the topic of my dissertation.

Unfortunately, we can hardly claim to have a good 'reading-habit' in Iran with which students may more effectively develop their English language skills. In

order to facilitate this challenging journey of language learning, extensive reading should be the underpinning of all foreign language reading instruction and the students need to be encouraged to use the incredible benefits of ER with wide open arms.

Motivated by 1) Krashen (1982)'s input hypothesis about second language acquisition and 2) the findings of previous research on extensive reading, which suggest that large amounts of comprehensible input can help students improve their language proficiency in general and their writing skills in particular, the current study incorporated a semi-extensive reading program into the language classroom and probed its impact on the students' narrative writing performance.

Krashen's input hypothesis states that the key factor determining acquisition of competence in an L2 is exposure to large amounts of meaningful, interesting and relevant L2 input material if learners are to reach a high level of proficiency in the target language.

As suggested by Day and Bamford (1998), the reading materials in the extensive reading programs should be essentially $i - 1$, containing a very small number of unknown words and difficult syntactic structures. Reading very easy material at $i - 1$ level builds confidence and makes it clear to the students that this is a different kind of reading practice from what they are used to. The fact that even i

minus 1 text includes i minus 1 vocabulary and syntactic structures as well as i (the reader's current level of linguistic competence) and i+1 (elements beyond the reader's current competence) is undeniable. However, as Day and Bamford (1998) states:

As long as the bulk of vocabulary and grammar is well within the reader's competence without too many i+1 distractions, development of sight vocabulary is made possible and there will be an increase in the students' confidence and motivation in reading". (p.17)

Shillaw (1999) and Duzzy (2003) recommended the implementation of semi-extensive reading programs with graded readers in which the entire class reads the same book with assistance from the teacher. They argued that this gives the students the opportunity to improve their linguistic skills and gives weak or reluctant readers a fresh new start before moving on to reading independently.

Among language skills, writing is regarded as the most difficult skill by students in EFL practice and it is still a nightmare for many EFL students. First of all, many students have had a harrowing experience writing compositions since they can hardly come up with new ideas to start writing. Next, they may rarely feel interested in the topics assigned or even do not feel competent enough to write a composition. However, narrative writing compared with descriptive, argumentative

and expository writing is the easiest. As argued by Grabe and Kaplan (1996), the task of narration is generally considered to be the least cognitively demanding writing task.

1.2. Statement of the problem

Despite the worldwide popularity of extensive reading, it is not readily welcomed into the educational curriculum and language institutes in Iran and the invaluable benefits of ER are underestimated. In Spite of the countless positive results obtained by many researches concerning the overwhelming evidence in support of extensive reading, teachers are still uncertain about the effects of ER which usually do not occur in a short period of time; hence, they focus exclusively on intensive reading.

If Iranian students of English are going to be more proficient in English as the dominant international language, using the power of extensive reading is crucial in paving the way for their success. However, neither teachers nor students seem to have discovered the precious benefits of reading large quantities of meaningful and interesting material and failed to use its undeniable power.

In order to upgrade EFL students' language proficiency, in general, and writing ability, in particular, extensive reading seems to be an indispensable tool.