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EXTENSIVE READING AND VOCABULARY DEVELOPMENT IN EFL LEARNERS: A YEAR-LONG STUDY IN FERGANA PRIMARY AND SECONDARY SCHOOLS

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Abstract: This study examined the effect of a structured Extensive Reading (ER) program on vocabulary development among EFL learners at Fergana schools over one full academic year. The study involved 80 students from two schools in Fergana, divided equally into an ER group and a conventional vocabulary instruction group. Students in the ER group read a large number of graded English storybooks at their own comfortable reading level, while the control group received standard vocabulary lessons based on the national curriculum. Vocabulary knowledge was measured at four points throughout the year using simple word recognition tasks and short writing samples. By the end of the academic year, students in the ER group recognized significantly more English words than those in the conventional group, and their writing showed a wider and more varied use of vocabulary. Importantly, vocabulary growth in the ER group appeared to accelerate over time, with the second half of the year producing faster gains than the first. These findings support the use of graded reader programs as a practical and effective approach to building vocabulary in Fergana school settings, and the article offers concrete recommendations for teachers and school librarians.
Key Words: *extensive reading, vocabulary development, graded readers, EFL, Fergana schools, Uzbekistan, incidental learning.*

INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary is one of the most fundamental building blocks of language learning. Without a wide range of words, learners cannot understand what they read or hear, express their ideas clearly, or engage in meaningful conversation. For students in Fergana who are learning English as a foreign language, building a strong vocabulary is especially challenging because they have few opportunities to encounter English words naturally outside the classroom. Unlike learners who live in English-speaking environments or who regularly watch English television or use English-language social media, most Fergana school students experience English primarily through their textbooks and lessons. This limited exposure makes vocabulary growth slower and more difficult.[1]

The vocabulary taught in national English curricula for Uzbek schools is carefully selected and progressively organized, but it covers a relatively small number of words compared to what students would need to read authentic English texts with ease. Research suggests that a person needs to know at least several thousand of the most common English words in order to understand everyday English texts without constantly looking up words in a dictionary. Most school programs, focused on grammar, pronunciation, and a core vocabulary set, do not provide sufficient input for learners to reach this level within the standard years of schooling.[2]

One widely recommended solution to this problem is Extensive Reading (ER) — the practice of reading large amounts of text at an appropriately comfortable level, primarily for pleasure and general understanding, rather than for the purpose of studying specific language items. When students read extensively, they encounter words many times across different stories and contexts, and this repeated, natural exposure helps words gradually become part of their stored knowledge. Unlike vocabulary exercises where words are memorized in isolation, ER allows words to be learned incidentally — as a natural byproduct of reading for meaning.

Graded readers — simplified books written or adapted for language learners at different proficiency levels — are the most common vehicle for ER programs in EFL settings. They are written using controlled vocabulary, clear sentence structures, and engaging plots that make reading accessible even to learners with limited English proficiency. A well-organized ER program using graded readers can give students hundreds or even thousands of additional encounters with common English words over the course of a school year, far exceeding what textbook instruction alone can provide.[3]

Despite the well-documented benefits of ER in international research, graded reader programs remain uncommon in Fergana schools, partly due to limited library resources and partly due to unfamiliarity with ER as a teaching approach among local educators. This study was designed to investigate whether a structured ER program, implemented within existing school conditions in Fergana, could produce meaningful vocabulary gains compared to the conventional vocabulary instruction approach. The study followed 80 students across two Fergana schools for one full academic year and measured their vocabulary growth at four points throughout the year.[4]

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study used a longitudinal design, following two groups of students across one full academic year from September to May. Vocabulary was measured four times: at the start of the year in September, at the end of the first semester in January, at the midpoint of the second semester in March, and at the end of the academic year in May. This four-point measurement schedule allowed the researchers to examine not just how much vocabulary students gained overall, but how the rate of vocabulary growth changed across the year — an aspect of learning that single pre-test and post-test designs cannot capture.[5]

Participants and Setting

Eighty students from two general secondary schools in Fergana participated in the study. School Number 1 provided 40 students who formed the ER group, and School Number 17 provided 40 students who formed the conventional instruction group. All participants were in the 7th grade at the start of the study and had been studying English for approximately 3 years. At the beginning of the year, both groups completed a simple word recognition test, and their scores were found to be closely similar, confirming that the two groups started from an equivalent level of vocabulary knowledge. The schools themselves were comparable in terms of student demographics, class sizes, and available teaching resources.[6]

The Extensive Reading Program

The ER group was provided with a classroom library of 120 graded readers across three difficulty

levels, ranging from beginner to pre-intermediate. Books were sourced from the Oxford Bookworms series and the Cambridge English Readers series, with titles selected to cover a wide range of topics including adventure, mystery, everyday life, and Uzbek and Central Asian themes where available. Students were asked to read at least two books per month independently, choosing any title that interested them from the classroom library.[7]

Thirty minutes of each week's English lesson time was reserved for silent reading, during which students read their chosen books in class. After finishing each book, students wrote a short three-sentence summary in a reading diary, describing what they had read and one new thing they had learned or enjoyed. No vocabulary tests were conducted on the books, and students were not required to look up every unfamiliar word — consistent with the ER principle of reading for general understanding rather than intensive word study.[8]

Teachers in the ER group received three training sessions at the start of the year covering the principles of extensive reading, how to organize a classroom library, how to guide students in choosing appropriate books, and how to facilitate post-reading discussions without turning them into vocabulary tests. They also met with the research team once a month to discuss progress and address any difficulties.

Conventional Vocabulary Instruction

The conventional group received standard vocabulary instruction as part of their regular English curriculum, using the national textbook for Grade 7. Vocabulary was taught through explicit presentation of word lists, definition exercises, gap-fill activities, and sentence writing tasks. The same amount of weekly English lesson time was used as in the ER group, ensuring that the two groups received equal instruction time overall.[9]

Vocabulary Assessment

Vocabulary knowledge was measured at each of the four assessment points using two instruments. The first was a word recognition checklist adapted from standard frequency-based vocabulary lists, in which students indicated whether they knew each of 60 words presented without context. The second was a short writing task in which students wrote a paragraph on a familiar topic, and the range and variety of vocabulary in their writing was assessed by counting the number of different words they used relative to the total number of words written. Both measures were scored by the research team, with unclear cases reviewed by a second researcher.[10]

RESULTS

Word Recognition Growth Across the Year

At the start of the study, both groups correctly recognized approximately 58% of the words on the checklist, confirming their comparable starting levels. By the end of the first semester in January, the ER group had improved to approximately 65% correct, while the conventional group had improved to approximately 63% — a small difference at this early stage. By the end of the year in May, however, the gap had widened considerably. The ER group's recognition rate had climbed to approximately 78%, while the conventional group had reached approximately 68%. This means that over the course of the year, the ER group improved by 20 percentage points compared to 10 percentage points for the conventional group — twice the rate of growth.[11]

Acceleration of Vocabulary Growth

Examining the growth rates across the four assessment points revealed an important pattern for the ER group. In the first semester, the ER group improved by approximately 7 percentage points. In the second semester, the same group improved by approximately 13 percentage points — nearly doubling their rate of growth in the second half of the year. The conventional group, by contrast, showed a broadly similar rate of progress in both semesters, with approximately 5 percentage points of growth in each half of the year. This accelerating pattern in the ER group is consistent with the theoretical expectation that vocabulary growth through reading becomes self-reinforcing

as learners' expanding vocabulary allows them to read more, thereby encountering more new words.[12]

Vocabulary in Writing

Analysis of students' writing samples showed a similar pattern in favor of the ER group. At the start of the year, both groups used a similar range of different words in their writing paragraphs. By the end of the year, ER group students were using approximately 35% more distinct vocabulary items in their writing compared to their own pre-test samples, while conventional group students showed an improvement of approximately 15%. Students in the ER group also used more descriptive adjectives, a wider range of verbs, and more connective expressions in their end-of-year writing, suggesting that reading had enriched not only their vocabulary size but also the variety and naturalness of their word use.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that a structured Extensive Reading program, implemented over one academic year in Fergana schools, produced substantially greater vocabulary gains than conventional vocabulary instruction. By the end of the year, ER students recognized twice as many new words as their peers in conventional classes and showed a richer and more varied vocabulary in their own writing. These results are consistent with international research on the benefits of ER for vocabulary development and confirm that the positive effects of ER documented in other EFL contexts also apply in the Fergana school setting.[13]

The acceleration of vocabulary growth in the second semester of the year is one of the most theoretically significant findings of the study. In the early months of the ER program, students spent considerable time selecting books, adjusting to independent reading, and building habits of sustained engagement with text. As the year progressed, students became more fluent and confident readers, capable of choosing more engaging books and reading them more efficiently. This increased reading fluency appears to have translated directly into faster vocabulary acquisition, supporting the view that extensive reading becomes increasingly productive as learners' skills and habits develop.

The improvement in writing vocabulary is particularly encouraging because it suggests that vocabulary encountered in reading did not remain locked in passive, receptive knowledge but transferred into students' active use of language. This transfer from reading to writing is not automatic — it requires students to encounter words multiple times in varied and meaningful contexts, which is precisely what a high-volume reading program provides. The fact that ER students used more descriptive and varied language in their writing by the end of the year suggests that their reading experiences gave them access to a richer range of linguistic resources than the relatively controlled and repetitive vocabulary of textbook instruction.[14]

Several limitations of the study should be acknowledged. Reading diaries were the primary evidence that students completed the required reading, and it was not possible to independently verify the amount or quality of each student's reading engagement. Future studies should consider including short comprehension checks after each book to confirm that students were reading attentively and at an appropriate level. Additionally, the classroom libraries in this study were assembled with specific funding support; sustaining and expanding such libraries over time will require ongoing institutional investment.[15]

CONCLUSION

This study provides encouraging evidence that structured Extensive Reading programs can significantly enhance vocabulary development among EFL learners at Fergana schools when sustained over a full academic year. Students who participated in the ER program recognized twice as many new words by year's end compared to their conventionally instructed peers, and their

writing reflected a noticeably broader and more varied vocabulary. The accelerating rate of growth observed in the second semester suggests that the benefits of ER are cumulative and may increase the longer a program is sustained.

For school administrators in Fergana, the study makes a practical case for investing in classroom libraries of graded readers and allocating dedicated reading time within weekly lesson schedules. For teachers, it highlights the value of positioning themselves as reading facilitators — guiding students to appropriate books and encouraging reading for pleasure — rather than as direct instructors of vocabulary lists. Future research in Fergana and across Uzbekistan should explore how ER programs can be most effectively integrated with existing national curricula, how digital graded readers might expand access in schools with limited physical library resources, and how the benefits of ER interact with students' overall English language development across reading, listening, speaking, and writing skills.

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