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BEYOND THE WORD LIST: EXTENSIVE READING AND SECOND-LANGUAGE VOCABULARY DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

Vocabulary knowledge is a core component of proficiency in a second or foreign language, yet the classroom hours available for direct vocabulary instruction can cover only a small fraction of the lexicon that learners need in order to read comfortably. One long-standing answer to this problem is extensive reading: the practice of reading large quantities of self-selected, comprehensible texts with minimal dictionary use. This article reviews the theoretical foundations of extensive reading as a vehicle for incidental vocabulary acquisition, synthesizes the key empirical findings, and draws out implications for university EFL programs. The evidence indicates that extensive reading produces real but modest vocabulary gains; that these gains depend on repetition, word frequency, and the sheer amount of text read; and that extensive reading works best as a complement to, rather than a replacement for, explicit instruction. The article closes with a set of evidence-based principles for implementing extensive reading in higher education and with questions that remain open for future research.

Keywords: extensive reading; incidental vocabulary learning; second language acquisition; vocabulary; EFL; higher education



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1. Introduction

Few practical questions in applied linguistics are as persistent as how learners of a foreign language amass the vocabulary they need. Estimates of the lexical threshold for comfortable reading place the requirement in the thousands of word families, and an even larger receptive vocabulary is needed for reading without external support.¹ And knowing a word is not a binary affair: it involves mastering its form, its meaning, its collocations and associations, and the contexts in which it can appropriately be used.² Against this scale, the few hundred items a teacher can deliberately teach in a course of study begin to look very small indeed.

The gap between what is taught and what is needed is one reason why applied linguists have long been interested in incidental vocabulary learning — the acquisition of words as a by-product of meaning-focused activities such as listening and reading, rather than as the goal of the activity itself.³ The most controllable of these activities, and the one most amenable to pedagogical organization, is extensive reading (ER): reading large amounts of easy, self-selected material for pleasure or information, at a level that allows fluent comprehension.⁴ This article examines the case for extensive reading as a driver of second-language vocabulary development. It reviews the theoretical rationale, weighs the empirical evidence, and translates the findings into practical principles for university EFL contexts.

¹I. S. P. Nation, *Learning Vocabulary in Another Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

²B. Laufer and I. S. P. Nation, "Vocabulary," in *The Cambridge Handbook of Second Language Acquisition*, eds. J. Herschensohn and M. Young-Scholten (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

³S. Webb, "Incidental Vocabulary Learning," in *The Routledge Handbook of Vocabulary Studies*, ed. S. Webb (London: Routledge, 2019).

⁴R. R. Day and J. Bamford, *Extensive Reading in the Second Language Classroom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).



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2. Theoretical Foundations

The theoretical case for extensive reading rests above all on the input hypothesis associated with Stephen Krashen, who argued that we acquire vocabulary and spelling not by memorizing lists but by understanding messages — and that for literate adult learners, sustained reading is the most efficient source of the required input.⁵ Krashen's survey of the research on free voluntary reading concluded that readers consistently outperform non-readers across a range of literacy measures, and that the effect is observable in both first and second languages.⁶ Even researchers who do not accept every element of Krashen's model generally agree with the narrower claim that volume of meaning-focused input is a necessary, though not sufficient, condition for large-scale vocabulary growth.

It is important to be precise about what "incidental" means. As Webb cautions, the term describes the conditions of learning — the learner's attention is on meaning, not on the words as objects of study — rather than any single cognitive mechanism; incidental and intentional learning lie on a continuum of degrees of intention rather than in opposition. Extensive reading deliberately creates the low-intention end of this continuum, in which words are met, at least potentially, in varied and meaningful contexts.

Extensive reading is defined less by the material than by the manner of reading. Day and Bamford distilled the practice into a set of principles: students read a great deal and read for pleasure or information; they choose what they read; they read texts in which almost all the vocabulary is already familiar, so that comprehension is smooth and dictionary use is unnecessary; and they read at a normal rate, without translating or stopping to analyze.⁷ The figure commonly cited as the condition for

⁵S. D. Krashen, "We Acquire Vocabulary and Spelling by Reading: Additional Evidence for the Input Hypothesis," *The Modern Language Journal* 73, no. 4 (1989): 440–464.

⁶S. Krashen, *The Power of Reading: Insights from the Research*, 2nd ed. (Westport, CT: Libraries Unlimited, 2004).

⁷R. R. Day and J. Bamford, "Top Ten Principles for Teaching Extensive Reading," *Reading in a Foreign Language* 14, no. 2 (2002): 136–141.



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this smooth comprehension is about 98 percent known coverage of the running words in a text.⁸ Because authentic texts rarely offer such coverage to learners, extensive reading programs rely heavily on graded readers — simplified texts written within controlled vocabulary lists — which have the additional advantage of recycling high-frequency words across books and series.⁹ Waring has gone so far as to call extensive reading "inescapable" for any serious language program: every learner who wants a large vocabulary must eventually read very large quantities of text, whatever else the program provides.¹⁰

3. What the Evidence Shows

The empirical record is consistent in direction if modest in magnitude. Waring and Takaki gave Japanese university learners a single graded reader and tested them on new vocabulary immediately and after a delay of three months: although some words were learned, the overall rate of pickup and, especially, retention was low, demonstrating that a single text, however enjoyable, is not enough.¹¹ Pigada and Schmitt tracked one advanced learner reading self-selected graded readers over a month and found gains across spelling, meaning, and grammatical knowledge — with spelling improving most and meaning least, a reminder that partial knowledge is the normal outcome of incidental learning.¹² Working with primary-school children in an intensive ESL program, Horst documented measurable vocabulary

⁸Nation, Learning Vocabulary in Another Language.

⁹I. S. P. Nation and K. Wang, "Graded Readers and Vocabulary," *Reading in a Foreign Language* 12 (1999): 355–380.

¹⁰R. Waring, "The Inescapable Case for Extensive Reading," in *Extensive Reading in English Language Teaching*, ed. A. Cirocki (Munich: Lincom, 2009), 93–111.

¹¹R. Waring and M. Takaki, "At What Rate Do Learners Learn and Retain New Vocabulary from Reading a Graded Reader?" *Reading in a Foreign Language* 15, no. 2 (2003): 130–163.

¹²M. Pigada and N. Schmitt, "Vocabulary Acquisition from Extensive Reading: A Case Study," *Reading in a Foreign Language* 18, no. 1 (2006): 1–28.



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growth that could be attributed to reading alone, and argued that the right measurement instruments reveal learning that coarse tests miss.¹³

A second strand of research asks which conditions make pickup from reading more likely. Hu's case study of Taiwanese EFL readers showed that the frequency with which a word occurred and the type of context in which it appeared both conditioned acquisition from extensive reading.¹⁴ Nation and Waring, reviewing the area, emphasize the arithmetic of the process: each encounter with a word yields only a small increment of knowledge, so substantial learning requires thousands of encounters, distributed across many texts — which is precisely what graded-reader-based extensive reading is designed to supply.¹⁵

At the program level, the most informative evidence comes from meta-analyses. Nakanishi synthesized the extensive reading research and found small but statistically significant positive effects on language proficiency, with outcomes improving as the amount of reading increased.¹⁶ Suk's meta-analysis of studies measuring reading comprehension, reading rate, and vocabulary acquisition likewise reported significant positive effects of extensive reading on all three outcomes, while noting substantial variation across contexts and designs.¹⁷ The sober conclusion from this literature is that extensive reading works — but quietly, cumulatively, and in proportion to the volume actually read.

¹³M. Horst, "Learning L2 Vocabulary through Extensive Reading: A Measurement Study," *The Canadian Modern Language Review* 61, no. 3 (2005): 355–382.

¹⁴H. M. Hu, "The Effects of Word Frequency and Contextual Types on Vocabulary Acquisition from Extensive Reading: A Case Study," *Journal of Language Teaching and Research* 4 (2013).

¹⁵P. Nation and R. Waring, "Incidental Vocabulary Learning from Extensive Reading," in *Researching Incidental Vocabulary Learning in a Second Language*, ed. M. F. Teng (London: Routledge, 2024).

¹⁶T. Nakanishi, "A Meta-Analysis of Extensive Reading Research," *TESOL Quarterly* 49, no. 1 (2015): 6–37.

¹⁷N. Suk, "The Effects of Extensive Reading on Reading Comprehension, Reading Rate, and Vocabulary Acquisition," *Reading Research Quarterly* (2017), <https://doi.org/10.1002/rrq.152>.



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Table 1. Selected empirical studies of vocabulary learning through extensive reading.

Study	Context	Focus	Contribution
Waring & Takaki (2003)	Japanese university EFL	Learning and retention of new vocabulary from a single graded reader	First sustained estimate of pickup rates; showed most new words are not retained without repetition
Horst (2005)	Primary-school ESL, Canada	Vocabulary growth during a school-year reading program	Documented measurable gains attributable to reading alone
Pigada & Schmitt (2006)	Single advanced learner	Spelling, meaning, and grammatical knowledge over one month	Gains across all three dimensions; strongest for spelling, weakest for meaning
Hu (2013)	Taiwanese university EFL	Word frequency and contextual type	Showed pickup is conditioned by frequency and by the type of context
Nakanishi (2015)	Meta-analysis of ER programs	Overall effect of extensive reading	Small but significant positive effects; more reading, larger effects
Suk (2017)	Meta-analysis of ER studies	Comprehension, reading rate, vocabulary	Significant positive effects on all three outcomes

4. From Research to the University Classroom

Translated into practice, the research supports a small number of firm principles. First, extensive reading must be protected: reading time built into the timetable, with a clear target volume, since the meta-analytic evidence shows effects scale with the amount read. Second, materials matter: graded readers matched to each



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learner's level, so that comprehension is near-total and reading feels like reading rather than decoding. Third, choice is non-negotiable — Day and Bamford place self-selection of texts among the core principles precisely because motivation sustains the volume on which everything else depends. Fourth, fluency conventions should be honored: no dictionaries, no translation, no testing of every book, because such habits convert extensive reading back into intensive study and destroy its distinctive contribution.¹⁸ Fifth, accountability should be light and formative — short reports, reading logs, or brief discussions that keep students honest without burdening each title with assessment.

Finally, extensive reading should be framed as a complement to explicit vocabulary work, not a substitute for it. Deliberate study remains the most efficient route to the high-frequency core of the language, while extensive reading supplies the massive, varied exposure through which that knowledge is consolidated and the long tail of lower-frequency vocabulary is gradually encountered. The benefits extend beyond vocabulary: Celik reported gains in grammar as well as vocabulary knowledge among Turkish university EFL students engaged in extensive reading,¹⁹ and Park found that extensive reading improved secondary learners' reading attitudes relative to an intensive-reading approach.²⁰ A well-run program, in other words, is an investment in the whole reader, not only in the lexicon.

5. Challenges and Open Questions

Several questions remain open. The most practical is dosage: how much reading, at what level, is enough to produce noticeable vocabulary growth in a one-semester

¹⁸I. S. P. Nation, "Principles Guiding Vocabulary Learning through Extensive Reading," *Reading in a Foreign Language* 27, no. 1 (2015): 136–145.

¹⁹B. Celik, "The Role of Extensive Reading in Fostering the Development of Grammar and Vocabulary Knowledge," *International Journal of Social Sciences and Educational Studies* 6 (2019).

²⁰Y. S. Park, "A Comparison of the Impact of Extensive and Intensive Reading Approaches on the Reading Attitudes of Secondary EFL Learners," *Studies in Second Language Learning and Teaching* 10 (2020).



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university course? The cumulative logic of the research implies that programs measured in tens of thousands of words will show little, while those measured in hundreds of thousands may show a great deal, but precise expectations for typical university contexts are still lacking. A second issue is measurement: because incidental learning yields partial, incremental knowledge, binary test formats systematically undercount gains, and researchers continue to debate which instruments best capture them. A third challenge is motivational: in examination-driven systems, students accustomed to studying for tests may initially treat self-selected pleasure reading as an illegitimate use of time, and teachers must work deliberately to change that perception. Finally, the migration of reading to screens — e-books with embedded dictionaries, hypertext, and now machine-generated simplified texts — changes the conditions under which incidental learning has been studied, and the field will need new evidence about how these tools help or hinder it.

6. Conclusion

The case for extensive reading does not rest on the promise of rapid vocabulary expansion — the research rules that out — but on a quieter argument. Learners need an enormous amount of comprehensible, meaning-focused input to build a large vocabulary; no amount of classroom instruction can supply it; and extensive reading is the most practical, most motivating, and most thoroughly researched way to supply it. Programs that protect reading time, match materials to level, preserve learner choice, and resist the urge to assess every page can expect cumulative gains in vocabulary, fluency, and attitudes. For university EFL contexts in particular, where learners' future contact with the language will often be through written text, the habit of extensive reading may be the most durable legacy a language program can leave.



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