The Benefits of Implementing an Extensive Reading Program to Increase Vocabulary Acquisition in the Bilingual Classroom

Beneficios de implementar un programa de lectura extensiva para mejorar la adquisición de vocabulario en la clase bilingüe

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Abstract

Extensive reading has widely proven to be of benefit for EFL learners, but little research examines the use of original books in primary education. This paper displays a research carried out to find the benefits that implementing an extensive reading program has on vocabulary acquisition and communicative skills improvement in a 3rd and a 4th grade classroom in a bilingual primary school in Madrid. By way of comparing pre and post tests that measure percentage increase of control and target vocabulary use, findings support this approach in favour of a traditional textbook one, from which control words were extracted.

Key words: extensive, reading, vocabulary, skills, primary, bilingual.

Resumen

La lectura extensiva ha demostrado sus beneficios en los estudiantes de inglés como lengua extranjera, pero apenas hay estudios que examinen el uso de libros originales en primaria. Este estudio muestra una investigación para descubrir los beneficios en la adquisición de vocabulario y destrezas comunicativas de implementar un programa de lectura extensiva en 3º y 4º de primaria bilingüe en Madrid. Al comparar pruebas previas y posteriores que midieron el aumento porcentual del uso de vocabulario control y experimental, los resultados favorecen este enfoque frente una metodología tradicional con libro de texto, del cual las palabras control fueron extraídas.

Palabras clave: extensiva, lectura, vocabulario, destrezas, primaria, bilingüe.

1. INTRODUCTION

English teachers around the world are constantly in the search for better methods to help students acquire the foreign language. While no one method has proven to be above all others, Matamoros-González et al. (2017) point out common denominators that account for what one may call effective teaching. In their study, four outspread methods for teaching were compared: the grammar and the audiolingual methods, as well as the communicative and natural approaches to teaching a foreign language. Out of 51 items compared in a checklist created by the authors, the use of books was the only common denominator, since all methods and approaches highlighted the importance of reading and providing learners with reading materials.

From the grammar translation method, which heavily relied on original texts to instruct vocabulary, to more modern language learning approaches, such as the communicative approach (Canale & Swain, 1980) or Content and Language Integrated Learning (Marsh, 2002), literature has walked hand in hand with the teaching of English. However, the question remains regarding how intertwined using literature should be with the formal instruction of a language, or whether there should be no distinction at all.

In tertiary education, the use of literature in the classroom is widespread. However, Ortells (2013) argued that in Spain's secondary schools «literature is relegated to a virtual non-presence» (pp. 91-92). In search of articles regarding the use of authentic literature and/or extensive reading in primary education in Madrid, or even Spain, literature was not found. One may say that teachers in Madrid still hesitate to carry out programs based on extensive reading for a number of reasons, the real, unfiltered use of the language being the main one. In my experience, I have encountered few teachers that included extensive reading in their syllabus. Nevertheless, especially in bilingual schools, where teachers are aiming for students who can understand and communicate fluently in English, extensive reading of authentic books seems to be an exceptional opportunity to expose students to genuine language from a very early age.

The scarcity of studies is surprising insofar as the benefits of using literature to teach and learn English as a foreign language have been widely dis-

cussed in the past years. Khatib (2011) lists the benefits of literature in EFLT, among which are authenticity, motivation, cultural/intercultural awareness and motivation, intensive/extensive reading practice, sociolinguistic/pragmatic knowledge, grammar and vocabulary knowledge, and language skills. In this vein, Hunt and Beglar (2005) discussed that extensive reading was one of the most valuables implicit lexical instruction strategy to increase vocabulary size in EFL learners, and that «for extensive reading to be effective, learners must be regularly exposed to large amounts of comprehensible text» (Hunt & Beglar, 2005).

This led to the following research questions: Could the reading of authentic literature be applied in primary education? More precisely, could extensive reading prove to have benefits for the learning of EFL in primary education? Could the reading of authentic literature be worth the effort if it increases student engagement and/or academic results? Could reading help students achieve better results than following a traditional Spanish textbook approach? Linked to this, could reading be a better tool for vocabulary acquisition?

In this light, the objectives of this research include scrutinizing the increase of vocabulary students meaningfully acquired by way of extensive reading vs. the one they learnt via a textbook approach. Secondarily, the study also aims to look at the development of students' reading comprehension skills. Hence, this study first starts with the hypothesis that these variables will in fact affect student achievement in a positive way: that the use of extensive reading of authentic books will have a better effect on student achievement in general and in vocabulary acquisition in particular than if only learning via a textbook designed for Spanish EFL learners; and that authentic literature will not hinder student learning but will, on the contrary, help motivation, engagement, and ultimately, academic improvement.

2. Literature Review

The present study takes as a departure point a blend of approaches and methods that can be said to be key for teaching English successfully in the 21st century.

2.1 The teaching of English: reading skills within the development of students' communicative competence

To start with, there is a need to reflect on the building blocks of the Communicative Approach. In Canale and Swain (1980) it is stated that

> it is especially important that the more arbitrary and less universal aspects of communication in the second language (e.g. certain features of the grammatical code) be presented and practiced in the context of less arbitrary and more universal aspects. (p. 28)

As Richards and Rodgers (2014) pointed out, some of the Communicative Approach's principles include linking the different skills such as speaking, reading, and listening together, since they usually occur together in the real world, and letting students induce or discover grammar rules (p. 95).

Teaching English through literature is necessarily associated with text-based instruction. More precisely, Richards and Rodgers (2014) argued that, regarding text-based instruction «communicative competence is seen to involve the mastery of different types of texts» (p. 200). Ergo, understanding the features of a text type will allow the student to learn norms of language and writing style related to that genre. In this study, students were formally introduced to some linguistic features of narrative texts. Students were able to recognize them and later on, produce them.

All in all, Richards and Rodgers (2014) argued that «the objectives of a text-based course are linked to the contexts in which the learner will use English» (p. 204). Furthermore, they added that central to all activities in a text-based course is «the focus on the nature of an authentic text, what its purpose and features are, and how it reflects the context of its use» (p. 206). In this vein, Krashen (1982) argued that meaningful reading experiences are more likely to lower students' affective filter, which in turn favours the acquisition of the foreign language.

The teacher's role in an extensive reading course in an EFL setting has much to do with scaffolding. Swain, Kinnear and Steinman (2010) defined scaffolding as classroom interactions where «one person (e.g., the teacher or another learner) has more advanced knowledge than the other» (Richards & Rodgers, 2014, p. 28). For scaffolding to be effective, it has to be able to be removed because the student has accomplished the goals

thanks to this help. Where extensive reading is involved, scaffolding is an essential tool the teacher has to introduce to help students overcome linguistic, contextual, and grammatical barriers. In the present study, scaffolding was thoughtfully introduced in every lesson and when reading every chapter of the selected books, and it was a fundamental piece for the success of the project.

2.2 Teaching through literature: approaches

There are plenty of approaches to using literature in the EFL classroom. Maley (1989, cited in Khatib et al., 2011) introduced two approaches: the «Critical Literary Approach» and the «Stylistic Approach». The first one focused on the literary features of the text. The Stylistic Approach highlighted the importance of both the text as a language model and the need to understand it in order to grasp the literary value of said text. For primary students learning English as a FL, the second one seems to appeal more, as they would need to have a certain command of literary features and an advanced level of the language in order to benefit from the Critical Literary Approach. Besides, the Stylistic Approach blends learning language and literature.

Carter and Long (1991, cited in Khatib et al., 2011) developed three models: the «Language Model», the «Cultural model», and the «Personal Growth Model». The Language Model achieves literary understanding through the study of the language. The Cultural Model (or Literature as Content) uses literature as a vessel to access cultural understanding. The latter one stands out as the most interesting, due to its integration of language, context and motivation.

Lazar (1993) described three approaches: «Language-based approach», «Literature as content», and «Literature for personal enrichment». The first one would relate to the approach taken with the group of students in this study, where «literary texts are seen as a resource –one among many different types of texts– which provide stimulating language activities» (p. 27). Nonetheless, although a language-based approach is interesting for young learners, focusing on the language too much can take away from the literary and reading appreciation of a book.

However, it seems to me a necessary scaffolding step to help young learners be autonomous readers in the long term, in addition to being the appro-

priate method for a primary classroom where the main curricular goals point in the direction of language learning. «Literature as content» would be appropriate in more advance courses or tertiary level literary degrees. As for 'Literature for personal enrichment', it is of course a desired goal that teachers can work towards by means of the other two approaches. In the last few decades, an integrative approach is preferred.

Now that approaches to teaching literature in general have been contrasted, a look into extensive reading becomes necessary. To start with, the present study focussed on extensive reading because of the global experience it offers to students. The students in this study were not used to reading extensively, being intensive reading the norm in their previous courses. Reading a book for a longer period of time allowed them the opportunity to make language connections and appreciate the value of learning English in order to be able to understand and enjoy literary texts. Global reading comprehension was constantly checked while they were reading, and grammatical features that students were getting familiar with at the time (such as the use of the past) were pointed out in the book, thus connecting what students were studying in class with authentic language use.

Looking expressly at vocabulary acquisition, extensive reading is proven to help tremendously, and Pigada and Schmitt (2006) argued that it should be an indispensable dimension of vocabulary teaching because both vocabulary acquisition and reading occur simultaneously. When learning vocabulary through lists, as it generally happens when using textbooks designed for FL language learners, students have difficulty retaining the words. Even though this direct way of introducing concepts is apparently fast an efficient, and students comprehend the vocabulary quickly (especially when the words are accompanied with images), they forget them easily, and it is with difficulty that they become part of their lexis and they independently use them in separate contexts.

Furthermore, several authors argue in favour of teaching EFL through reading. Some advocate for the authenticity of the language used, versus the use of adapted books. While the latter usually provide a clear, simple language model, they lack the genuine use of language with its richness in connotations, culture and intention. Floris (2004) highlighted the language and cultural enrichment literary texts provide, as well as the higher level

of involvement needed from students, for 'students are required to engage in «content-based purposeful learner talk in English» (p. 3).

In addition, Khatib (2011) offered ten recommendations for integrating literature in the language classroom. Most related to this study are: «2.1. The teacher should work for learners' personal involvement with literary texts…; 2.5. Teachers should consider the accessibility of literary texts for their language classrooms…; 2.6. The four language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) should be integrated…; 2.8. The teacher should provide scaffolded assistance with literary texts…; 2.9. The teacher should encourage and facilitate group discussions» (pp. 259-262). In this regard, this study offered students with engaging tasks to become active agents of the reading experience, they worked with a physical book of which each student had a copy of, and they had opportunities to talk about the plot, characters and other features of the story. Finally, the teacher scaffolded tasks to help vocabulary acquisition that at the same time encouraged the practice of the four skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing.

When considering using extensive reading in the EFL classroom, one must make a choice between graded readers or authentic texts. Graded readers provide language that has been specifically selected for English learners. Original books will usually expose children to larger amounts of new vocabulary and uses of English. Moreover, original, authentic texts contain the literary and cultural value that most agree is partially or completely removed from graded readers. Both types of books have a valuable place in the English classroom, and a blended use of them will likely balance language needs to bring a full learning experience to the classroom. However, the present study has focused on vocabulary gains through extensive reading of original books, so as to evaluate if their implementation if primary classrooms in bilingual schools should be recommended.

One cannot move on without considering some difficulties of using authentic literature in the classroom: the use of ungraded language and cultural differences. The teacher becomes an essential filter for two objectives: first, to carefully select the text so that language is not too far away from their students' comprehension level, and second, to apply measures to get students closer to cultural understanding and enrich-

ment. This present study includes all the scaffolding, remedy work and linguistic support that students' need to be provided with in order to make a literature course successful.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Context

The present study was carried out in a public bilingual school in Madrid. In an effort to improve students' linguistic and communicative competence, the school is in the midst of a three-year project to change its methodological line in the English lessons, attempting to transition from a textbook based curriculum to a four skills based one. Moreover, extensive reading is progressively being implemented in all primary levels.

The main study group was composed of 23 students in the 4th grade class. Two students were excluded because they follow the 2nd grade curriculum due to their specific needs. Out of the 23 students, three of them had special needs, but followed the 4th grade curriculum. Around 45 % of the students in this study group struggled in all or most areas, and most of them have little support regarding their schooling at home. The minor study group was composed of 21 students in the 3rd grade class, two of whom had special needs. This group had overall better academic results, and parent involvement was also higher.

Out of the 4 lessons per week, 3 were dedicated to following the textbook and other types of activities. The remaining lesson was focussed on extensive reading and all tasks related to the books and this study, including the data collection tasks and measurement tests. A language assistant was present in some of these lessons.

3.2 Methodology

To start introducing 3rd and 4th grade children to extensive reading and vocabulary acquisition through it, students were exposed to a variety of books all along the year. Students read at home an average of a book in English every two weeks, and they produced oral and written reports about them.

The books for this study were carefully picked out after months of research. The criteria behind choosing them followed Hill's (1986): (a) the needs and abilities of the students; (b) the linguistic and stylistic level of the text (especially: vocabulary and text structure within the students' scope; slang, dialect and highly idiomatic language at a minimum); (c) the amount of background information required for a true appreciation of the material (p. 15). I also thought about the amount up to which the books could connect with the students' lives and interests, and the attractiveness of the plot and the characters. The resulted selected titles were two books intended for children who are native speakers of English.

- 4th grade: Eerie Elementary, by Jack Chabert. (Scholastic).

- 3rd grade: Game Over, Super Rabbit Boy! by Thomas Flintham. (Scholastic).

Regarding the fact that these titles are not classic titles, even though the literary canon is usually basis for schools' reading curriculum, the Spanish law does not set a list of books for primary education. Furthermore, given that students in this study have approximately an A1 – A2 English language level according to the European Framework, finding an original book that was also a classic but was not too difficult or culturally out of their knowledge was highly challenging.

3.3 Design of the study

This study started taking place during the second term. Each lesson was dedicated to the reading of one chapter. Lessons followed a careful structure.

At the pre-reading stage, the main goal was to arouse students' interest and to overcome any vocabulary barriers that could potentially pose a problem for the global understanding of the text. Some of the activities that took place were: presentation of vocabulary words, sensory activities, looking at pictures or presentations, eliciting the new plot, finding key words in the chapter, remembering the plot, describing the characters, etc.

At the while-reading stage, reading took place mostly as a whole-group activity. Each chapter was read twice, combining different techniques: teacher reading the whole passage to the class, teacher narrating and selected

students reading the dialogues, students reading out loud in turns, silent reading, language assistant reading to a small group, students reading to each other in small groups, students reading while interpreting, etc. On the second reading, attention was brought to elements of interest to the story to reinforce vocabulary, to highlight the use of certain structures, or to discuss character or plot development. Students were also asked questions to double-check understanding.

At the post-reading stage, tasks were designed to aid students incorporate the new vocabulary and to check reading comprehension. Written and oral tasks, activities and games were used to change the focus into a productive skill. Some of the tasks included: writing descriptions, using the new vocabulary in sentences, summaries and paragraphs, drawing parts of the plot or characters, acting out, role-plays, recreations, glossaries or picture dictionaries of words, etc.

3.4 Data collection

Data was collected by measuring the amount of vocabulary acquired by students. The decision to measure success in terms of vocabulary acquisition was based on the importance of lexicon for understanding and communication. Duppenthaler (2007) argued that the lack of vocabulary can be an obstacle to good reading. He also compared explicit and implicit instruction of vocabulary, concluding that the best idea is to combine both. In this study, vocabulary was taught both ways, and a wide variety of tasks and activities for the teaching of vocabulary were implemented.

Data collection started in March 2021, when extensive reading began and the pre-tests took place, finishing at the end of May 2021, with the gathering of the last data. The data was collected via a free writing test, which served both as a pre and post study test, in which students were required to recall and use in context as many words as they could. They were provided with a set of pictures intended to spark the connection with the studied vocabulary.

The study collected data for two main purposes: (1) to gather conclusions on the amount of target vocabulary students acquired at the end of the study. This data was measured against the control vocabulary students acquired through the textbook course, and findings were measured in

percentage of increased use, to check which group of words students had learnt better; and (2) to see how much each skill had improved during those months, and which skills students had progressed more in: listening, reading, or writing. Students' speaking skills were not assessed in this study.

Apart from this formal data collection, mid study formal and informal tests were carried out during March, April and May, to scaffold students' learning. These tests measured vocabulary recognition, naming, and guided production. In comparison, one may say that the pre and post-tests assessed vocabulary acquisition at the highest thinking level, for students were not shown any written clues.

3.5 Work plan

The chronological order of the study was parallel for both study groups. February was dedicated to introducing the books and their topics, and to carrying out introductory activities to arouse the students' interest. These activities worked well as all students were eager to start reading the books. At the beginning of March, pre-tests were taken. Extensive reading, which started in March as well, lasted until late May, when both books were finished and the post-tests were taken. Throughout the study, several remedy activities and tests, as well as motivational tasks were executed. *Table 1* shows an overview of the project's timeline.

Table 1

Study's timeline

FEBRUARY	MARCH	APRIL	MAY
Introductory activities	*Pre-tests for target and control vocabulary*	*Remedy tests*	*Post-tests for target and control vocabulary*

Table 2 and *Table 3* show a detailed view of the chronological work plan for each age group. In them, chapter reading distribution can be seen, along with motivational and vocabulary activities. In addition, dates for pre-tests and post-tests are displayed.

Table 2

3rd grade timeline

3rd grade timeline	FEBRUARY	MARCH	APRIL	MAY
CHAPTERS READ	**Chapters 1-2**	**Chapters 3-4**	**Chapters 5-8**	**Chapters 9-11**
ENGAGEMENT ACTIVITIES	– Introduction to the book and the topic	– Acting out	– Acting out – Writing to the authors	– Acting out – Role plays and recreations
VOCABULARY REINFORCING ACTIVITIES	– Working on the characters – Specific study of vocabulary	– Specific study of vocabulary – Small group work with language assistant	– Specific study of vocabulary – Writing practice – Small group work with language assistant – Remedy test	–Specific study of vocabulary – Small group work with language assistant – Remedy test
TESTING		– Pre-tests (vocabulary)		– Post-tests

The table for 4th grade's timeline (*Table 3*) is practically the same, except for the difference in chapters read (this book had more chapters and they were longer).

Table 3

4th grade timeline

4th grade timeline	FEBRUARY	MARCH	APRIL	MAY
CHAPTERS READ	**Chapters 1-2**	**Chapters 3-6**	**Chapters 7-11**	**Chapters 12-15**
ENGAGEMENT ACTIVITIES	– Introduction to the book and the topic	– Acting out	– Exploring the school – Writing to the authors	– Role plays and book recreations
VOCABULARY REINFORCING ACTIVITIES	– Vocabulary about schools in the USA	– Character description – Specific study of vocabulary – Small group work with language assistant	– Specific study of vocabulary – Writing practice – Small group work with language assistant – Remedy test	–Specific study of vocabulary – Small group work with language assistant – Remedy test
TESTING		Pre-tests (vocabulary) – Pre-test Cambridge A2 flyers		Post-tests (vocabulary) – Post-test Cambridge A2 flyers

3.5.1 Pre-tests

On the one hand, vocabulary acquired through extensive reading was named «Target vocabulary». This vocabulary was learnt as the extensive reading lessons happened once a week. Pre-reading, while-reading, and post-reading activities reinforced the new target vocabulary. On the other hand, vocabulary acquired by means of the textbook was labelled «Control vocabulary». This vocabulary was the one with which the target vocabulary was to be compared with. This vocabulary was learnt in two or three lessons a week, when extensive reading or other school activities did not take place. The control vocabulary was part of the official school syllabus that follows a specific textbook designed for Spanish children who are EFL learners. 3rd grade control and target vocabulary lists consisted of a total of 30 words each. 4th grade control and target vocabulary lists had 40 words each, taking into account that this study group had a higher English level than the first one. All vocabulary was learnt during a three-month period, between mid-February and mid-May. Target and control vocabulary was chosen due to its relevance.

The pre-tests in both cases consisted of a free writing in which students were asked to make up a story based on a set of pictures. The pictures were carefully selected to elicit the key words. Pre and post-tests were exactly the same, so as to have a valid source of comparison at the beginning and at the end of the study.

Secondarily, a listening, reading and writing test was conducted in 4th grade at the beginning and at the end of the study. The objective was to decipher what skills students had improved in more during those weeks. The selected test for this was *Cambridge A2 Flyers*. Since literature is said to improve the four skills (Shamsur & Alasmari, 2018), it appeared of interest to look at how much student had gained in each skill.

Regarding listening skills, most of the reading took place in read-aloud sessions, both by myself, in storytelling fashion, and by other student peers. As for reading skills, it goes without saying that a correctly implemented extensive reading program should build up on students' reading comprehension skills and will enhance their motivation and love for reading. With reference to writing skills, it was implied that readers would pick up on certain basic writing features of narration. This was looked at in the evolution

of the free pre and post writing tests students sat. The minor study in 3rd grade did not measure the degree of acquisition of these three skills through formal testing, as students were considered to be too young and unfamiliar with this type of test.

3.5.2 *Remedy tests*

Amid the study, both formal and informal remedy tests were executed to ensure students were progressing in their vocabulary acquisition and reading comprehension skills, and when specific difficulties were observed. More precisely, the informal remedy activities included oral vocabulary games, such as *Taboo* and *Pictionary*, interactive games, such as jeopardy, and small group work with both the teacher and the language assistant. Students were alternatively grouped in both mixed and same ability groups to provide them with diverse learning opportunities.

Formal tests measured students' ability to recognise, name, define, and use key words. They also included extracts from the book with comprehension questions. The correction of these tests allowed deciphering what aspects of vocabulary acquisition students were struggling with the most so that further measures could be implemented. These further measures encompassed asking struggling students to create picture dictionaries and doing individual or pair oral review activities with the language assistant. Each students' specific needs were taken into account and activities were personalised to help each of them overcome their obstacles.

3.5.3 *Motivational activities*

Not all activities done throughout the extensive reading program had a testing connotation. In fact, it was deemed crucial that students liked the books they were reading if the program was to be successful. Since sometimes students show a lack of motivation towards reading, motivational activities were implemented to prevent possible negative attitudes from students.

In the study groups, intrinsic motivation prior to the study varied, depending mostly on whether students enjoyed reading or/and English before starting the extensive reading program. To boost motivation in all students, extrinsic motivation techniques were constantly applied.

From the beginning, a number of motivational activities were executed. All of them proved to be great motivational tools. Out of the four English lessons a week, the reading lesson was without a doubt the one student expected and longed for the most. Often, when following the course book, students needed the teacher's help to remember the last topic of study, and warm-up or recalling activities were needed in order to get them back on track. Contrarily, students would often ask at the start of the reading lesson what activities we were going to do that specific day. They would also clearly recall what chapters we had read last, and found it easy to explain to their peers what the last chapters had been about.

One of the recurrent engagement tasks was the use of role-play and drama in the classroom. Students would engage in acting out as different characters, recreating scenes, making voices, moving and jumping around the classroom or miming while the teacher or another student narrated. Students would also role-play characters from the stories, taking the plot as a departing point to explore different aspects of their traits. In addition, another objective was to bring the story to life. Allowing the students to emulate the plots in the book provided an immersion, which in turn resulted in better student engagement. Another motivational activity used along the reading of the book was the use of sensory effects in the classroom. Background music for sound effect was regularly played while the class was reading the chapter as a whole group. An ambience would be created according to the atmosphere in the story, so that students would be immersed in the plot. Visual effects like dimming the lights or adding props that appeared in the book were highly valued by students, who openly showed their excitement to be involved in the «adventure». Visual aids were shown as well, mostly to present new vocabulary items.

Presumably, the most potent motivational activity was to contact the book authors. Students took hold of this opportunity, recognizing in it the chance to level up their writing skills to be able to connect with the author, and they enjoyed the excitement of writing and sending the authors real emails. When one of the authors answered, the message delivered to children about reading and learning English was powerful beyond the words it contained.

3.5.4 *Post tests*

The final test aimed to check the amount of vocabulary acquired by students through the textbook course vs the extensive reading course. For that purpose, the same open story tests as in the pre-test were offered. When they happened, students did remember the structure of the task, i.e., they knew they had to use the pictures to create a story. However, they expressed to barely remember the pictures themselves, let alone the stories they wrote in the first place, at the beginning of the study. Both the control and target vocabulary acquired and the percentage of improvement were measured. Results were contrasted to extract conclusions. As explained in *section 3.5.1* of this paper, pre and post-tests were repeated, so as to have a valid source of comparison at the beginning and at the end of the study.

Lastly, post-tests for listening, reading and writing comprehension were done in the 4th grade study group. Again, 3rd grade did not participate in this data measurement for the reasons explained above. The listening test was presented to students in one session, while the reading and writing was done in a different day, for time management reasons.

4. ANALYSIS

4.1 Data Analysis: Procedures

The data analysed was the number of control words and target words acquired at the end of the study by students in both study groups. This was analysed in two ways. First, the average percentage of control vs target words used at the end of the study was measured. Secondly, and perhaps more interestingly, the average percentage of increase of both control and target words was measured to decipher which group of vocabulary words had been best acquired by children: the words studied through a traditional direct approach to vocabulary teaching, or the words studied through an extensive reading program.

To measure how many words students could use, they were asked to create a story based on a set of pictures. The pictures were selected to stimulate the use of all vocabulary words. Free use of vocabulary words is one of the most challenging activities students can carry out to demonstrate the acquisition of vocabulary. «Creating» is a HOTS (High Order Thinking Skill) according

to Bloom's Taxonomy revision (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001). If students are able to design original products, it means they can understand, remember, apply, analyse, and evaluate the vocabulary they are working with.

Words were labelled as correct taking into account that students could use them in sentences that showed understanding and contextual use of the lexicon. Spelling mistakes were not taken into account unless they changed the meaning of the word or made it utterly illegible. Each correct use of the control or target vocabulary was only counted once, even if students used it repeatedly in their stories.

4.2 Data analysis: Findings

4.2.1 Vocabulary acquisition

Before analysing the findings in the pre and post-test performance comparison, it must be noted that mid-study remedy tests were pointed in the direction of helping students recognise and independently use vocabulary words. Mid-study remedy tests showed that students in 4th grade were good at recognising words, but struggled with producing the words without help. Some students also had difficulty when answering reading comprehension questions. In 3rd grade, students were better at reading comprehension and word recognition, but struggled when having to define words. These obstacles were overcome through small group discussions, reinforcement and expansion work.

As for the findings related to vocabulary acquisition, results can be observed in the following tables. Information has been broken down to make it clear to the reader:

Table 4
3rd grade Control vocabulary acquisition

3rd grade		
Control vocabulary		
Average percentage of vocabulary used at the beginning of the study.	Average percentage of vocabulary used by the end of the study.	**Average percentage of increase of use of vocabulary words.**
10,16 %	16,03 %	**5,87 %**

As displayed in *Table 4*, control vocabulary had little increase in this three-month period. Despite the fact that there is an increase, and that this is always positive, one must reflect on why it is so small. Moreover, students tended to use different words, vastly because both in the pre and post-tests they recalled the most recently studied ones. This can lead into thinking long-term retention was not generally spread.

Table 5
3rd grade Control vocabulary vs Target vocabulary acquisition

3rd grade					
Control vocabulary			**Target vocabulary**		
Average percentage of vocabulary used at the beginning of the study.	*Average percentage of vocabulary used by the end of the study.*	*Average percentage of increase of use of vocabulary words.*	Average percentage of vocabulary used at the beginning of the study.	Average percentage of vocabulary used by the end of the study.	**Average percentage of increase of use of vocabulary words.**
10,16 %	*16,03 %*	*5,87 %*	2,38 %	29,21 %	**26,83 %**

In Table 5, it is observed that the difference between control vocabulary and target vocabulary increase is significant, being it more than 20 %. What is more, students showed a more stable use of words, even of those who had appeared at the beginning of the reading program. One of the benefits of extensive reading is that vocabulary stops being isolated words, and becomes an integrated experience. Most vocabulary was mentioned frequently because the story was one unit, unlike the control vocabulary, which was presented in unlinked didactic units.

Let us take a look now at the results in the 4th grade classroom in *Tables 6* and *7*, where difficulty was slightly higher in all aspects:

Table 6

4th grade Control vocabulary acquisition

4th grade		
Control vocabulary		
Average percentage of vocabulary used at the beginning of the study.	Average percentage of vocabulary used by the end of the study.	**Average percentage of increase of use of vocabulary words.**
4,67 %	9,67 %	**5 %**

Table 6 shows how control vocabulary showed little increase. The use of control words started as very low (4,67 %), and, although there was an increase of 5 %, it remained fairly low. In fact, the percentage of increase is almost the same as in the other study group. Patterns of students not recalling vocabulary from the beginning also appeared. All in all, results can be said to be parallel in both groups.

Table 7

4th grade Control vocabulary vs Target vocabulary acquisition

4rd grade					
Control vocabulary			**Target vocabulary**		
Average percentage of vocabulary used at the beginning of the study.	*Average percentage of vocabulary used by the end of the study.*	*Average percentage of increase of use of vocabulary words.*	Average percentage of vocabulary used at the beginning of the study.	Average percentage of vocabulary used by the end of the study.	**Average percentage of increase of use of vocabulary words.**
4,67 %	*19,67 %*	*5 %*	4,67 %	24,89 %	**20,22 %**

Table 7 results are similar to the 3ʳᵈ grade group. The difference between control vocabulary increase (5 %) and target vocabulary increase (20,22 %) is significant, being it more than 15 %. In only three months, students were able to independently use almost 25 % of target words (this percentage does not include words they could recognise or understand, which were more). As in 3ʳᵈ grade, students had incorporated the lexis stemming from reading in the long term, and they were confident in using them independently in larger amounts than the lexis learnt via textbook.

As can be observed, predictions that pointed out that reading would enhance vocabulary acquisition were validated. Results are similar in both study groups. 3ʳᵈ grade students showed an average increase of the use of control vocabulary of 5,87 %, vs a 26,83 % of average increase of target vocabulary use. 4ᵗʰ grade students showed an average increase of the use of control vocabulary of 5 %, vs a 20,22 % of average increase of target vocabulary use. For both groups at the beginning of the study, the difference of knowledge between control and target vocabulary was almost inexistent, whereas a big gap was clear by the end.

Language learnt through the authentic books extensive reading lessons was better acquired than that learnt by means of the textbook. This is due to the fact that language is not only a combination of words. To best learn a foreign language, the learner has to develop a deep connection with meaning. Immersing students in the world of a fantasy story created a learning environment where students felt motivated and wanted to learn the language needed to understand the story and talk about it. Moeller and Meyer (1995) argued that 'reading is a personal experience in a social context-exactly like language acquisition' (p. 37). On average, the students who struggled showed a similar increase in target vocabulary acquisition. No student shows a difference between increase of usage of control and target vocabulary lesser than 10 %.

Attention must be brought to the fact that the test measured vocabulary acquisition in its most complex forms. This accounts for the apparently low scores, compared to the total number of target and control words. Students showed understanding and recognition of most words in informal context, such as classroom questions and interactive games, but the pre and post-tests were designed to see which words students had incorporated into

their lexicon in a way that permitted them to use them independently. In addition, posts-tests proved that target vocabulary words that students were able to use were better distributed along the timeline, i.e. students had not forgotten words that were learnt at the beginning of the project.

Contrarily, post-tests for control words showed that most students used more frequently control words that had been recently learnt. This shows light into the importance of the meaningfulness of the language learnt in an English course. Extensive reading provided a context in which all the vocabulary was connected and students kept recycling words over and over. Per contra, the textbook presented control vocabulary words in separate Didactic Units that were not connected to one another. This compartmentalisation made it more challenging for students to make connections in their brain, and they unconsciously forget and move on to the next group of words once a Didactic Unit is finished. Furthermore, motivational activities greatly helped the reading program be successful. Emotional connections were done and students related vocabulary with experiences and tasks we had performed.

It can be then stated that reading helped students improve their lexis, and using authentic literature was not an impediment for it. In fact, it helped more than textbooks designed specifically for EFLL, and results achieved were by far better.

4.2.2 Increase in skills performance

Let us look now at the secondary objective of this study in Table 8, which was to observe student increase in skills performance (listening, reading and writing) in the 4th grade class, which was labelled as the main study group.

Table 8

4th grade skills performance increase

4th grade Cambridge A2 flyers testing: number of increase points (out of 10) between pre and post-tests	
Reading comprehension	0,52
Listening comprehension	0,50
Written expression	0,50

Results in reading comprehension increased slightly more, but not enough to be considered significant to the study. This can be due to a number of reasons: the big emphasis put on vocabulary acquisition along the extensive reading program or the lack of practice in different types of reading comprehension tests, for which students may not have been prepared. Still, these results can be looked at in another perspective: that an extensive reading program is a four-skill integrated long-term task that allows for the sustained improvement of reading, listening and writing.

Regarding writing, it was observed that students improved their writing creativity, which was transferred to other classroom activities and situations. However, significant gains in the use of grammatical features typical to writing narrations and extensive reading were not found. In this study, it was thought that the sole exposure to a specific text type of an extended period of time would affect the way students wrote after the study. Despite students being able to recognise basic connectors, the use of the past, or text division in paragraphs, overall students struggled to apply these features in their own writing pieces.

As for the development of listening skills, this extensive reading program involved a continuous practice of aural comprehension. Through the teacher reading aloud, students received a tremendous amount of input on word comprehension, pronunciation, and intonation. According to Renandya and Jacobs (2016), when EFL learners are «exposed to a large amount of language input, their word recognition skills improve, their vocabulary expands, their ability to process oral and written text fluently increases and their overall proficiency also goes up» (p. 1).

Nonetheless, some modifications could be applied to confirm better results in reading comprehension. As the reading comprehension tests were official ones, some students struggled with the format, even if the texts presented were appropriate for their level. When discussing them in class, students showed understanding of the texts, but still had trouble grasping the pattern of the activities they were required to do. The Cambridge A2 Flyers task configuration did not match the informal reading comprehension tasks done in the extensive reading program.

4.3 Outcomes

Introducing an extensive reading course into mainstream primary education is not simple and must be carefully planned out if it is to be integrated successfully into a school's curriculum. The role of the teachers becomes essential to ensure the texts are appropriate, meaningful, of decent literary value, and will, in fact, contribute to the improvement of students' command of English.

The outcomes of the study were satisfactory in that students did significantly improve the number of target words (vocabulary learnt via extensive reading) vs. control words (vocabulary learnt via textbook) they were able to use independently. The pre-tests and post-tests posed a difficult challenge of using higher order thinking skills, thus students needed to have a strong command of the vocabulary if they were to apply it in a free writing piece. This positive outcome leads to the conclusion that motivation and student engagement, as well as the relevance of the topic and the wholeness of the project, were key features for success. Working with a textbook, although it provides a structured curriculum, lacks in novelty and relevance. Language is presented in isolated words or chunks, and students hence study these language features as so, most of the time not incorporating the new words into their lexicon, as can be seen in the post-control tests.

By using authentic books, it can be seen that students' Communicative Competence is improved. Students can overcome language barriers when given the proper tools to do so. When guided, they can understand jokes, idioms, and other uses of language that are above their language level, and they remember the language learnt through reading in a greater way than when studying it from a textbook, because of the meaningful context and the emotional connection that is created. All in all, they acquire vocabulary and expressions in a meaningful way and are able to incorporate them into their lexicon in the long run. Furthermore, students feel empowered as they recognise their own effort in reading an authentic text. They were able to appreciate the difficulty of it and commented on how they felt ready to keep reading original books (for instance, as each book is part of a series, many students expressed how they wanted to keep reading the second book in the series). When properly engaged, students wait impatiently to

keep reading, and feel proud that they are achieving this accomplishment. Moreover, after carrying out extensive reading programs, students notice the difference between authentic and adapted books, and when given the option, most choose original books to read independently.

4.4 Plan of Action

Based on the findings, the recommended plan of action for the future includes two steps regarding the school curriculum design and the teacher's active role in it.

At school level, it is advisable to continue implementing the extensive reading program in all primary education in the school. This program should last one term in 1st and 2nd grade, 2 terms in 3rd and 4th grade, and the whole school year in 5th and 6th grade, and be applied one hour a week in all grades. The lesson dedicated to extensive reading will continue in the same line of work regarding vocabulary teaching through reading programs, due to the efficiency seen in this study, and language assistants will be included in the extensive reading program, given that they are a prized asset that is key to personalise learning. As for the other three hours of English lessons, the plan is to combine this reading program with textbook courses and skill-based lessons, but reducing the amount of time dedicated to decontextualized learning of language features of English.

At teacher's level it is also necessary to ensure teachers choose books that match their students' needs in terms of language level, literary value and student interest and motivation. After teachers decide literary materials, the next step will be to work on creating activities that help the development of students' reading skills in a more efficient and diverse way, so that they are able to anticipate and extrapolate their reading comprehension skills to other types of testing not directly related to the book they are reading.

Responsible to carry out this plan of action will be the bilingual coordinator of the school in close collaboration with the rest of the English teachers in the school, as well as the rest of the staff, should they want to jump on board in the project via other subject areas. It will be the responsibility of the English team to choose the books that will be read each

year, taking into consideration the precise characteristics of each cluster. Seeing that, in an informal way, this program is already taking place up to some extent, the timeline to apply it fully will be the next school year. Teachers will gather at the beginning of it to discuss and select books, and the extensive reading program will start in 5th and 6th grade in October. Flexibility on starting dates should be applied if students have difficulty getting a copy of the book.

Regarding resources and materials, apart from the book themselves, most tasks will be done in students' classroom notebooks, which makes it easier for families, since they are not required to buy extra school supplies. Worksheets or other materials that may emerge as necessary will be provided by the school. With reference to the language assistant, the bilingual coordinator of the school is the one who plans their schedule; therefore, arrangements must be made so that they will be present in the lesson dedicated to extensive reading.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The present study has intended to test the benefits of extensive reading of authentic books in the English as a foreign language classroom in a primary bilingual setting, in terms of vocabulary acquisition and, secondarily, of improvement of reading, writing and listening skills. It has also aimed at looking into the strengths and weaknesses of students' reading skills, in order to implement an improved reading program in the school.

Students' acquisition of vocabulary has been measured via comparisons between the acquisition of vocabulary through literature and through the textbook. The analysis has shown important gains in vocabulary acquisition through extensive reading. Additionally, in the 4th grade classroom students' improvement of listening and writing skills, which were not openly targeted in the study, versus their improvement of reading comprehension, have been assessed using standard Cambridge A2 Flyers tests. Regarding these three skills, quite similar improvements were made by students, reading comprehension not standing out particularly.

A complementary study has been carried out in 3rd grade, analysing most of the items from the main study class.

5.1 Implications

Extensive reading has proved, once again, a highly valuable tool for the EFL teacher and learner. This project has been of great interest for me as a teacher, the students, and the school community, as it will help open the way into a slightly different methodological approach that all teachers are looking forward to enforce.

Some concerns have appeared throughout the study. At first, having no control group who could shed light into how students gain vocabulary without an extensive reading program was seen as an almost impeding limitation. Due to the fact that this had no solution at all, the school only having one class per grade, alternative solutions had to be found. In the end, comparing different techniques used within the same classrooms, and comparing the evolution of two grades, allowed for a wide range of data, which in fact turned out to back up the results, displaying analogous results in both study groups. At the end, worries arose regarding how reading comprehension is being measured in the classroom and the school in general, and what more strategies students could learn. All things considered, three months seems a short time span. Pre, while, and post-tests sometimes happened with not a long time in between, which caused stress in some students, and others would have needed more time to settle and expand their knowledge.

This study will definitely have positive and helpful implications for other teachers who want to move on to a skills approach in primary education. Answering the research questions, reading has proved to help students in many dimensions of their language learning, and authentic literature has overcome its daunting name to be a better and more enjoyable way to improve reading and to increase vocabulary acquisition than traditional textbooks supposedly designed for that purpose. Students have enjoyed reading far more than traditional lessons, and they have felt proud of reading original books. In the end, they have incorporated vocabulary into their lexis that they now use confidently in a greater extent they do with the one learnt through textbook vocabulary lists, and extensive reading is to be thanked for that.

To conclude, the hypothesis expressed in the introduction of this paper, which was formulated as follows: that the use of extensive reading of authentic books will have a better effect on student achievement in general and in vocabulary acquisition in particular than if only learning via a textbook designed for Spanish children who are EFFL; and that authentic literature will not hinder student learning but will, on the contrary, help motivation, engagement, and ultimately, academic improvement, can be said to be validated. Bilingual systems allow us to help students learn language in a more natural way, and in that sense, reading original books in extensive reading programs offers the opportunity of expanding language knowledge in a similar fashion to how native students would. Notwithstanding, steps need to be actively taken in order to consciously move away from traditional teaching methods that might be hindering our teaching practice, and, accordingly, students' performance.

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