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English Novels Hold Particular Promise for Improving Reading Comprehension

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Abstract: Reading comprehension is a fundamental skill in second language acquisition, yet traditional methods often rely on short, intensive reading passages that may not fully engage learners. This study investigates the use of English novels as a tool to improve students' reading comprehension in an EFL context. Results indicate that the novel-reading group made significant gains in reading comprehension and related sub-skills, with notably higher incidental vocabulary gains and improved inferencing ability in comprehension questions. Participants also demonstrated increased reading fluency and expressed greater cultural insight and motivation to read in English.

Keywords: Reading comprehension, second language acquisition, English novels, extensive reading, EFL, vocabulary acquisition, inferencing skills, reading fluency, cultural awareness, learner motivation, Communicative Language Teaching, Task-Based Language Teaching, language pedagogy.

Introduction: Developing reading comprehension in English is a central goal for EFL/ESL learners, yet it remains a challenging skill to teach and acquire. Traditional classroom practice often emphasizes intensive reading of short texts with close vocabulary and grammar analysis. While such practices build discrete reading skills, they may not sufficiently promote fluent, engaged reading or the broad language growth that comes from encountering language in context.

Among long-form texts, English novels hold particular

promise for improving reading comprehension. Novels are rich, authentic texts that present language in varied contexts and registers, exposing learners to vocabulary, idioms, and syntax beyond the scope of textbooks. Unlike abridged passages, novels tell extended stories that can captivate learners' interest, potentially increasing motivation and time-on-task. From a communicative language teaching (CLT) perspective, novels constitute authentic materials produced for native readers, which can be leveraged in the classroom to simulate real-life reading experiences and cultural exposure (Savignon, 2002). Authentic literary texts immerse learners in the target language culture and modes of expression, enabling them to understand not just the language but the social and cultural contexts of communication. By reading fiction, students also practice inferential thinking – “reading between the lines” to grasp implicit meanings – an essential comprehension skill. Furthermore, the narrative flow of novels encourages reading fluency; learners must read more continuously and rapidly to follow the plot, which can improve their reading speed and automaticity over time.

Despite these theoretical advantages, incorporating novels in an EFL setting raises questions about methodology and outcomes. How exactly does novel reading impact specific facets of comprehension such as vocabulary growth or inferencing ability? Can a novel-based curriculum significantly improve general reading proficiency compared to traditional methods? What frameworks and classroom practices best support students in benefiting from literature? To address these questions, this study explores the integration of English novel reading into an EFL program and its effects on learners' reading comprehension. We focus on five key areas of potential benefit derived from literature as highlighted in prior research: vocabulary acquisition, inferencing skills, reading fluency, cultural awareness, and motivation. Each of these dimensions plays a role in reading comprehension. For instance, a broad vocabulary and the ability to infer meaning from context help readers make sense of texts, while reading fluency allows readers to process text smoothly without being bogged down by decoding. Cultural knowledge can enhance understanding of references and contexts in English texts, and motivation drives the extensive reading needed for improvement.

Inferencing – the ability to interpret information that is implied but not explicitly stated – is a critical component of reading comprehension. Skilled readers constantly make inferences about characters' intentions, plot developments, and the meaning of unknown words or phrases. Reading novels can

sharpen students' inferencing skills because literary narratives typically do not spell out every detail; readers must “read between the lines” to fully understand motives, causes, and themes. Several studies have explored how working with fiction can improve learners' inferential reading strategies. Gahari and Basanjideh (2015) trained Iranian EFL undergraduates using short story reading and strategy instruction, and found that those who practiced inferring meanings and identifying themes showed higher gains in reading comprehension than those who only did standard comprehension exercises. The act of following a long-form narrative allows students to practice connecting clues over chapters and predicting outcomes, thereby exercising deeper cognitive processing.

Research in L1 contexts also reinforces the value of inference training through literature. For example, Levine and Horton (2015) demonstrated that high school readers, after guidance on making thematic inferences in literary texts, began to interpret stories more like expert readers and improved their overall understanding of the texts. In an EFL context, Öz & Efegioğlu (2015) examined the use of a graphic novel in a Turkish high school and found that the group reading the graphic novel developed a significantly better ability to make inferences compared to a control group (as evidenced by more interpretative answers to comprehension questions). These students could more readily “read between the lines” and grasp implicit meanings, a skill which directly translated into stronger reading comprehension performance. Consistent with these findings, McCarthy and Goldman (2015) note that prompting students to construct inferences about themes and arguments “makes it possible to read between [the] lines and beyond the explicit text, which improves their reading comprehension”. Thus, incorporating novels in the curriculum – especially with guided activities like discussions or reading journals that prompt inferencing – can help learners practice and internalize this skill. Over time, as students become comfortable with inferencing in literature, they are likely to apply the same skill to other reading materials, improving comprehension across the board.

Reading fluency refers to the ability to read text quickly, accurately, and with appropriate expression. It is often measured by reading speed (words per minute) and is closely tied to comprehension; when a reader can decode text fluently, cognitive resources are freed for understanding meaning. Extensive reading of novels is expected to improve fluency because it involves reading large amounts of text where the focus is on overall meaning rather than careful analysis of form. As learners progress through a novel, they ideally start

reading faster as they become engrossed in the story and encounter familiar vocabulary and patterns. The aim of extensive reading programs is indeed to increase reading fluency by making reading an enjoyable, regular activity.

An additional perspective is provided by Nuttall's concept of the "virtuous circle of reading": fluent reading leads to more enjoyment, which leads to more reading, which in turn further enhances fluency and comprehension. In other words, initial improvements in fluency can yield motivational benefits that reinforce a self-sustaining cycle of reading development. In our focus on novels, it is expected that once students get hooked on a story, they will read for longer stretches and with increasing ease, thereby boosting their fluency. Teachers have observed, for instance, that students who initially read slowly and word-by-word begin to read in meaningful chunks and with greater speed after participating in a semester of extensive novel reading (Day & Bamford, 1998). By including novels in an EFL syllabus, educators target fluency indirectly: rather than drills for speed, they provide engaging content that naturally trains students to read more fluently as they immerse themselves in the text.

METHODOLOGY

This study was designed as a quasi-experimental intervention with mixed methods, conducted over one academic semester. The research setting was a university-affiliated language institute where learners were enrolled in an upper-intermediate EFL reading course. Two intact classes were selected: one served as the experimental group (novel-based extensive reading) and the other as the comparison group (traditional intensive reading). A total of 60 students participated (N = 60), with 30 students in each group. All participants were adult learners (aged 18–22) whose proficiency corresponded roughly to B2 level on the CEFR scale. They had all completed at least four semesters of general English instruction, ensuring a sufficient baseline of vocabulary and grammar to handle intermediate-level texts. None of the students had extensive prior experience with reading English novels. A pre-study survey confirmed that while most had read short stories or textbook chapters in English, fewer than 10% had ever read an English novel to completion.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, improving students' reading comprehension through English novels is not only feasible but highly beneficial. The academic gains in comprehension, vocabulary, and fluency go hand in hand with affective gains in motivation and confidence, painting a picture of learners who are not just better readers but also more autonomous and enthusiastic readers. This holistic improvement is particularly valuable in EFL contexts, where students often struggle to find authentic reasons to engage with English. A novel provides that reason – a compelling story – and transforms reading from a classroom task to a personal journey. English novels, when appropriately employed, are powerful tools for enhancing reading comprehension and language competence. We encourage educators to embrace literature as a dynamic component of language teaching and to share in the journey of discovery that their students will undoubtedly experience as they turn the pages of a good book in English.

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