

Learners' Perceptions of Using Readers as Extensive Reading Tool in Reading Class

Rumana Rafique*

Abstract : Numerous studies emphasized on the importance of extensive reading in learning a second or foreign language. The aims of extensive reading are to build reader confidence and enjoyment by offering students large amounts of high interest material, usually out of class to achieve a good reading competence in a second or foreign language whereas in some EFL/ ESL context learners' interest level is seldom taken into account while choosing a text for using in the classroom. This study tries to investigate learners' perceptions towards using 'graded readers', as a mean to extensive reading tool in a reading class at a private university where 'reader' is mandatory as part of the course requirement and students have to attend a test based on it. To conduct the study a questionnaire containing both closed-ended and open-ended questions has been used to find out learners' attitude towards graded readers as extensive reading tool in reading class. The participants were 30 undergraduate students of a private university in Bangladesh. The results of the study show that learners often have some difficulties in understanding the text as limited time is given to the teaching of 'readers' in class, but overall they are benefitted from using readers as it develops their comprehension skills, reading fluency, vocabulary, and more than that it appeals to the learners' interest level. Hence, using readers in reading classes can be more effective if it meets learners' needs and motivates them for reading for pleasure. The paper also discusses some suggestions provided by the learners in using readers in classroom so that maximum learning opportunities can be ensured.

Introduction

A good reading competence is essential in EFL learning process as Krashen (2004) argues that "those who do more recreational reading, show better development in reading, writing, grammar and vocabulary

in case of second language acquisition" (p.1). Many researchers also agreed to the fact that students need to receive an extensive input to develop language proficiency because the language input students receive is mainly from the classroom. Guo (2012) stated, "Students do not often take any initiative to locate foreign language resources outside of class or engage in reading beyond a course requirement" (p. 196). Therefore, when extensive reading is utilized in classroom, learners get to read a wide variety of texts for pleasure and at the same time achieve a general understanding of the content while deciphering unknown words through context (Rabbidge & Lorenzutti, 2013, p. 28). This contrasts with the concept of intensive reading which involves a slower process of reading relatively small amount of materials in order to extract specific information from the text. Researches based on reading suggest that "most developing countries put stress on intensive reading leaving the idea of extensive reading ignored whereas ER can have significant impact on L2 learners' development" (Hafiz and Tudor, 1989, cited in Haider & Akhter, 2012, p. 126).

While the importance of including extensive reading in foreign or second language curricula is undeniable, there are actually a large variety of materials for extensive reading, including 'graded readers'-novels and short stories that are calibrated to the different language levels of learners. The benefits of using graded readers are many. These simplified texts not only appeal to the learners' interest level as it is written using simplified words and grammar, it also improves their language proficiency, vocabulary acquisition, fluency in reading. Using 'readers' also engages learners through the entertainment of reading which leads to discussion and sharing of ideas. Researches acknowledged the fact that using graded readers in ESL/EFL context is an excellent way of improving English, reading skills and learners' motivation (Eidswick, Rouault, & Praver, 2010, p. 4). It is also equally important to research on the learners' needs and perspectives regarding the effective use of these 'readers' in the language classroom especially in EFL/ ESL context as "students' perceptions of how interesting or boring a book is plays a role in students' attitudes toward ER and activities related to it" (p.4) and in EFL context fewer research has been done on this field.

The aim of this paper, hence, is to investigate learners' perceptions on using 'graded readers' or as extensive reading tool in a reading course

* Lecturer, Department of English, University of Dhaka

at a private university of Bangladesh. The course Eng. 107 is 'Reading and Grammar', in which according to the course design, the focus is more on teaching the various English grammatical elements and unfortunately less on teaching reading skills and strategies or even teaching reading comprehension. As a result, it is noticed that for many undergraduate learners reading an English novel even though it is simplified, is a matter of great challenge as they are not used to this type of reading. Besides, using readers in such language courses might often prove to be a challenge as the class time and content to teach in a semester may not permit the effective teaching of these readers in the class. To minimize the challenge, teachers need to be a little more tactful to implement different activities or exercises in the classroom. To investigate the issue from learners' perspectives, this paper tries to answer the following question:

- a. What are the perceptions of learners in using 'readers' in reading class?

The results of this study will hopefully help the teachers adopting a more student-centered pedagogy in using 'readers' following the principles of extensive reading as a result they can explore what activities can be conducted creatively to maximize the teaching and learning of readers in class. Moreover, there are different approaches to teach readers in languages classroom as proposed by various EFL/ESL researchers such as language-focused activities, comprehension activities, productive skills-focused activities choosing of which will mostly depend on the learners' level of understanding. Hence this paper will give an overview of the difficulties learners face in reading 'readers' in language classes as well as it will provide some suggestions from the learners' perspectives on minimizing these challenges and how learning can be maximized to a great extent.

Literature Review

What is Extensive Reading?

According to MacLeod, "in a language classroom, several types of reading can occur. Brown categorized between oral and silent reading where within the category of silent reading one encounters intensive and extensive reading" (p. 1). Brown (2001) suggested that extensive reading is carried out "to achieve a general understanding of a text"

(p.301). Extensive reading is always done for the comprehension of main ideas instead of focusing on specific details.

Extensive Reading is "intended to develop good reading habits, to build up knowledge of vocabulary and structure, and to encourage liking for reading" (Richards, Platt & Platt, 1992, p. 133). When students read extensively, they read very easy, enjoyable books to build their reading speed and reading fluency. It also aims to build reader confidence and enjoyment. The aim of Extensive Reading is to help students become better at the skill of reading rather than reading to study the language itself. The primary aim of ER programs, according to Day and Bamford, is "to get students reading in the second language and liking it" (p. 6). Harold Palmer was thought to be the first to use the term extensive reading in foreign language (FL) teaching. In Palmer's view of ER, students read a great deal and read quickly. He believed that in ER, books were read for both language study and real-world experiences (i.e., pleasure and information).

According to Bamford & Day (1997), to read extensively means to read widely and in quantity (p. 1). In recent research, extensive reading took on a special meaning in the context of teaching modern languages. As emphasized by Day, the term Extensive reading was first used by Harold Palmer who used it to differentiate ER from Intensive Reading (p.1). While intensive reading refers to the "careful reading (or translation) of shorter, more difficult foreign language texts with the goal of complete and detailed understanding", extensive reading is generally associated with "reading large amounts with the aim of getting an overall understanding of the material. Readers are more concerned with the meaning of the text than the meaning of individual words or sentences" (1997, p. 1).

Why need Extensive Reading

It is now widely acknowledged that to gain better proficiency in L2, reading in that language is the most beneficial way. "Extensive reading provides 'contextualized clues' for better reading comprehension and substantial 'linguistic input' needed for language development" (Guo, 2012, p.1). However, in the EFL context, most reading is done in the classroom focusing on the linguistic input (vocabulary building, etc.) while reading

outside the classroom is almost negligible; and even if it is encouraged, the amount of reading is very little. For a language teacher, therefore, encouraging learners in doing extensive reading is very important. "Krashen (1993) makes a strong argument for the use of extensive reading where he states that not only reading comprehension but the writing style, vocabulary, and spelling and control of grammar will all improve" (Maruyama, 2008, p. 28). In order to get the most out of the learning, choosing appropriate material is crucial.

Top ten principles of extensive reading by Day

Day and Bamford (2002, p. 2) proposed ten principles for an extensive reading approach to teaching reading. According to them,

1. The reading material should be easy.
2. A variety of reading material on a wide range of topics must be available.
3. Learners choose what they want to read.
4. Learners read as much as possible.
5. The purpose of reading is usually related to pleasure, information and general understanding.
6. Reading is its own reward.
7. Reading speed is usually faster rather than slower.
8. Reading is individual and silent.
9. Teachers orient and guide their students.
10. The teacher is a role model of a reader.

Hence, the basic tenet of extensive reading program is that "learners select materials on their own within their "linguistic capabilities" from a collection of graded readers (Day and Bamford, 1998, p. 126) or learners are exposed to "large quantities of materials within their linguistic competence" (Grabe and Stoller, 2002, p.259, cited in Meng, 2009, p. 133). This aim can only be achieved by reading a large number of texts out of the classroom. Besides, learners can choose and read reading materials based on their own interest, with the aim of general comprehension rather than translation or analysis of vocabulary and grammatical points.

Graded Readers as Extensive Reading Tool

Graded Readers (also called 'Readers') are books (both fiction and non-fiction) written especially for language learners to build their reading speed and fluency and to give them chances to practice 'real' reading for pleasure. They are called 'graded' readers because they are written according to a pedagogical syllabus which has increasing grades, or levels, of difficulty (cited in ERF Guide, 2011, p. 2). They are made easy to read by simplifying the vocabulary and grammar so the learner can easily understand the story. Graded Readers are not children's books (although some are written for teenagers and children), but in general they are books for adult language learners (Waring, 1997, p. 1).

Graded readers are described by David Hill (2008), as "books written for learners of English using limited lexis and syntax" (p. 185). A variety of well-known publishers have published collection of good graded readers such as Macmillan, Oxford University Press, Cambridge University Press, Penguin, Mary Glasgow, etc. Using graded readers to promote extensive reading can be an effective way to develop fluency in foreign or second language because GRs come in so many different genre and teachers can choose the genre based on learners' interest and difficulty level of English. Hence the benefit of GRs can be-

- ✓ allow students to meet lots of comprehensible language
- ✓ provide motivating & interesting reading materials
- ✓ Short and faster, more fluent reading
- ✓ a more positive attitude to the foreign language in general
- ✓ develop a "reading habit"
- ✓ gain more confidence in reading
- ✓ become more " independent readers", being able to read for different purposes and being able to change reading strategies for different kinds of texts
- ✓ increase reading comprehension & overall language competence

Related Research

Very few researches have been done on using GRs as extensive reading material tools. Most of the studies among this focused on the

effectiveness of using graded readers in acquiring L2 vocabulary. For instance, a recent study by Maruyama (2008) discusses the importance of using GRs in Japanese context. The study also investigates the level of GRs text to choose according to learners' level based on Vocabulary Level Test where the findings indicated that testing students' vocabulary size was an appropriate measure to decide their books' level. It shows that though the books they chose were lower than their actual vocabulary level, learners felt they were neither too easy nor too difficult on average.

Another study on using GRs was done by Huang and Liou (2007) on vocabulary learning in an automated GR program in Chinese context. The result of the study showed that learners improved their vocabulary after using an online extensive reading program. It also indicated that designing an online extensive reading program was technically feasible and pedagogically beneficial as it has value in both vocabulary gains and learner satisfaction. Similar study has also been done by Walker (1997) with a positive outcome of the project. Poulshock's (2010) study describes the purpose and format of the stories used by hundreds of university students and adult learners in Japan. It also examines how students learned vocabulary from the stories that they used. The results support the idea that learners enjoy, are motivated by, and can gain vocabulary knowledge through using short graded stories in the liberal arts and sciences.

Another significant study has been done by Bulushy. Bulushy has focused on various aspects of graded readers including the types of GRs available and their publishers. The paper discussed different strategies used to engage students and encouraging them to read and comprehend. It also reports on students' views regarding the current GRs they read and the assessment strategies they prefer. It is found out that some learners found the GRs very useful as it is short and has simplified language and expressions while others felt it contained more difficult words and they could not find enough time to read. Moreover, regarding the assessment strategies, 62% felt that presentation in teacher office was a good strategy while 60% preferred writing summary of the book they read as assessment strategy.

Tien's (2015) study on teachers' and students' perceptions toward an extensive reading program located in an EFL higher education context

suggest that differing majors among students and the amount of time spent weekly on reading graded readers directly impacts students' attitudes toward extensive reading. The results also confirm the linguistic benefit ER brought to learners upon completion of the program.

Though using GRs to promote extensive reading has gained much popularity over the years in different ESL/EFL context, in Bangladesh it is only recently that GRs are being used as extensive reading material tools. Some private universities are using adapted readers in EAP Reading program but it has not been properly researched yet whether the levels of GRs are welcomed by the learners, or to what extent adapting this material in language class is actually beneficial for both the teachers and learners. A very recent study by Touhid (2015) on implementation of extensive reading in ESL classrooms suggests that teachers acknowledge the benefits of extensive reading though certain challenges are encountered in implementing the program. The study also suggests that awareness among the teachers, school authorities as well as the education board need to be raised in the promotion of extensive reading among the learners.

Methodology

The aim of this study is to investigate the learners' response in using (graded) readers in a language course in a private university of Bangladesh. This is a short exploratory study in which a questionnaire was used containing both open-ended and closed-ended questions.

Sampling

Purposive sampling method was used to select the subject in this study. The subjects are 30 undergraduate first year Law students taking an EAP Reading course (Eng. 107: Reading and Grammar) at a private university in Bangladesh.

Instruments

A survey questionnaire was used containing both closed-ended and open-ended questions covering the aspects of using graded readers in language class. The questionnaire consisted of twenty-five items and divided into five areas such as the difficulty level of the text, appropriateness of the

text, learners’ enjoyment on reading, their sense of improvement and their perception on the activities done based on readers. The items of the questionnaire were designed on a five-point Likert Scale ranging from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree”.

Methods of Data Analysis

The Likert-scale items in the first section of the questionnaire produced quantitative data whereas the open-ended questions in the second section produced qualitative data. The quantitative data was analyzed by using Microsoft Excel. Descriptive statistics (frequencies and means) were calculated for each variable to identify the learners’ perceptions towards using readers as extensive reading tool.

Results and Discussion of the Findings

Research Question: What are the perceptions of learners in using graded readers in language class?

Learners’ Perception of the Difficulty Level of the Text used as Reader

Table 1: *Questionnaire Results: Difficulty Level of the Text*

No.	Statements	5	4	3	2	1	Mean
1	While reading, I didn’t understand most of the words.	3.33	33.33	6.66	43.33	13.33	2.7
2	It looked challenging enough, I didn’t understand the story/ theme well.	0	16.67	6.66	70	6.66	2.33
3	They are very long, can’t finish reading on time.	6.66	33.33	16.67	40	3.33	3
4	It would have been better if the teacher taught the reader chapter wise focusing on every important details in class.	26.67	40	23.33	0	10	3.73
5	It looked easy to read.	33.33	36.67	3.33	23.33	3.33	3.73

The results in Table 1 shows that though majority of the respondents (70%) did not have that much problems in understanding the story or

theme of the story, 43.33% admitted that they could not understand the difficult words well enough. It suggests that lack of vocabulary did not create much impact as they were actually using “graded readers’ which has simplified language with occasionally difficult words. However, 40% agreed that the teacher should explain the story chapter wise which might be a problem in this particular Eng.107 class where there are so many grammatical items to finish in a semester.

Learners’ Perception of the Relevance of the text (Readers)

Table 2: *Questionnaire Results: Relevance of the text (Readers)*

No.	Statements	5	4	3	2	1	Mean
6	I wasn’t so comfortable with reading an English reader as I haven’t read any English stories like this before.	6.66	36.67	6.66	36.67	13.33	2.87
7	I don’t find readers useful as we don’t get much time to read this in class.	6.66	16.67	6.66	43.33	26.67	2.33
8	Some readers don’t have good ideas.	16.67	26.67	30	20	6.66	3.27
9	We don’t get to select the stories we want to read.	36.67	40	10	6.66	6.66	3.93
10	These stories contain a great source of information from where we can learn about life.	46.67	36.67	13.33	3.33	0	4.27

The results in Table 2 shows that 43.33% respondents have positive attitude towards using readers in language classroom as they find it very useful, while 46.67% admitted that they are benefitted from the story as it contains a great source of information about life. Another major finding here is that 40% agreed with the opinion that they cannot choose stories according to their preferences. In contrary one of the principles of extensive reading is to let the learners select their own stories (Day & Bamford, 2002, p.137) which is not maintained here.

Learners’ Perception of Reading ‘Readers’ for Pleasure

Table 3: Questionnaire Results: Reading for Pleasure

No.	Statements	5	4	3	2	1	Mean
11	I enjoyed the text very much.	40	43.33	3.33	13.33	0	4.1
12	We read them only to get marks.	16.67	10	20	43.33	10	2.8
13	They are very boring.	6.66	6.66	10	36.67	40	2.03
14	I want to read more English books like this.	46.67	40	10	3.33	0	4.3
15	I didn’t like the type of story in my Reader (e.g. crime, action, adventures, etc.). I have my own favorite type.	6.66	20	16.67	30	26.67	2.5

The results of Table 3 also indicate a positive attitude of learners in using readers in language classroom. Majority (43.33%) of the respondents responded that they enjoyed the reader very much while another 40% strongly agreed with this statement. They (36.67%) did not think readers as boring text; rather they would like to read more English stories like this if possible as 46.67% already agreed to this view. In case of the type of stories, the table shows that the respondents (26.67%) quite liked the story of their reader.

Learners’ Perception of their Learning through Reading

Table 4: Questionnaire Results: Learning through Reading

No.	Statements	5	4	3	2	1	Mean
16	The chain of events & actions in my reader demands thinking.	30	56.67	10	3.33	0	4.13
17	I have learnt new expressions.	36.67	46.67	13.33	3.33	0	4.17
18	I got to learn about other cultures.	36.67	50	6.66	3.33	3.33%	4.13
19	My reading ability improved. I think I learnt to read fast.	50	30	20	0	0	4.3
20	They suggest ways to resolve problems.	23.33	40	30	6.66	0	3.8

The results of Table 4 indicate the sense of improvement of the learners after using reader as extensive reading material. As the results suggest, 56.67% of the respondents felt that the chain of events and actions in the story improved their critical thinking and 50% thought that their reading skill has improved. Moreover, these readers are useful means to learn new vocabularies and expressions as 46.67% have agreed. As these readers are being taught in an EFL context or EAP academic setting, learners can easily get to know about a new culture (50%) other than their own.

Learners’ Perception of the Activities Done Based on Readers

Table 5: Questionnaire Results: Activities Done Based on Readers

No.	Statements	5	4	3	2	1	Mean
21	The work we did in class was useful for me.	36.67	30	23.33	6.66	3.33	3.9
22	The practice in class was interesting.	40	46.67	3.33	3.33	6.66	4.1
23	There was too much homework.	16.67	26.67	0	53.33	3.33	3
24	We were required to do too much writing at home.	10	36.67	13.33	26.67	13.33	3.03
25	It was not taught properly in the class.	10	16.67	30	26.67	16.67	2.77

The results in Table 5 indicate learners’ response on activities or exercises done based on the reader. Majority of the respondents (53.33%) disagreed with the statement that there was too much homework given on the reader and 46.67% admitted that the class works were actually interesting and useful for them for understanding the story. However, 36.67% did not like the amount of work they had to do at home. From all the Tables it is seen that learners generally have a positive response towards using readers in language classroom with occasional obvious difficulties in implementing them as extensive reading material as these texts are short and simplified version especially written for second or foreign language learners. Learners’

response towards using reader in language classroom can be shown by using a chart:

Means of the Constructs (in descending order)

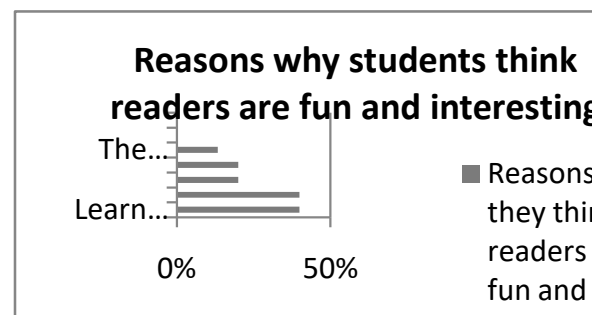
Table 6: Means of the Constructs

Constructs	Mean
Learning through Reading	4.10
Activities Done Based on Readers	3.36
Relevance of the text	3.33
Reading for Pleasure	3.14
Difficulty Level	3.09

Table 6 shows that learners' perception on their sense of improvement has the highest mean (M=4.10) which suggests that they can improve their reading skills and fluency very well by using a simplified text. Next, they consider readers as useful mean of learning reading as the mean is M=3.33. Again, they have a positive attitude towards using readers (M=3.14) because it motivates them and engages them in learning new information, discussing and sharing ideas and building their vocabularies. All of these statements support the idea of using graded readers in language classroom.

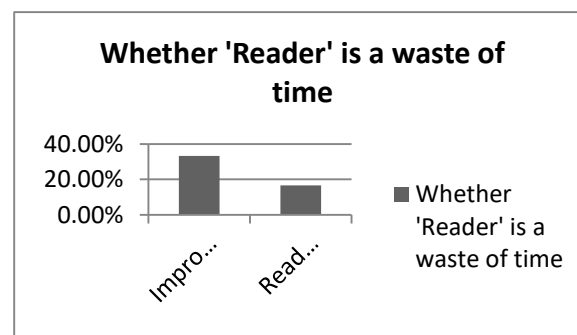
Results of the Open-ended Questions

In the second part of the questionnaire there were three open-ended questions which sought opinions from learners regarding the use of readers in class. Among 30 participants, 14 participants did not respond to any of these questions while other 16 participants respond to almost all the questions. The first question in the open-ended section asked the learners to mention some reasons why they think readers are fun and interesting to read. One participant thought readers are not fun and enjoyable, however reasons behind this opinion has not been mentioned. On the other hand, the rest 15 participants gave a variety of reasons why they think they enjoyed reading 'readers' in classes. Some of the common reasons are-



The results of the first question support most of the statements in the closed-ended section of the questionnaire. For example, the means of the constructs in Table 6 suggest that learners had very positive response on the fact that they have learned new things from the text they read which is similar in the above responses. Moreover, majority of them also agreed to the fact that the text was more interesting and enjoyable to read in class which again can be seen in the response of the first question of open-ended section.

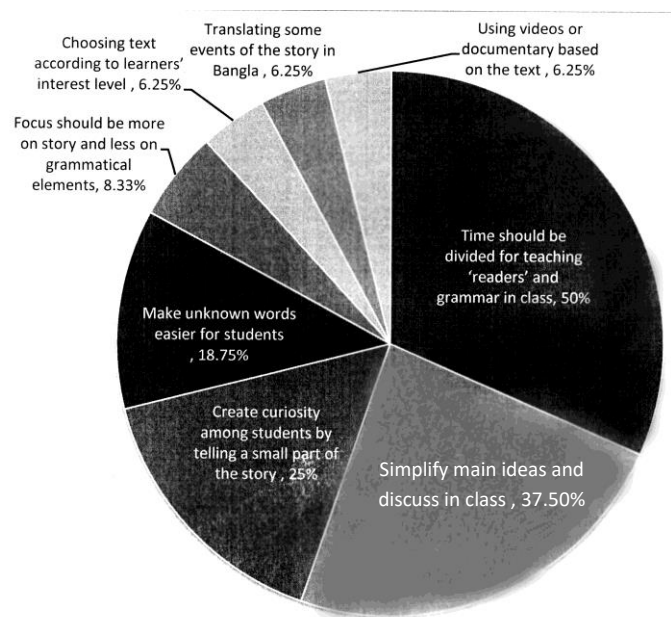
The second question in the open-ended section sought the reasons why these learners might think using 'readers' in a reading class is a waste of time. Only 12 participants answered this questions where all of them mentioned that 'readers' are actually not a waste of time, rather they have been benefitted from using 'readers' as part of their course.



The responses to this question directly support the first open-ended question. It also supported many of the statements in the closed-ended section. Their responses were categorized on the basis of common themes-

Learners feel that reading books out of their regular text books actually helped them get acquainted with a large amount of reading contents and improved their comprehension of texts. As the content or story of this books are in easy language and related to their interest level, they found these 'readers' quite enjoyable.

Lastly, the learners were asked about their expectations from teachers in using readers effectively in classes. Learners came up with a variety of responses which has some common themes. They expected the following (according to importance given by participants) for better learning in their classes:



The responses of the third question draw some thoughtful answers on the ways teachers can administer 'readers' in language classes. In other words, it also suggests some difficulties learners face in reading text in class. For example, the first statement in closed-ended questions talked about the difficulties learners have with unknown words, similarly as a response to the third open-ended question, some learners mentioned their expectations that teachers would clarify this as well as discuss the important events and simplify the themes of the story for better

understanding. Further, majority of the participants emphasized that more time should be devoted to teaching 'readers' in class and less on teaching grammatical elements.

Overall, the findings of the open-ended questions are quite similar to the results found in closed-ended questions of the questionnaire. Therefore, as 'readers' are considered as a popular mean to promote extensive reading in language class, teachers should implement effective techniques to introduce it in the classroom keeping in mind learners needs and interests level.

Implications of the Study

The findings of this study show learners' response on using 'readers' as extensive reading tool in language classes. It has several implications for ESL/EFL teachers in implementing 'readers' in language classroom. First of all, Bamford and Day (2002, p. 137) mentioned in their top ten principles of extensive reading that learners should be able to select their own stories. Choosing the appropriate text according to the level of difficulty of the learners is a very crucial part as L2 learners' understanding of their own level of difficulty might vary. Hence, choosing the text according the learners' difficulty level is essential because if a text is difficult, learners might get a general idea of the text but reading for a detailed understanding would be beyond his/ her capability. But thinking of an EFL context like Bangladesh, this might not be quite possible in every scenario as the availability of reading materials as well as the foreign language program might not support the idea. Hence what can be done is teachers should keep in mind learners' level and their interests while choosing a text as 'readers' for them.

Another implication for EFL/ESL teachers would be to keep in mind the course design, class timings and selection of reading materials to use in class. The responses of learners from open-ended questions also reflect the fact that while using 'readers' as extensive reading tool in language class, equal amount of time should be given for teaching grammar and 'readers' instead of keeping a large amount of time for teaching grammatical elements only. Lastly, teachers need to adapt a more student friendly pedagogy in teaching the 'readers' by allowing enjoyable and fun activities in class based on readers so that learning can be more fruitful.

Limitations of the Study

This is a very short scale research considering only the perspectives of 30 learners towards using readers. The findings, therefore, may not be applicable to all undergraduate language classes. The other limitation is that data has been collected from students sample only. If the teachers had been included, the findings would have been more reliable and valid. Moreover, further research could be done on the selection of graded readers and assessment strategies to implement which might provide a comprehensive view of using readers to promote extensive reading in language classrooms.

Conclusion

The study explored learners' perceptions towards using graded readers as extensive reading tool in a language class. The study focused on five areas such as the difficulty level of the text, the appropriateness of using readers in language classroom, reading readers for pleasure, learners' sense of improvement and lastly, learners' perceptions on the activities based on their reading. The study revealed that using readers is a very effective way to engage learners in extensive reading and develop their reading fluency. Though it might not be possible to devote a proper class time on teaching readers, teachers should initiate interesting techniques to integrate language works in teaching readers which might maximize the learning opportunities for the learners.

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