The Effect of Intensive and Extensive Reading Strategies on Reading Comprehension: A Case of Iranian High School Students

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This study was an attempt to investigate the effect of intensive and extensive reading strategies on EFL learners' reading comprehension. To achieve this goal, seventy EFL learners were conveniently selected from two different high schools in Shiraz. All the participants in this study were third grade high school students and most of them were male. To be determined, if the two groups have the same level of reading comprehension or not; both of them took pre and post reading exams. It should be mentioned that the extensive group with the help of their teacher became familiar with various books other than their text book for ten weeks. During this period, they studied their ideal books out of class without fear of exam. Whereas the intensive group studied their text book, plus ten texts. In order to obtain students' feedback, an interview was conducted with five students in each group in relation to the effect of these two strategies on reading comprehension. In general, the results from the interview and reading exam indicated that these two strategies, in particular extensive reading had positive effect on EFL learners reading comprehension.

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Key words: intensive reading, extensive reading, reading comprehension

Introduction

Reading is a complex activity, in recent years; two approaches have been used in developing reading skills, known as extensive and extensive reading. It is believed that these two approaches can be beneficial, in one way or another, for improving students' reading comprehension ability (Popescu, 2012; Attaprechakul, 2013; Alpatkein, 2006; Gorsuch, 2012; Grabe, 2010; Huang, 2013; Bernhardt, 2010; Abraham pula, 2002).

Recently, there have been some trends in favor of extensive reading over intensive reading (Poulshock, 2010; Peham, 2009; Tamrackitkun, 2010; Rezaee & Nourzadeh 2011; Bell, 2001)

and a number of studies have highlighted the significant role of extensive reading in enhancing comprehension of learners (Nakanishi, Ueda, Guo, & Roehrig 2011; Chou, 2011). There are also some studies conducted in different contexts with different ethnic and linguistic backgrounds.

Powell (2005) believes that "there is enough evidence to suggest that an extensive reading program would be valuable complement to existing methodologies (p. 28)". This claim is based on a considerable amount of literature devoted to the role and advantages of extensive reading in learners' reading comprehension. Powell (2005) reports that in Japan, more students enjoy extensive reading and the total number of books read by the class have increased from 153 in the first year to 261 in the second year. Faisal Al-homoud & Schmitt (2009) pointed out that in a study in Saudi Arabia, the extensive reading participants had more positive attitude toward reading in comparison to intensive reading group. Bamford and Day (2004) concluded that by exposing the learners to the extensive reading, their interest, eager and attitudes changed after the research process was accomplished. According to the results of three studies in U.S.A. Mason and Krashen (1997) founded that extensive reading permitted "reluctant" students of EFL to reach to traditional students, and Hafiz and Tudor (1989); Robb and Susser (1989); Sims (1996) and Hill (1997) have observed extensive reading programs would be especially useful in situations in which students shy away from speaking due to their lack of confidence in areas like vocabulary and grammatical knowledge.

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Similarly, Krashen (1982) indicated that the unconscious process of language acquisition, such as reading for enjoyment is more attractive and successful than conscious learning. As cited in Schmitt (2009) Liem (2005) studies six Vietnamese computer science students who had to report their reading experience during a seven-week extensive reading treatment. He found positive outcomes in relation to attitudes towards reading in L2, by using different strategies including activities enhancing autonomous reading. In another study on comparison between different groups of learners, Walker (1997) studied 51 EAP and general English students in the UK, and found that general English students were more enthusiastic to extensive reading programs than EAP students, and he found EAP students emphasize on structure and vocabulary development not through extensive reading.

In another study Alshwairkh (2004) studied 18 ESL MBA students who were asked to read extensively on the internet, by keeping constant vocabulary logs, writing journal entries, and

participating in interviews during eight weeks, at the end of the study he found that their vocabulary knowledge as well as their reading comprehension was improved significantly. As intensive reading is used around the world it is believed that in teaching reading comprehension intensive reading can be beneficial to expand reading comprehension (Yang, Dai, & Gao, 2012). Waring (1997) argues that intensive reading is very useful for learning vocabulary and understanding how text is organized. Stahl (2003) found that there is relationship between intensive reading activities and overall language proficiency. He examines 88 Chinese students who were asked to read the text and find the meaning, synonym or antonym of the unknown words, give a paraphrase and write a summary. This study also revealed a significant improvement in comprehension ability of the students. Paran (2003) emphasizes that teachers need intensive reading to maximize learning the three phases of pre-, during and post-reading for better language preparation, retention and activation strategies. He indicates that extensive reading alone is not enough for developing reading skills and intensive reading approach involving explicit instruction is also needed.

Intensive reading, is, therefore, regarded as an effective tool for improving reading comprehension (Pollar, Durodo, Gonzalez, Simmons, Kwok, Taylor, Davis, & Simmons, 2011). Intensive Reading is a hair-splitting analysis of vocabulary and sentence structures, which dominates the ELT course throughout the three stages (elementary, secondary, and tertiary) of learning in China. Its dominance manifests itself in both contact class hours it takes (2/3 of the total) as well as the time and effort it draws from teachers and students alike.

This domination has been enhanced by the introduction of Teachers' Books, of which the dominating feature is the detailed explanation of the text. This gives learners a false impression as if the only way to Learn English were by analyzing the languages in a hair-splitting manner (Shun, 2010. pp 32-40). In other words, some scholars believe that some students who find reading difficult cannot successfully derive the meanings of words as well as those who are at higher level of vocabulary knowledge. In general, based on some investigations in the realm of teaching reading for example, Paran (2003) and Hill (1997) found that both extensive and intensive reading are complementary to each other and both of them can be beneficial for achieving reading goals at different levels.

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There seems to be a shift toward teachers' attitude to teaching reading in such a way that reading comprehension can be achieved by using intensive and extensive reading approaches together. It should be mentioned that in Iran the focus is more on intensive approach in most of the teaching activities in public schools. This study is aimed to be a clarification of the approaches adopted in Iranian context and the comparison and illumination of them for the purpose of contributing to promotion of reading comprehension among Shiraz zone four high school students.

Statement of the Problem

Due to the importance of reading in learning language generally and TEFL context specifically and the observations of difficulties that Iranian high school students face in reading comprehension, there is a need to address these problems in more direct and substantial ways. Reading, almost always practiced intensively in Iranian language classes, has turned to be more of a translation practice which has evoked negative attitudes among the students. Though there are many factors that may have a role in problems related to reading comprehension, adopting an appropriate strategy of reading practice may have some effects in improving the reading activities of the students and making the practices more appealing to the students.

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Significance of the Study

 Unprecedented interest in second language acquisition due to globalization of industry and human knowledge-base has had a considerable effect on recognizing reading as one of the areas of the most interest to second language learning and teaching (Koda, 2005). The need for teaching and conducting reading practices is more essential in EFL context where there is very little, if any, interaction between learners and native speakers of target language. Due to multi-faceted nature of reading and its interaction with and contribution to other aspects of language proficiency, there is no clear consensus on the efficiency of different approaches to teaching and learning reading, including extensive and intensive reading practices. Even though the literature has leant toward extensive reading in the last decade as pointed out by Schmitt (2009) and Richards (2010), it seems that there is a need for drawing on multiple research tools, including both qualitative and quantitative approaches, for enriching the perspectives on reading processes and practices. The primary purpose of this study is to shed light on beneficial effects of extensive

and intensive reading strategies in the Iranian TEFL context. In other words, the purpose is to get a more thorough view of reading practices in Zone four Shiraz high schools and explore the effects of intensive/extensive practices on improving students reading comprehension ability. It particularly takes into account the variables that are specific to Iranian TEFL context in which reading takes place. The distinctive feature of this study is considering extensive and intensive reading both quantitatively and qualitatively in order to shed some light on the field of reading comprehension in Iran.

Objectives of the Study

The aim of the present study is to investigate the effect of extensive and intensive reading strategies on reading comprehension of Shiraz Zone four high school students. Among those who will benefit from the findings of this study are EFL learners/teachers, because it is done among Iranian EFL learners taking particularities of the teaching context of Iran into account. The findings of this study can also contribute to the debate between intensive and extensive proponents by investigating it in another and yet under-researched context.

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Research Questions

1. What is the effect of extensive reading strategies on reading comprehension of Shiraz zone four high school students?

2. What is the effect of intensive reading strategies on reading comprehension of Shiraz zone four high school students?

3. What are the attitudes of Shiraz Zone four high school students toward extensive and intensive reading?

4. Which reading strategies (i. e. extensive or intensive) are more effective from the students' point of view?

Method

Participants

A sample of 60 participants was selected for the present study. They were all male third-year public high school students in Shiraz zone four whose age ranged from 16 to 17. The participants were randomly assigned to two equal groups (N=35): intensive group and extensive group.

Instruments

Two instruments were used to collect data from the subjects.

Two reading comprehension tests

There were two sets of reading comprehension tests which were made by the researcher. One of them was used as the pre-test and the other one as the post-test which were administered to all participants both in the intensive and extensive group. Correlational procedure was used to validate the tests. Due to the low proficiency level of the participants, the Oxford Placement Test was selected and administered as the criterion. The correlation coefficients obtained between Oxford Placement Test and the pre- and the post-test turned out to be 0.76 and 0.79, respectively. The reliability of the tests was also estimated through the KR-21 formula. The obtained indices for the tests were 0.82 and 0.76, respectively.

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Semi- structured interview

Regarding the fact that qualitative part of any study can be invaluable dimension to the whole process of study, the researcher tried to gather qualitative data by conducting an interview with some of the participants from both of the groups. To this end, ten of the participants were selected from the two groups. The individuals were selected based on their willingness to participate in the study. The purpose was to explore and understand the students' point of view about these two strategies. We tried to reveal the students' motivation and confidence in reading practices when using each of these strategies.

Data collection procedure

The participants in both groups (i.e. intensive and extensive) took pre-test and post–test. The type of the test was multiple-choice. Each test (in both pre & post) consisted of three passages. The participants freely took part in the test.

It should be mentioned that for intensive group we studied and analyzed about 10 passages word by word in a three- month period. The extensive group, on the other, was guided by their teacher during the same time span for using and getting familiar with reading materials such as different story books, short passages in the web and what they thought could increase their reading ability out of class and sometimes in the class if time permitted.

The view points of ten students (from each group five individuals) were gathered through a semi-structured interview. The aim was to elicit their attitude toward intensive or extensive reading strategy.

Data analysis

Analysis of quantitative data

After gathering the necessary data from the subjects, the following statistical tests were used for this study: two t-tests were used to determine if there was any difference in the mean score of each group in terms of their pre and post tests (using paired sample analysis by SPSS). As well as, the researcher used two t-tests to determine the differences between the two groups both in their pre and post tests.

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Analysis of qualitative data

Qualitative studies provide the researchers with a means for an in-depth analysis of research topic. As Genesee (2009) mentions they offer an opportunity to view the problem from many perspectives. The qualitative analysis procedure used in this study was Straus and Corbin's (1998) systematic approach. The data gathered through semi-structured interview from ten of the students were transcribed verbatim. Then we used the constant comparative method which is the primary analysis technique in Straus and Corbin's model (Ary et al., 2010).

Results

Analysis of the quantitative data

Having collected the required data and in order to answer the research questions on the effect of extensive reading on the comprehension of reading tests, two separate t-test procedures were

utilized. One was used to determine any pre-existing differences between the means of two groups. The results are presented in table.1.

Table 1. The comparison of the mean of the two independent groups (pre-tests)

Groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Pre-test intensive	35	18.77	2.602
Pre-test extensive	35	19.77	2.691

The results indicate that the mean score of the pre-tests of two groups are not noticeably different and they are close to each other: the mean difference between the two groups is (18.77-19.77= -1) in reading exam which statistical analysis shows that it is not significant. So, here one can say that the groups are homogeneous in terms of reading comprehension; that is, the results of the mean of the differences of the means of the pre-tests of two groups did not reveal any significant differences (Table.2).

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Table 2. The results of the t-tests for the two groups (pre-tests)

	df	**Sig**	Mean Difference
t	**68**	**.0595**	-1.000

Checking obtained t-score in t-table reveals that the difference between the means of the two groups is not statistically significant with 95% Confidence Interval of the Difference ($p<.05$). Therefore, the present researcher was confident that the two groups are homogeneous to start with and any subsequent differences can be attributed to the treatment that they would receive.

The results of the comparison of the post-tests of the two groups after three months of treatment are presented in tables (3 & 4).

Table 3. The comparison of the mean of the two independent groups (post-tests)

Groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean

| Post-test intensive | 35 | 19.86 | 2.415 | .408 |
| Post-test extensive | 35 | 21.71 | 2.739 | .463 |

Table 4. The results of the t-tests for the two groups (post-tests)

	df	Sig. (1-tailed)	Mean Difference
T	**68**	**.002**	-1.857

As is evident from Table 4 there is a statistically significant difference between the mean of the two groups in their post-text performance at $p<.05$ level. Therefore it can be claimed that extensive reading was more effective in promotion of students reading ability.

The researcher also conducted a paired t-test between the mean of pre-and post-tests of each of the groups to see whether the differences between the means are significant or not. The results showed significant differences between the mean of pre- and post tests of each of the groups (Table 5 to 8) indicating that both of the groups have actually improved significantly.

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Table 5. Comparison of the means of pre- and post-tests of intensive group

	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pre-intensive	18.77	35	2.602	.440
Post- intensive	19.86	35	2.415	.408

The results illustrated in Table 5 indicate that the mean differences between pre and post test are significant; the mean of pre-test is 18.77 and the mean of post test is 19.86. Therefore, one can say that intensive reading has a positive effect on reading comprehension of EFL learners.

Table 6. Comparison of the means of pre- and post-tests of extensive group

	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pre-extensive	19.77	35	2.691	.455

Post-extensive	21.71	35	2.739	.463

Regarding the extensive group, as is clear from the table, the mean of pre-test is 19.77 and for the post-test is 21.71, also SD is 2.691 and 2.739 for pre- and post-test, respectively. Hence, the differences are significant and these changes in the mean provide the evidence to show that extensive reading strategy can promote students' reading comprehension.

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Table 7. Paired sample t-test for intensive group

	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	t	df	Sig.
Pre-intensive Post-intensive	-1.086	3.109	.526	-2.066	34	.0235

Table 8. Paired sample t-test for extensive group

	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	t	df	Sig.
Pre-extensive – Post-extensive	-1.943	3.597	.608	-3.196	34	.0015

In sum, it is obviously the case that both of the approaches have improved students' reading comprehension abilities. Considering the results of these tables (7 & 8) in post-tests, it can be revealed that the role of extensive reading is more significant than intensive reading. In other words, students can benefit from extensive reading more than intensive reading. To give a whole picture of what processes are involved in the students' learning we now turn to qualitative analysis of this study.

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Analyzing the qualitative data

One significant point regarding qualitative data is that the results from EFL learners' interview showed that the participants in both groups believed that the method they worked improved their reading ability and changed their attitude in a positive way. Reading was enjoyable for them and they believed that the strategies they worked with can bring them enjoyment. So, these results reveal that both intensive and extensive reading when conducted appropriately-since they both can give a sense of achievement to students- can enhance positive attitudes toward reading.

Discussion

Having presented the results of the study, the researcher discusses the findings of the study, in order to answer the research questions.

The first research question is "What is the effect of extensive reading on reading comprehension of Shiraz zone four high school students?" According to the descriptive statistics presented in table 4.6, the mean score of extensive group for pr-test was 19.77 and for post-test was 21.77. The analysis revealed that the difference was significant. Therefore, this improvement in post-test is an indication of the effectiveness of extensive reading on students' reading comprehension. In other words, the extensive group did better in post-test than pretest. So, it can be concluded that extensive reading has had a positive effect on students' reading comprehension.

Many studies have indicated that extensive reading can be beneficial to students, and can promote students' reading comprehension. The results of the present study are in line with Segalowitz and Huliston (2005); Pigada and Schmitt (2006 cited in Pazhakh & Soltani, 2010). The above-mentioned scholars believe that the extensive reading can increase reading comprehension and vocabulary learning. Besides, it was shown that extensive reading strategy could lead to continuous vocabulary learning and learners' achievement in spelling and vocabulary knowledge. Indeed, studies conducted on the effectiveness of extensive reading on reading comprehension (e.g., Lee, 2007; Bell, 2001; Renandya, 2007; Sheu, 2003; & Yu, 1993) indicate that this strategy can bring enjoyment, motivation, and confidence to the learners. The findings of these studies which are also in line with this study reveals that through extensive reading students feel more autonomous over their learning, improve overall language competence, enhance their language acquisition and become more aware of what is available to them to read and how to find materials that expand their vocabulary for reading comprehension. However, based on some studies the general belief is that through extensive reading students feel that they are not under the control of their teacher, in other words, they are not limited to read or follow what is presented to them. In contrast, they are free to read what they like without any limitation (Sheu, 2003).

The second research question of this study is "What is the effect of intensive reading strategies on reading comprehension of Shiraz zone four high school students?"

According to the descriptive statistics illustrated in Table 4.5 the mean difference in pre and post-test in the following table is 18.77 for pre-test and 19.86 for post-test. It means that students performed better in post-test.

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Table 5. Comparison of the means of pre- and post-tests of intensive group

	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pre-intensive	18.77	35	2.602	.440
Post- intensive	19.86	35	2.415	.408

The difference between the means of these two tests is noticeable but in order to see that this difference is meaningful or not a paired sample t-test was run. Table 7 below depicts the results.

Table 7 Paired sample t-test for intensive group

	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	t	df	Sig.
Pre-intensive Post-intensive	-1.086	3.109	.526	-2.066	34	.0235

Based on table 7 one can say that intensive reading has had a positive influence on the learners reading comprehension, because the Sig of this test is 0235 < 05. So, it can be told that intensive reading affect reading comprehension.

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The results of the present study are in line with Allen (2004); Consoli*, et. al.* (2010) and Marr, *et. al.* (2011). They found that intensive reading can't be removed from teaching reading, especially in teaching reading to beginners. Intensive reading helps the beginners to grasp primitive knowledge to use as a knowledge-base to arrive at higher levels. Based on what is mentioned, it can be conclude that intensive reading is useful to improve students reading comprehension (Blackman, *et. al.,* 2004). In similar studies, it is noted that through this strategy we can provide a base to structure and vocabulary, it can also be a base for students to improve a better control of language and finally, for checking the degree of comprehension individually (Vaughn, Sharoh, etal, 2012).

The first qualitative research question of this study is "What are the attitudes of Shiraz Zone four high school students toward extensive and intensive reading?"

The results showed that students' view were positive, generally speaking, all of the interviewees felt that their confidence was enhanced. They also felt that their reading

comprehension, vocabulary and reading skills was promoted. Besides, extensive reading interviewees thought that this strategy should be part of curriculum in the high schools, because they believed that this strategy brings them variety in selecting text books, be free of others control, enjoyment, motivation, confidence and autonomy. Three of the intensive group interviewees believed that this strategy can be beneficial for them to promote their reading comprehension. They believed that through this strategy under the control of the teacher their problems can be solved readily and their questions are answered immediately. Two of them told that the system of our education in our country is not ready for employing other strategies and in the present condition intensive reading is more effective for them because the final goal for them was getting a good mark and to be prepared for university entrance exam. They found extensive reading very beneficial to this end.

The second question of this study in the qualitative part is "Which reading strategies (i. e. extensive or intensive) are more effective from the students' point of view?"

The results of the interview showed that students were more interested in extensive reading, because all of the subjects in the extensive group had a positive opinion about the effectiveness of this strategy. They believed that this strategy gives them confidence, motivation, enjoyment, and autonomy. By the way, they thought it was possible for them to read what they want without any limitation or fear of exam. The results of interview also revealed that intensive reading was boring for some of them by contrast, extensive group shoed more enthusiasm. It can be concluded that these two strategies should be used together since; through intensive reading alone the readers cannot be a fluent reader. They are ultimately learning about the language. In other words, some parts of the language are taught not reading skill. So it can be boring for them. On the other hand, with regard to the students' attitude, the conditions in Iranian high schools don't let students and teachers use extensive reading, because they should finish a book at the end of the year which is planned for them in advance, and give a final exam based on this book. So, even if the advantages of incorporating extensive reading strategies in the public schools are obvious, the wash back effects of testing and other particularities of teaching condition in Iran makes it very difficult to use this strategy in reading practices .

In sum, based on the results of the interview the score is in favor of extensive reading and it has more positive impact on reading comprehension.

Conclusion

The first research question of the present study sought the effect of extensive reading strategy on the learners' reading comprehension.

Having analyzed the relevant data, the researcher concluded that students' reading comprehension skill is affected by both of the strategies. That is, when students become familiar with the strategy under their teacher's guidance, it helps them to improve their reading comprehension.

In Iranian public high schools the students' ability in comprehending the reading texts is only practiced by intensive reading. In other words, the textbook alone is responsible to serve as an input for reading practices and to enable the students to read and comprehend host of other things out of the classrooms and in real life situations. On the other hand, sometimes teachers face with students' objections or their complaints about the unknown words in their reading tests. They claim that some new words are not taught to them and should not be used in their exams by their teacher. It seems that they also should be taught extensively to learn to cope with unknown words. So if teachers, overcoming the available problems, can use this strategy, some of the problems of the students in reading comprehension will be addressed appropriately. As a result, it is highly recommended that teachers make efforts to familiarize their learners with techniques and strategies that are required for a better comprehending of the reading passages. Therefore, in concordance with the findings of this study, it is difficult to improve the learners' reading comprehension without familiarizing them with extensive reading strategies.

The second research question of this study attempted to identify the effect of intensive reading on the learners' reading comprehension. The results of the study indicate that intensive reading influences the learners' reading comprehension. That is, when they are taught through this strategy their vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension will be improved. A point to remind here is that both of these two strategies together are constructive for students and they can play a significant role in the promotion of the learners' reading comprehension. As a result, teachers can integrate intensive and extensive reading into the language teaching practices. Hence, there is no doubt that students can benefit from intensive approach but the point that

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should be kept in mind is that teachers should not rely on the intensive reading all the time, because by doing this, students are deprive from an important method for improving their reading skills, that is, they will only learn some lexico-grammatical points without being able to use them in real situations.

The third research question of the present study made an effort to identify the attitudes of Shiraz zone four high school students towards extensive and intensive reading. The outcomes of the interview indicated that they were eager to be taught through these two strategies. Their viewpoints showed that both strategies can help them to reach to a better understanding of what they read. Therefore, it is recommendable to teachers to persuade students to read extensively along with intensive reading activities. This can be achieved by introducing various reading texts out of classroom and putting them into practice to improve reading habits of students. In other words, teachers can highlight the advantages of extensive reading by providing situations in the classroom in which students are encouraged to go through as many reading texts as possible. It is, therefore, suggested that teachers should not have a constraining role by only expecting students to read the texts thoroughly all the time. By contrast, it's better to give the students the opportunities to engage in different reading materials.

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The fourth question of the present study aimed at identifying which one of the reading strategies (i.e.) extensive and intensive was more effective from the students' point of view?

Based on the results of their viewpoints one can conclude that students were more eager to be taught reading materials extensively because the interviewees in the extensive group felt that in this approach they are not absolutely under the control of their teacher and it is possible for them to select various kinds of reading texts. Besides, they believed that this strategy can improve their confidence and motivation and does give them pleasure and enjoyment because of the fact that they can rely on their own capabilities when they read different types of texts. The results of the present study are in line with Krashen's views (2005) on the effect of extensive reading. On the other hand, they thought this method can help them use whatever they have learned in real situation. As a result, the extensive group participants held more positive views about their reading development in terms of the following elements:

Reading skill,

Reading comprehension,

Getting motivated and

Reading fluently.

The extensive group also strongly believed that this strategy maximized their knowledge of words. So, the results of this study recommend that English teachers in our country should not ignore the significant role of extensive reading in language teaching because the best final product of this strategy is nothing except motivation and confidence for our learners.

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