

# The Affective Benefits of Extensive Reading in the Spanish Curriculum: A 5-week Case Study

by *Teljer Liburd and Victoria Rodrigo*

*Teljer Liburd is a Spanish Lecturer at Atlanta Metropolitan College*

*Dr. Victoria Rodrigo (Associate Professor of Spanish Applied Linguistics in the Dept. of Modern and Classical Languages at Georgia State University) is an active researcher in the field of second language acquisition. Her area of research is receptive skills --reading and listening-- as means to enhance language acquisition. Rodrigo has published numerous articles in prestigious national and international journals in the States, Spain, Mexico, and Argentina. She has also authored teaching material --Infórmate con CNN and Spanish Audio Library-- and is a co-author of an intermediate Spanish textbook -- Opiniones-- based on her research on Narrow Listening, an alternative approach to developing listening skills.*

## Abstract

Previous research has indicated that Extensive Reading (ER) is one of the best ways to learn a language. Unfortunately, the implementation of ER programs in the Spanish FL curriculum is scarce or even non-existent. This study seeks to evaluate whether a short-term ER program implemented in the second semester of Spanish at the college level can a) make students realize of the value of ER and its implementation in the curriculum, and b) affect students reading attitude and confidence in their language skills. Participants in the experimental group read 5 books during 5 weeks (one book per week) as a supplement to their regular Spanish class. Results show that ER is viewed as a liked activity, and when compared to a control group, the experimental group showed positive gains in attitude towards reading and more confidence in their reading abilities. Pedagogical implications are discussed.

The research concerning the linguistic benefits of extensive reading (ER) has consistently demonstrated its efficacy as an approach to reading (e.g. Day & Bamford 1998, Krashen 2004). There is evidence that shows that the more students read and understand, the more they will acquire (Krashen 1985). But ER is not only an excellent means to acquisition; it is also an exceptional tool to develop the habit of reading and to foster pleasure and enjoyment in the reading experience (Day & Bamford 1998). Having a successful reading experience entails more than just giving students books to read. Practitioners should keep in mind that a lack of confidence in ones' reading ability and a negative attitude towards reading, may pose strong impediments to becoming an independent reader in the L2. On the other hand, having a positive reading experience will be crucial to developing reading habits (Cho & Krashen 2001, Kim & Krashen 1997). Therefore, when teaching reading in the foreign language (FL) classroom, it is important to consider the affective benefits, reading attitude, and confidence that ER affords, as these can be key to creating independent readers, and to making the reading experience a successful one.

A number of studies have evaluated the impact of ER on affective variables. By implementing ER as a component in a lower-level Japanese class, Hitosugi and Day (2004) demonstrated that ER fostered gains in positive attitude towards reading in the participants, more so than for a control group that was not exposed to ER. In a meta-analysis review, Yoon (2002) concludes that the nature of ER is what makes it an influential factor in improving reading attitude. That is, ER offers the reader autonomy in selecting reading materials, non-accountability (in that reading itself is the goal, and not passing a test), and teacher support through role modeling.

Confidence in one's reading ability is also an important affective variable. Diary reports from a one-subject case study by Hong (2007) indicate that increased exposure to ER fostered a sense of achievement in the participant and boosted confidence in reading ability. This in turn positively impacted his attitude towards learning the L2. In two studies,

Rodrigo (2011) looked at affective variables related to ER in lower-level Spanish classes. Study one (N=41) showed that after reading two stories using an ER approach, reading attitude was positively modified when students' felt a sense of accomplishment in their reading. This reported positive reading experience translated into greater confidence in their reading ability. Based on results of study two (N=94), it was concluded that extensive reading can be successfully done beginning in the first semester when teachers prepare students with ER strategies, and when the reading material is at the appropriate linguistic level.

Despite the potential affective and linguistic benefits that ER can offer, many FL curricula do not implement ER programs due to challenges such as cost of reading material, administrative red tape, and the lack of room in the curriculum. The current study explores the effects of implementing a short-term (5-week) ER program as a supplemental component to a traditional Spanish course. Specifically, this study aims to evaluate the impact of ER on attitude and confidence towards reading in Spanish, as well as students' perception of the value and impact of implementing ER in the FL curriculum. By comparing an ER group with a control group, we seek to address the following research questions:

1. By reading 5 books extensively, can students improve their reading attitude and gain more confidence in their reading ability than those who do not?
2. Can a short-term (5-week) ER program foster a positive perception of the value and utility of ER?

## THE STUDY

### SAMPLE

The participants were 6 undergraduate students that were enrolled in a second semester Spanish class at a university in the southeastern United States. These students volunteered to participate in the study without knowing the reading task involved. During an initial meeting with the researcher, students were given details regarding the nature of the study (e.g.

what to do, amount of reading to be done, and when to do it). Those who were still interested and agreed to read extensively were assigned to the experimental group (N=3) and those who chose not to read were assigned to the control group (N= 3).

### PROCEDURES

Before beginning the study, the experimental group was informed about what extensive reading entails, how to do it, what strategies to apply, and the benefits that research has shown. Participants in the experimental group agreed to read one graded reader per week (for a total of 5 weeks) and met with the researcher (first author) once a week to select and check out books. During these weekly meetings participants filled out a short book evaluation sheet to track reading progress. Also, readers were informally asked to answer two main questions: 1) *How was the book?* and 2) *What was it about?* This was done to verify whether the participant had read the book, how much they understood, but most importantly to give them an opportunity to articulate the story in their own words (in English). The control group did not meet weekly with the researcher after the initial meeting, but only once more at the end of the 5 weeks to complete an affective questionnaire.

### MATERIALS

A library of 100 graded Spanish readers, ranging from reading levels 1 through 6, was provided plus 48 pre-level 1<sup>1</sup> books. Based on their proficiency levels, students were asked to focus on books from levels 1 and 2, but were allowed to start with a pre-level 1 book or move to level 3 books if it did not pose a challenge to their understanding. By the end of the program, each student had read a total of 5 books for an average of 169 pages each. Of the 15 books students selected to read, 13.33% (n=2) of the books read were from pre-level 1, 73.33% (n=11) from level 1 and 13.33% (n=2) were from level 2.

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1 These books are part of a Developmental Reading Assessment (Evaluación del desarrollo de la lectura or EDL2), an authentic series intended for native Spanish children. Pearson publishes the collection.

## INSTRUMENT

At the end of the 5 weeks both the experimental and control groups completed an affective questionnaire about their reading attitude before and after the program, confidence in their reading ability, their perception of the value of ER, and their opinion regarding whether ER should be incorporated into the Spanish curriculum.

## RESULTS

Table 1 presents pre-post attitude scores towards reading in Spanish, and attitude towards reading in L1. Table 2 presents the level of confidence in their reading ability at the end of the program. Higher scores represent a better attitude and more confidence: 3= Quite a lot, and 0= Not at all.

**Table 1.** Attitude towards reading

	L1	L2		
		Pre	Post	Gain
	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)
<b>Experimental</b>	2.67 (0.58)	1.33 (1.53)	2.67 (0.58)	1.33
<b>Control</b>	2.67 (0.58)	1.33 (0.58)	1.33 (1.15)	0.00

N=3 for the experimental group and N=3 for the control group.  
3=“Quite a lot,” 2= “Somewhat,” 1= “Very Little,” 0=“Not at all”

Descriptive data in Table 1 shows that both groups reported identical positive L1 reading attitudes (2.67), that is, it seems they like reading in their first language. In their L2, both groups shared the same attitude towards reading at the beginning of the program (1.33), which meant that they liked to read very little. At the end of the program, the reading attitude of the experimental group improved by 1.33, reaching the same reading attitude score that they have in their L1 (2.67). However, the control group showed no change on their attitude scores.

Average confidence scores reported in Table 2 show that at the end of the 5-weeks, the experimental group had higher levels of confidence in their L2 reading ability (3.00) while the control group had a lower mean of 1.33, meaning that they had very little

confidence in their reading ability. Although there was no pretest on the confidence measure, it is assumed that ER played a role in boosting confidence in reading ability for the experimental group, supporting the hypothesis that those who read extensively will have more confidence in reading ability.

**Table 2**

Confidence in L2 reading ability at end of treatment

	M (SD)
<b>Experimental</b>	3.00 (0)
<b>Control</b>	1.33 (0.58)

Experimental group (N=3); Control group (N=3).  
3=“Quite a lot,” 2= “Somewhat,” 1= “Very Little,” 0=“Not at all”

Table 3 shows the results of four questions that were posed to the experimental group to evaluate participant perception of the value and usefulness of ER. These questions related to how they felt ER had helped them improve in reading fluency, vocabulary recognition ability, grammar and performance in the course in which they were currently enrolled. Overall, results indicate that the students felt that ER was at least somewhat helpful in improving language skills. Mean perception scores demonstrate that participants felt that ER helped them improve most in grammar skills ( $M=3$ ,  $SD=0$ ), followed by vocabulary recognition and course work ( $M=2.76$ ;  $SD= 0.48$ ), and finally reading fluency ( $M=2.00$ ,  $SD=1.00$ ).

**Table 3.** Student perception of value and usefulness of Extensive Reading, in ranking order.

	M (SD)
<b>Grammar</b>	3.00 (0)
<b>Vocabulary</b>	2.67 (0.58)
<b>Course</b>	2.67 (0.58)
<b>Fluency</b>	2.00 (1.00)

N=3 for the experimental group  
3=“Quite a lot,” 2= “Somewhat,” 1= “Very Little,” 0=“Not at all”

The most remarkable results were those relating to the question of whether participants felt

that ER should be incorporated into the curriculum. Both the experimental and control group somewhat agreed that reading should be incorporated into the language curriculum (see Table 4). Most of the experimental participants (67%) reported that ER should definitely be implemented, while only one person from the control group felt the same way (33%). None of the participants felt that reading should not be incorporated. Interestingly, even those who did not want to read at the beginning of the study, acknowledged the value of reading.

**Table 4.** Student interest in having reading incorporated into curriculum

	Experimental	Control
	N	N
Definitely yes	2	1
Somewhat yes	1	2
Not really	–	–
Not at all	–	–

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This descriptive and case study set out to evaluate whether a short-term ER program could foster in language learners positive attitudes towards reading and confidence in their reading abilities. Also, the study explores student perception of the value of this kind of program, and their opinion on whether ER programs should become part of the FL curriculum. Results show that in just 5 weeks and after reading 5 books, ER can have a positive impact on affect, since the experimental group had a better attitude towards reading in Spanish, higher confidence in their reading ability, and a strong perspective on the need to implement ER in the language curriculum. These results corroborate previous studies that maintain that those who read extensively and enjoy the reading experience, improve their attitude towards reading in the L2 and show more confidence in their reading ability (Hitosugi & Day 2004; Hong 2007; Rodrigo 2011).

This study demonstrates the feasibility of incorporating ER as a supplement to a Spanish

language course. Reading a book per week is a task that can be done along with the regular course curriculum. If students are asked to do most of their reading at home and evaluations are kept to a minimum, students can read extensively without disrupting regular coursework. Moreover, two of the three participants in the experimental group, despite not receiving extra-credit for the readings, expressed a desire to continue reading even when the study had concluded. This proves the positive impact that ER made in the participants in only five weeks.

Although the current study shows some interesting outcomes, it should be viewed as an exploratory study due to the small sample size, which prevented the researchers from applying inferential statistics to see if the differences between the experimental and the control group were statistically significant. The fact that the experimental group was composed only of students who chose to read could also be seen as a limitation of the study. The fact that the experimental group was composed only of students who chose to read could also be seen as a limitation of the study. It could be argued that the experimental group showed higher scores because they volunteered to do it --even without credit--, which shows that they were highly interested, and because they were told in advance how beneficial free reading was for language development. These two factors could bias attitudes upwards. However, we should note that these subjects had to fill out an evaluation sheet and answer short questions on what they read, which could have biased their attitudes downward as well. Consequently, to further investigate this issue, future studies should focus on implementing short-term ER programs with a larger sample that includes reluctant students to examine whether change in affect can still be evident in the short-run.

Due to the affective benefits that ER has been shown to promote, and because it helped our sample to become independent readers (that is, they are capable of reading by themselves), it is worth implementing. The only thing that remains to be done is to actively take the steps toward its integration into the curriculum. In our study a small number of books

was enough to show students that reading in a FL is not only possible, but also fun and could help them develop a sense of accomplishment in their reading ability. Five books encouraged them to want to read more, and to do it independently. Language programs should be encouraged to have at least a small library for those students that choose to read. If cost is a concern, the ER program could rotate among different class sections every 5 weeks during the semester, allowing all students the chance to experience the benefits of ER.

Most of the Spanish FL programs around the nation are full of students that have hardly ever read in the L2. As a result, they constantly miss out on the opportunity to engage in a positive reading experience that may change their reading attitude, boost their confidence in their reading ability, and help them to become independent readers. This case study suggests that this current situation can be changed.

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