

A Study of Extended Reading Programmes at Foreign Language Departments at Georgian Universities

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Abstract: *The paper presents a recent study of extended reading programmes at foreign language departments of 7 major universities in Georgia. These programmes reflect the influence of Russian methodologists and their gains in foreign language teaching methodology. These programmes have some common aspects with an extensive reading approach and obvious differences opposite to characteristics of an extensive reading program. The study results are important in order to encourage modification of these programs into extensive reading programs, which will be more beneficial for English language learners at university level in Georgian universities.*

Key words: *extended reading program, extensive reading program, home reading, characteristics of extensive reading*

INTRODUCTION

Extensive reading is reading of a large quantity of material for general understanding of the text or for the enjoyment of the reading experience. Extensive reading gained popularity in the 1990s. The benefits of extensive reading in terms of vocabulary acquisition, development of writing skills, spelling, and positive attitude toward reading are described by Day and Bamford (2005), Bell (2001). In Georgian foreign language teaching methodology it is described as an approach that focuses on the large quantity of reading material which conveys the goal of teaching reading according to Kraveishvili (2002); however, the methodology of teaching extensive reading is not elaborated in Georgian foreign language teaching methodology. What is the basis of existing extended reading programs? Are these programs the same as an extensive reading program? What are the similarities and differences between them? In order to answer these questions it was necessary to study the existed extended reading programmes at foreign language departments at Georgian universities. The following questions guided our research:

- What extended reading programs exist in the foreign language departments of Georgian universities?
- What are the differences between these extended reading programs taught at Georgian universities and an extensive reading program?

HOME READING

In the 1980s all foreign language departments at universities in Georgia had the same curricula, similar disciplines and programmes, with difference in the material used for teaching. The teaching methods and approaches were the same. Mostly these programs reflected the influence of Russian methodologists and their gains in education. The extended reading program in this period and later was known as home reading. Klichnikova (1973) describes home reading as an approach which serves two goals: a) a means to consolidate the reading skills learned at the lessons; and b) preparation for other classroom activities. She admits that a home reading program should be enjoyable for the reader, although sometimes this enjoyment is diminished by abundant follow-up activities. According to Danelia (2005) working on a reading material in a home reading program consists of the following principles: systematization, consistency, and accessibility. Students' assignment is: reading at home a part of or a whole literary work and doing exercises based on this reading material. The exercises are checked in class. The focus of home reading is not the amount of reading, but the acquired knowledge and skills.

Russian methodologists did not come to a distinct procedure of teaching home reading. Mostly they distinguished two phases in home reading. The first phase was reading and the other was the sequence of activities which were vocabulary work, comprehension activities, discussion, and writing according to Fadeev (1979), Balakirev

(1988), Skazkiv (1982). Furthermore, there is no agreement among Russian methodologists whether to use the activities based on vocabulary and grammar structures present in the reading material. Russian methodologists and teachers offer many kinds of text-based activities. Naturally, the selection of these activities by a teacher depends on what the aim of home reading is. If the purpose of home reading is reading itself, then the activities will serve to check students' comprehension of texts. In addition, if the purpose of home reading is to lead some discussions about the material which students read, then there will be supplementary tasks which will support students' discussions.

EXTENDED READING PROGRAMS AT FOREIGN LANGUAGE DEPARTMENTS

A survey was conducted in seven major universities of Georgia (In Tbilisi – 3 universities, Batumi – 1, Gori – 1, Telavi – 1, Kutaisi – 1) in 2010. The questionnaires were sent to the teachers, who instructed extended reading program at foreign language departments. The questions in the form were aimed to reveal the title of the program, who selects the reading material, what activities teachers use in the classroom, what they consider as shortcomings of the program, etc. The answer sheets of the universities were numbered conditionally from 1 to 7.

The aforementioned disagreements in home reading teaching methodology are currently reflected in foreign language departments at Georgian universities. In all researched universities there was no common approach in teaching extended reading programs. The answers given by the teachers are analyzed below.

The title of this program varies within the universities. Three of these universities still have the program with the name "Home reading"; University number 2 admitted that 3 years ago home reading existed at their foreign language department; others have changed the title of the program into "Reading", "Intensive reading", and "Academic reading".

The amount of hours in a week and duration of these programs varies from university to university. Two main patterns how these programs work can be outlined: 1-2 academic hour/s in a week with the duration 2 or 4 semesters. In university number 5 the programme has free schedule and the colloquiums are held according to the students demand.

The level at which the program starts is the same for 3 universities – in the third semester and for 3 universities – in the second semester.

Who selects the reading material is the point that all lecturers at the universities are unanimous. All of them indicate that the tutor of the programme chooses the reading materials taking into consideration the learners' language level, although in university number 5 there is a modification: the students are allowed to select books from the prepared reading programme which matches their language level.

The amount of reading done at home is another controversial issue of these programmes. University number 2 does not even have reading assignments at home in its programme while others presented different figures. University number 4 has very small amount of reading - 1-2 pages and the largest reading amount has University number 5. Others vary from – 2-3 pages to 7-15 pages.

The genres of reading materials are the same for the 5 universities. They are fiction, novels, and detective stories. University number 2, as it was observed, does not have reading assignments at home. A textbook that is focused on developing reading skill and that includes different short informative texts is applied in this program; that is why the genre is not specified. Another type of texts offered by University number 4 is texts from popular science and scientific sources. It is significant to mention that these reading materials are unabridged.

The steps how the program works are alike for two of the universities. Universities number 6 and number 7 include in their programme pre-reading and post reading activities. Universities number 2 and number 3 describe their programme's working process as: "reading in class followed by translation and additional reading comprehension

activities", while University number 3 makes distinction between the programme taught at the lower level and at the higher level. This alteration of the programme depends on learners' language skills and experience gained at lower level. At higher level the programme procedure involves giving reading assignments to students at home without any pre-reading activities and explanation in class. Universities number 1, 4 and 5 in their programmes do not have pre-reading activities. The material is given to students to read at home and they retell and perform different activities on the following lecture.

The amount of new words for each reading assignment is about 15-20 words, and even more than 20 words. Two universities have not given specific answer to this question. They have pointed out that this amount of new lexis depends on the level the program is taught, even though they acknowledge that there is the amount of new lexis for each assignment in these reading programmes. The least amount of words, 6-15 words, is found in the program of University number 4 where the reading amount is 1-2 pages. In University number 5 one of the lecturer's points out that by the end of the semester the students had have learned 300 new words.

Activities at home are abundant in some programmes. These activities are mainly related to vocabulary learning, translating and writing an essay or a composition. In the programme of University number 7 the activities done at home are much more elaborated; they consist of grammar, lexis, reading comprehension activities and stylistic analysis. In most programmes students get ready to retell the plot or summary of the material. *Classroom activities* comprise primarily of retelling and post-reading activities. These post-reading activities are focused on vocabulary, grammar, reading comprehension, linguistic and stylistic analyses – for example: matching, gap filling, true and false, multiple-choice activities. Another activity which is common to these programmes is discussion. Three university programmes use discussion as the means for the students to express their opinions about an idea and characters in the reading materials.

Almost all of the tutors of these programmes at these universities unanimously agree that *students like their reading programs, except one tutor from University number 5*. In the next question they give explanations for students' preferences. They clarify that students like the specific programme because of the gains and benefits that students obtain from the reading programme; generally these gains are in vocabulary, general knowledge and writing. University number 3 points out the format of the lecture – interactive lecture – as an attractive environment for the students. Another reason why students like the specific programme for University number 7 is the development of some language skills: speaking skills and the ability for stylistic and sociocultural analyses. University number 4 has the most different answer. It seems that students, who already know the topic in Georgian, find it easy and enjoyable to read the same texts in English, thus they like this programme.

Almost all of the teachers of the programmes consider providing additional hours of teaching as a crucial factor to make the programme more successful and productive. Only in the programme of University number 4 the video material is signified as a necessary change and in the programme of University number 5 – translation of reading materials as an activity is added. All of the tutors in the reading programmes accept the teaching model of their programmes and once more outline the benefits the students gain after completing the reading programmes. These benefits are: increase in vocabulary, gains in literacy, reading comprehension, development of different reading skills – skimming and scanning, writing, individual work, ability to analyze. In University number 5 one of the tutors suggested some changes for this programme: 1) the procedure for testing the reading material must be changed. Most of the students find the easy way of avoiding reading. They borrow from other students notebooks with the notes made from the texts and pretend as if they have read the text. She acknowledges that students do not like the program, "there should be a method which will exclude cheating of students", she admits; 2) another issue which must be changed is the evaluation of students. Students often do not know the assessment criteria in an extended reading programme.

DISCUSSIONS

All these extended reading programs differ from an extensive reading programme:

- Their titles are different and they do not reflect the nature of extensive reading. Even the fiction reading sets the reader into a frame of reading only fiction, while in an extensive reading programme students have freedom of choice to read anything (e.g. books, magazines, newspapers, graded readers) they want.
- The role of the tutor is dominant in these programmes. The tutors choose the reading material and the activities. In an extensive reading programme the tutor is a guide who leads the readers to successful experience in reading.
- The reading materials are authentic in these programmes. For students at intermediate level it is difficult to read, translate and analyze 7-15 pages of authentic material. In an extensive reading programme the simplified materials or graded readers are used as the focus is on the pleasure of reading and on a large quantity of reading; simultaneously, in intensive reading programmes authentic materials are exploited.

The language level of the students varies in a group; therefore, reading materials are beyond the students' language competence. There are too many new words and students are required to look up the meanings in the dictionary and learn new vocabulary; in extensive reading students choose the level they are comfortable to read at (about 3 new words on a page). Dictionaries are rarely used while reading.

The tutors of these extended reading programmes are sure that the students like the programmes but they do not give the factors of satisfaction and pleasure linked to the study in these programmes. They judge from the point of view of the benefits that students have to get after completing these programmes. These gains are not related to reading itself and formation of reading habit as a lifelong activity. They emphasize increase in vocabulary, writing, reading comprehension, different linguistic and stylistic analyses. These gains are more like of language programmes', although extensive reading, as it was mentioned in the beginning, contributes to reading, writing, grammar, language competence; it encourages learners to read fluently and use all the strategies, to progress through different levels of text and monitor their own progress and provides students with an enjoyable reading experience. The encouraging fact in these programmes is that they have been used for a long time for teaching reading, pointing out that at foreign language departments reading is regarded as an important skill.

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE WORK

In conclusion, the survey revealed the inconsistencies between existing extended reading programmes and an extensive reading programme. Identifying these inconsistencies and shortcomings of existing extended reading programmes will help to develop extensive reading teaching methodology at Georgian universities. Furthermore, it will be an incentive for implementation of extensive reading programmes at Georgian universities.

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