



RESEARCH PAPER

Exploring the Opinions of Pakistani EFL Learners about the Benefits of Intensive Reading Approach: A Case Study of Sukkur IBA University Foundation Semester Students

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this study is to investigate how English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners at Sukkur IBA University perceive the benefits of the Intensive Reading (IR) approach. A purposive sampling technique was used to choose ten foundation program students for data collection. The researchers gathered data using reflective diaries and semi-structured interviews. Researchers analyzed the data using interpretive methods and thematic analysis techniques. The results showed that students developed positive views of the IR approach. Moreover, they found it fascinating and helpful. Furthermore, students reported a substantial improvement in their language abilities after participating in activities related to the IR approach. The research indicated that teachers could cultivate skilled and independent readers through intensive reading programs. Hence, this reading approach may enable students to reduce their reading difficulties. Additionally, the students thought that using this reading approach was very beneficial. To enhance EFL learners' reading abilities and overall language proficiency, it is suggested that teachers incorporate IR-related exercises into their classroom instruction.

KEYWORDS EFL Learners, Intensive Reading Approach, Pakistani Students

Introduction

Reading helps one learn a foreign language (Phonekeo & Macalister, 2021). In an EFL classroom, reading is considered an important ability for enhancing students' language proficiency. Their reading habits and abilities can be enhanced by exposing them to various reading materials (Pineau, 2023; Cremin & Scholes, 2024). Similarly, reading helps students develop various academic skills and improve their academic performance. Thus, encouraging reading habits and abilities is essential for EFL students. To get the most out of this, teachers should encourage their students to read intensively and extensively (Shulman, Baicker & Mayes, 2024). In Pakistan, English is the primary language of instruction in classrooms up to the university level (Mahboob, 2017). Therefore, in Pakistan, reading holds significant academic importance for students, as English is the primary language of instructional materials across various disciplines (Shumail, 2024). Furthermore, IR is a standard teaching method in Pakistani classrooms, and overall exposure to reading is limited (Haswani, Erlita & Rika, 2024). Consequently, Pakistani students often exhibit weak reading habits and skills (Mushtaq, Soroya & Mahmood, 2021). To address this, providing students with substantial reading input is necessary for

developing their reading proficiency (Nita et al., 2022). Within classrooms, intensive IR and ER are the two main approaches used to teach reading, each with distinct theoretical underpinnings (Nation & Waring, 2020). Moreover, both these approaches are vital for enhancing reading skills and impacting student language development (Hidayati, Renandya & Basthomi, 2022). However, it is argued that educators are well-versed in IR and consistently allocate time for related activities (Nation & Waring, 2020). This is also reflected in Pakistani EFL classrooms, where the IR approach is more employed (Mahmood, Younis & Firdous, 2023). Although numerous studies have explored the effectiveness of IR in various EFL contexts, there is a noticeable lack of empirical research specifically examining its application within the Pakistani educational contexts.

The current study is significant because it sheds light on how students have experienced the benefits of the IR approach. Moreover, students can benefit from these findings, and policymakers can use them to inform curriculum designers to design courses accordingly. The study is important for teachers because it helps them modify their teaching reading strategies to meet the needs of their students. The study may help Pakistani students enhance their reading habits, reading abilities, academic achievement, and general language abilities. Thus, the current study is an effort to add to the body of knowledge about the IR approach and the benefits of the IR approach to teaching reading in an EFL context. There is a significant lack of qualitative research studies that examine how EFL learners perceive the benefits of the IR approach. Therefore, this study aims to address this gap by qualitatively exploring EFL learners' perceptions of the implementation and perceived benefits of the IR approach in their classrooms.

Literature Review

Intensive Reading Approach

EFL classrooms typically use the IR approach. Mart (2015) asserts that this approach aids readers in comprehensively understanding the text's vocabulary and grammar. Furthermore, the reader thoroughly analyzes the texts to comprehend their meaning. Brown (2007) described this method as close reading. Harmer (2008) describes intensive reading material as usually guided by the instructor, with a primary focus on developing students' ability to understand texts through techniques like scanning, skimming, inferential reading, and detailed comprehension. The IR approach has been defined differently by different authors. For instance, Macalister (2010) defined IR as a reading approach where students encounter more complex language and materials. In this approach, instructors guide students to understand vocabulary, grammatical structures, and other language elements.

IR is an approach in which the readers read brief texts with grammar components and vocabulary. According to Richards & Rodgers (2014), each student needs to read the designated materials assigned by their teacher. Furthermore, students boost their reading comprehension by strategically blending top-down and bottom-up reading methods. The textual elements of a document require active involvement because students understand language through contextual analysis (Nation, 2024). When students use this method, their understanding of reading and their language abilities increase significantly. Through this method, students enhance their writing and speaking competencies and listening skills, expanding their vocabulary understanding while learning grammar fundamentals (Andres, 2020). The influence of the IR approach has been examined through various academic research studies in the recent decade. Research has shown that the IR approach acts as a language learning enhancer because it improves writing skills, leads to vocabulary development and better grammar mastery, and enhances reading and language fluency

(Miftah, Anshori & Utami, 2024). Some research studies have been conducted by various researchers for the implementation IR and benefits of this approach, for example, the studies were conducted by Seybold (2023); Purbayani, Herniawati & Hidayat, (2023); Ebrahim (2018); Widyaasita, Dayu & Aprizani (2020); Chuenchaichon (2011); Khazaal (2019); and Mahmood, Younis & Firdous (2023). The studies found this reading approach to be useful and interesting for students. Moreover, these studies have examined the effectiveness of implementing the IR approach as a classroom technique. For example, Mahmoudian et al. (2011) explored how IR affected the grammar skills of Iranian junior high school students. The authors conducted pre-test and post-test grammar score comparisons for their study under a quasi-experimental research design while using descriptive statistical analysis methods. The research demonstrated advanced grammatical knowledge development and improved attitudes toward grammar education when students engaged in IR activities. On the other hand, Chuenchaichon (2011) studied the impact of IR-based tasks on the learners' paragraph writing skills of Thai university students. This study used an experimental approach to measure the students' writing development using pre- and post-tests. As indicated by the descriptive statistics, there was a significant improvement in students' writing skills due to the IR approach. Also, Khazaal (2019) examined the role of the IR on Iraqi college students' vocabulary learning. In a controlled experiment, students were given pre-and post-tests to measure their vocabulary knowledge. A paired t-test was conducted to analyze the data, proving that IR has an important role in increasing vocabulary knowledge. Widyaasita et al. (2020) investigated Indonesian college students' perceptions of the role of IR in improving students' writing skills. For this study, data was gathered through questionnaires and analyzed descriptively. This study shows that most students claimed that their vocabulary improved and that they liked learning reading through the IR approach.

In another study, Andrés (2020) examined the role of IR in enhancing Colombian university students' reading comprehension skills in an action research design from a mixed-methods perspective. Questionnaires, reading tests, and reflective journals were used and then analyzed descriptively and thematically. Analysis indicated a positive advancement in reading comprehension. Ebrahim (2018) in Sudan also found that IR-based instruction helped overcome reading problems. Likewise, Indonesian Rejeki and Kurnia (2019) explored that IR activities helped to master vocabulary, grammar, word order, and writing and fostered motivation to read.

These studies demonstrated the benefits of IR as a teaching approach for the development of many skills in the English language. Most of these studies used an experimental approach with control and treatment groups. They used pre-and post-test measures to evaluate the effects of IR on language learning achievements. Applying IR in language programs offers considerable advantages to teachers and students. In a recent study, Purbayani, Herniawati, and Hidayat (2023) analyzed the IR approach's effect on reading ability development. For this study, the researchers used a cross-sectional survey design and developed a questionnaire given to 10 students from Putra Galuh Ciamis' Early Childhood Education Département. Findings showed that students can gain skills such as vocabulary acquisition, comprehension of texts, and independent sentence construction. It also positively fostered students' reading and writing interests.

Furthermore, in a study in Pakistan, Mahmood, Younis, and Firdous (2023) examined the teaching methods of Pakistani English teachers at the university level, focusing on the IR approach. Three experienced teachers collected the data, and numerous challenges were found, including teachers' lack of knowledge, diverse students, class size, and time constraints regarding using the IR approach in the classrooms. These findings can help improve English as a second language teaching in Pakistan using the IR approach.

It is evident from the studies that the researchers have compared the pre-and post-test outcomes using descriptive statistics. Nevertheless, the standard deviation or simple means cannot gauge the data's importance. Therefore, to better understand the effectiveness of this reading strategy, the researchers may quantify the significance of the variables using inferential statistical tests. Moreover, in the above studies, pure qualitative studies are not found. Therefore, this study uses qualitative research methods to explore the benefits of this reading approach.

Material and Methods

A qualitative research design was used for this study. The investigation adhered to Bryman's (2008) and Merriam and Tisdell's (2015) qualitative study design. The goal of this study's design is to learn something novel and fascinating (Swedberg, 2020). This study investigated how pre-university EFL students perceived the application and the benefits of the IR approach in the classroom. The researchers used a qualitative approach to gain a deep and comprehensive grasp of the issue in the Pakistani context. The population of this study is Pakistani pre-university EFL students of Sukkur IBA's foundation semester. Ten students enrolled in an English language course for the 2023 academic year made up the study sample. This foundation course aims to strengthen students' English abilities. For this study, we selected ten pre-university students, using a method where we specifically chose individuals who fit specific criteria. These students were all consistently present during IR lessons. We ended up with five male and five female participants between 17 and 19 years. Importantly, they all shared a similar prior educational experience.

Instrument

For this study, the researchers gathered data through two primary methods: individual face-to-face interviews and reflective diaries. The researchers conducted ten in-depth interviews with each participant using a semi-structured interview method. This approach allowed us to explore their experiences in detail, as it encouraged participants to share more than they might have in a rigid format. We reviewed existing research on IR and related topics to create interview questions. After we had made the draft of the interview guide, we asked three experts to review it and make suggestions. We also piloted the questions with two students beforehand. Based on the feedback from the experts and the pilot study, we made some adjustments to the interview guide.

In addition to the interviews, the researcher also asked participants to keep a personal reflective diary. This kind of diary records events and includes the writer's thoughts and feelings about IR activities. We used these diaries to understand better how the students felt about and reacted to the IR approach-related activities. To help them with this task, we gave them clear instructions on how to write their entries and provided an example diary at the start of the program. Participants then submitted their completed journals at the end of the course.

Data Analysis

This qualitative study explores how EFL students perceive the application and benefits of the IR approach in EFL classes. Data analysis methods included personal interpretation and thematic analysis. Thematic analysis. It is a versatile technique for examining and summarizing patterns in data. Moreover, it meticulously arranges and explains facts (Braun & Clarke, 2022). After transcribing all ten interviews, the researchers utilized Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis approach. The process involved (1) familiarizing themselves with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3)

identifying potential themes, (4) reviewing and refining the themes, (5) defining and naming the themes, and (6) presenting the themes with comprehensive explanations. This technique was chosen because it provides a flexible, easy, systematic, and transparent approach to data analysis. Additionally, researchers from all over the world have utilized and acknowledged this analysis technique extensively.

For the analysis of reflective diaries, the researchers thoroughly and repeatedly examined the reflective diaries and provided pertinent citations to back up the findings of the interviews. The researchers examined the validity and reliability of the instruments. Member checking was employed to boost the study's legitimacy and ensure the authenticity and dependability of the data. Two participants independently reviewed the interview transcripts and the thematic analysis to ensure accuracy and reliability. Any discrepancies in interpretation were resolved through collaborative discussions between these reviewers and the research team. The current study used Lincoln and Guba's (1985) four-construct framework to assess the reliability of qualitative data. Credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability are the four constructs. Researchers frequently utilize this approach to assess the reliability of the data.

Data Collection

The data was gathered through face-to-face interviews and reflective diaries after the completion of the foundation semester in 2023. The interview lasted thirty to forty minutes. The interviews were conducted at the participants' convenience by the researcher. After explaining the interview's goal to the participants, a formal agreement was sought to record the interviews. Additionally, the participants were assured that their submitted information would only be utilized for the study. Regarding reflective diaries, the students were given diaries beforehand. For their daily entries, students were free to select any suitable time. Ten students were given dairies in total, and eight students returned their dairies at the end of the program.

Results and Discussion

The findings revealed that students generally found the IR approach stimulating and beneficial for them. However, before their experience with this approach, their views on reading in English were largely negative. One student, for example, stated:

"Before joining this program, I always hated reading and never read anything in my previous school or college life. I used to consider reading a boring activity, but now, I have a keen love for reading because the teachers divided textbook reading into three ways. First, we were involved in pre-reading activities, and then the teachers took us through reading, during which everyone was given some time to read and focus on each aspect of the text. Afterward, teachers involved us in post-reading activities to see whether we were improving (P4)." Similarly, another student remarked in the interview,

"Honestly speaking, before joining this foundation program, I did not like English mainly. I hated reading textbooks in and outside the classroom, but now, I have started reading the material provided by teachers in the classroom. I have also started reading some novels and short stories (P7).

Based on these observations, the IR approach positively impacted the students. Their initial dislike of reading transformed into a genuine interest. Several students also expressed that these activities benefited learners of all abilities, including those who had previously struggled academically. This classroom reading approach made a noticeable improvement in their language skills.

A major finding emerged from the data as the students perceived this approach as highly effective in enhancing their reading proficiency and overall language skills. Notably, they began to acquire new knowledge about various aspects of the language. For example, research participant 8 wrote in the diary that she has improved not only her reading and vocabulary but also her writing proficiency, vocabulary knowledge, and grammatical skills to a greater level. Another participant remarked that.

"After participating in the reading sessions, I have understood the difference between IR and ER approaches. I enjoyed participating in both types of activities. The activities related to IR were very beneficial for me as this approach enhanced my writing skills, we also started reading many things, and we developed new words" (P5). Similarly, another participant wrote in the diary, "I realized improvement in my sentence construction. Before that, I always made errors in the sentence structures, but as I was given more content to read in the classroom and the teachers' support was there, I started improving my sentence structures" (P4).

It was also found that activities were healthy and fostered for the new language learners. Some of the participants were of the view that the IR approach is beneficial for learning various aspects of the language.

"We were exposed to various activities. There were plenty of interesting activities and fostering activities, especially for those students who want to learn English, and we learned some new aspects of English (9). Additionally, P2 wrote in the diary: "Those reading related tasks of IR are very much useful, enjoyable, exciting and interesting; those tasks helped me to improve my reading skills as previously I was unable to read and understand any reading material."

The activities were helpful in language development and in giving practical exposure to the learners to learn how to read. For example, it was found that this reading approach helped learners do deep reading or learn how to read a text.

Another student stated that *all the activities were useful because they taught us how to read well, and we learned how to do deep reading" (5).*

A significant observation arose from the interview data, as evidenced by one participant's comment.

"I have also grown my skill as a critical reader, and this critical thinking also helps in academic life; on the same point, another participant remarked that reading will help students in their future semester as they also develop their critical reading skills." (P10, P8).

The interviews and the student journals indicated that the IR approach improved their reading and language skills and provided a positive and engaging learning experience. As one student noted:

"I consistently found the activities to be interesting and enjoyable. This was largely because we had input into the reading materials, and the activities were highly interactive, encouraging full participation from everyone."

"Another student wrote in the diary that today, we read a passage about Dr. Fatima Shah, a blind lady. The teacher made us read Dr. Shah's autobiography, and the teacher asked us various interesting questions. Moreover, we did some interactive reading activities that increased our interest in reading, and we got some motivation and encouragement from the reading material.

In summary, all the participants had positive perceptions about the use of the IR approach in their reading classes, as the above finding reports that students benefited a lot

from the IR approach in their language development, and they took a keen interest in IR-related activities.

Discussion

In this study, almost all participants developed positive opinions about the use of IR activities. Moreover, it was found that the IR activities were helpful and inspiring for Sukkur IBA pre-university EFL learners. According to the results, the exercises were so practical and engaging that they assisted students in all skill levels while fostering their love of reading. The findings also demonstrated increased student reading confidence, an area where they had previously felt insecure. As the findings showed, learners profited greatly from the IR activities. The level of excitement and passion among students for reading also soared. It may be argued that reading exercises were planned and implemented so that students were less bored in reading classes than they had been before joining this foundation semester.

Since the learners' aversion to reading turned into a love for it, it is inferred that using this reading approach benefited them. Learners had an unfavorable perspective before being exposed to this reading approach, but now they have positive opinions about it. Based on the results, it can be concluded that the IR approach could be an entertaining and helpful exercise when used successfully in reading classes. The preset study findings also correspond with related studies that revealed that the IR approach is essentially required in the EFL classrooms for the development of reading skills and the language skills of the students. For example, the study findings align with prior research by Maipoka and Soontornwipast (2021), which found that engaging and suitable IR activities help students improve their reading habits, reading proficiency, and positive attitudes. Other studies have also observed similar results regarding students' positive opinions about the IR approach (Gundran, M., 2024; Sahibzada, Haqyar, & Sahibzada, 2024; Hadi, Anggraini, Gufron, & Haq, 2024). Mahmood, Younis & Firdous, 2023; Purbayani, Herniawati & Hidayat, 2023; Andrés, 2020; Widyaasita, Dayu & Aprizani, 2020; Suteja, 2019; Khazaal, 2019; Erguvan, 2016; Mart, 2015; Erfanpour, 2013; Mahmoudian et al., 2011).

EFL students viewed the IR reading approach from a variety of aspects. Because some participants believed that the present reading approach was constructive for enhancing reading and various components of the language, the results showed that the activities were beneficial for EFL learners. The findings also showed that exposure to IR reading activities enhanced learners' language proficiency in other areas, including reading. Additionally, the results showed that after participating in the IR sessions, students improved their ability to read texts deeply. Additionally, they become critical language readers.

The results showed that IR assisted them in developing their reading habits, as students were actively engaged in these activities. The findings also suggest that IR assisted learners in improving their language skills, and they remarked that their nearly extinct reading habits were restored due to the IR approach (Ibrahim & Rawian, 2018; Mart, 2015). Therefore, this IR approach could bring positive student learning and should be used in the classrooms (Nation & Waring, 2020).

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the IR approach can enhance students' reading skills and language proficiency. This study adds valuable insights to the field of IR approach by confirming students' positive experiences with this method. Moreover, it also addresses

the existing research gaps by focusing on learners' perceptions of the benefits of the IR approach, and the study is also a major contribution as it has confirmed the positive perceptions about the advantages of the IR approach. However, Previous studies often concentrated on the ER approach either exclusively or by comparing it quantitatively with the IR approach. Additionally, learner perceptions of ER were frequently explored. In contrast, this study uniquely contributes by addressing this knowledge gap in this area as this study exclusively explored students' perceptions of the IR approach. The findings indicate that students can significantly improve their linguistic competence through the IR approach used in classrooms. The study also offers practical guidance for teaching IR as it clearly shows the effectiveness of IR in developing students' reading abilities.

The implications of this study are significant for teaching reading in EFL classrooms. It suggests that educators can create a stimulating and supportive environment for students to improve their reading skills. The recommendations suggest that educators abandon their conventional teaching style and use methods such as the IR approach. The analysis contributes to other studies highlighting students' roles when participating in IR activities to develop them into skilled and passionate readers.

Nonetheless, there are elements of the study that require additional research. A mixed-method approach with quantitative and qualitative methods for triangulation integration would yield better results. A single semester of study may not reflect the impact captured over a longer time frame. More longitudinal research in varied educational environments would help answer these questions. Specific queries might also be addressed after applying the IR approach in class, such as motivational aspects of reading and the post-reading strategies employed by students.

Recommendations

- Considering the findings, it is suggested that EFL instructors in Pakistan and other regions revise their reading instruction strategies by integrating an effective IR approach to reap its benefits to the maximum.
- It is essential that students should be encouraged to read intensively, and students should be taught various techniques for reading a text intensively. Moreover, the reading activities should be interesting and entertaining, and the traditional teacher-centric method should be discouraged in the classes.
- The application of the IR approach to diverse educational contexts both inside and outside classrooms will enhance learners' reading competence and promote a better reading culture.
- This also acts as a resource for authorities and teachers at different levels of education in the IR integration process in policy documents and curricula for foreign languages.
- The three-level framework of IR with pre-reading, during-reading, and post-reading can be modified to suit different contexts in teaching English as a foreign language.
- The curriculum designers should design activities focusing on both IR and ER approaches, and the interest of students should also be considered by them.
- The school administration should also organize training for the teachers about implementing the IR approach in the classes.
- Students should be given free choice to select reading material for them, and they may be instructed how to read any text intensively.
- Students must be provided a conducive environment for reading both inside and outside the classroom. they may also be introduced to some online reading resources that may help them in the IR activities.

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