Degree Project with Specialization in English Studies and Education

The Effectiveness of the Extensive Reading Approach for Facilitating Vocabulary Acquisition Through an Enhancement of Reading Motivation

Effekten av Omfattande Läsning för att Höja Läsmotivationen, med Avsikt i att Främja Ordinlärning

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Master of Science in Secondary Education, 300 credits
Självständigt arbete 15 hp

2020-02-14
Abstract

This study investigates the possible benefits of using the extensive reading approach as means of enhancing reading motivation, and through that improve and develop EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners’ vocabular repertoire. According to the Swedish Media Council, almost 49% of the Swedish youth do not read books in their free time, and the numbers keep decreasing (Statens Medieråd, 2019). At a time where reading is no longer as common, several researchers have claimed that implementing the extensive reading approach in EFL classrooms gives space for incidental vocabulary acquisition to take place. It has been further argued that extensive reading is an appreciated approach by students, since it gives them the freedom to learn at their own pace. However, there is still some disagreement among researchers as to whether extensive reading does increase reading motivation or not. For this study, data and material were gathered through electronic searches from numerous educational databases to investigate this matter and provide an overview of the findings. The overall results indicate that extensive reading does have a beneficial impact on vocabulary acquisition, and that students are generally positive and receptive to extensive reading, especially when combined with reading-tasks and activities. However, further research is necessary to be able to understand whether vocabulary gains from extensive reading actually are affected by reading motivation or not.

Key terms: English as a Foreign Language, vocabulary acquisition, extensive reading.
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1. Introduction

Vocabulary learning is one of the most essential parts of learning a language; however, learning new words in a foreign language is hard. Second language (L2) educators have often interpreted incidental vocabulary acquisition from reading as an indication that extensive reading can work as a basis for vocabulary acquisition (Youngkyu, 2006). According to a study made by Statens Medieråd, The Swedish Media Council, most teenagers in Sweden feel like they spend too much time on social media, and too little time reading books or newspapers. The results showed that 48-49% of the teenagers (age 13-19) didn’t read or seldom read in their free time, and the numbers have kept decreasing through the years. It is apparent that with all the digitalization, social media and other streaming apps, the time and interest put on reading has become less appreciated (Statens Medieråd, 2019).

It is common knowledge that motivation is a very important factor when it comes to learning; however, it can be a great challenge for many teachers to keep their students’ learning motivation high. Dealing with bored students and a lack of interest or even maintaining an inspiring and motivating learning environment is often something that many teachers struggle with. And yet it is well known that motivation is crucial for even the brightest learners to persist with the language learning (Dörnyei, 2001). According to Burns and Richards (2012), the most effective way to engage students is for the motivation to come from within. Nevertheless, the teacher plays a major role in fostering an inspiring environment that helps the learners grow and develop an internal motivation.

Upper secondary school education involves a large amount of reading, writing and analyzing, which makes reading comprehension a very important ability to master. The Swedish curriculum for English in upper secondary school states that the learner should be given the opportunity to develop their ability to understand and interpret the content of spoken English and in different types of texts (Skolverket, 2011). Urquhart and Weir (1998) define reading as a process, in which the reader receives and interprets different meanings and messages in written text. This kind of interactive reading becomes a linguistic practice, where the reader actively processes information. According to Carrell and Gabe (2002), the reader should put up goals, activate different
knowledges, and adapt the reading to content and text. But how do we create motivation in reading, while still managing to develop learners’ vocabulary?

In order to accomplish a successful vocabulary learning outcome through reading, it is important that the teacher provides effective reading instruction. For the instruction to be effective, the teacher needs to ensure that the content appeals to the student. Making the content appealing to the students creates a meaning for the task at hand, which motivates them. It is common that students prefer not to write in the second of foreign language because they can’t find meaning in what they are supposed to write; it does not appeal to them the same way that their first language does (Burns & Richards, 2012; Harner, 2014). Dörneyi (2001) argues that motivation is the factor that explains why, how and for how long someone decides to do something.

Often times, teachers perceive students as being uninterested nor caring about learning. It is however argued by students that they do care, but they are not getting what they need (Dörneyi, 2001). Dörneyi reasons that motivation needs to follow through all the activities in language learning. If students cannot understand how the activity stands in relevance to the real world, then they will not be able to see the significance of it. When it comes to motivating EFL students to read in the foreign language, it is of utter importance that they understand the importance of the task at hand because reading is seen as a base for writing (Dörneyi, 2001). Burns & Richards (2012) suggest that one should place reading at the center of the teaching, because that later on builds up the base for the rest of the language skills, i.e. the teacher can use the text they have read to base their writing on, to create meaning to the writing.

Hugo (2011) implies that incorporating meaningfulness into the learning increases motivation. It has however been argued that in order for that to succeed, teaching needs to be student-centered instead of being subject-centered (Hugo, 2011). Hugo (2011) highlights the importance of the teaching being student-centered, meaning that the relationship between the student, the teacher and the subject is very important to achieve a motivating learning environment. A study conducted by Hugo (2011) revealed that even the lowest performing students can perform better in a meaningful learning environment, where they can relate their experience to the provided content. Hugo (2011) also emphasizes the teacher’s role in investing time, patience and dedication to create meaningful teaching situations that motivate the students. If students don’t find the learning to be meaningful, then the learning outcome will be negatively affected. Wolters, Barnes, Kulesz, York and Francis (2017) suggest that increasing motivation might have a positive effect on the cognitive
aspect of reading – such as comprehension- since the student would become more motivated to willingly put more effort on understanding the text. Studies have shown that students who feel more competent at reading, tend to be more motivated to read, enjoy reading and achieve better results on standardized reading achievement tests (Wolters et al., 2017).

One potential way to incorporate meaningfulness into reading is the extensive reading approach. Extensive reading is a very simple approach, and it thrives from reading regularly and with high quantity to create a habit of reading. However, in order for the learning to take place, it is important that the reading materials are chosen according to the students’ reading abilities and language proficiency (Suk, 2016). Suk suggests that extensive reading also should include features such as allowing the students to choose reading materials on their own, reading independently, and reading for different purposes. Those purposes could for instance be reading for information seeking, for general meaning or reading for enjoyment. In addition, Suk claims that through extensive reading, learners can develop their vocabulary and thus also their reading fluency. Another important aspect of extensive reading that Suk identifies is its ability to expose the learner to a high but very meaningful amount of content in the target language. By being exposed to a high amount of relevant reading material for a longer period of time, features like reading comprehension, vocabulary, reading fluency and other new knowledge have the potential to be acquired unconsciously and unintentionally (Suk, 2016; Krashen, 2004). Furthermore, ER offers the reader the opportunity to self-selection of the reading material, which makes the reading more enjoyable and thus increases their motivation for reading.
2. Aim and research questions

My aim is to identify to what extent the extensive reading approach increases EFL students’ reading motivation, which in turn may provide opportunities for the students to learn and expand their vocabulary repertoire at their own pace.

2.1 Research question

What impact does the extensive reading approach have on EFL learners’ reading motivation, and to what extent does this approach scaffold their learning regarding vocabulary acquisition?
3. Method

For this research, I have used multiple collecting methods to collect articles and studies that align with my area of interest: increasing reading motivation through extensive reading, to facilitate vocabulary acquisition. My primary search method has been through the educational data bases ERIC, Google Scholar and Malmö University’s data base Libsearch.

3.1 Search delimitations

To start off, I began my search on three different data bases: Malmö University’s Libsearch, ERIC and Google Scholar. The search terms that were used were “reading motivation”, “L2 OR EFL” and “vocabulary acquisition”, with the option of “peer-reviewed” on ERIC and Libsearch. Even though Google Scholar did not have “peer reviewed” filter, it offered a wider range of research articles. However, if I did find a relevant article on Google Scholar, I would double check if it was peer reviewed by looking it up on ERIC.

I searched on Google Scholar using the term “vocabulary acquisition EFL extensive reading” and got 58 300 results, which resulted in only one hit being relevant. The next search was done on Libsearch, using the terms “vocabulary”, “EFL”, and “extensive reading” and limiting it down to peer review and scientific articles, which got me 648 results. Out of those results I found three researches which were relevant for my subject. Additional relevant researches and other sources were retrieved from reference sections of found studies.

In all searches, different combinations of the following terms were used: “EFL”, “L2”, “extensive reading”, “reading motivation”, “vocabulary”, and “vocabulary acquisition”.

3.2 Inclusion and exclusion criteria

The articles that were found relevant and was included for this paper, contained research of the concept of extensive reading in association to vocabulary acquisition and/or reading motivation. Additionally, some studies even consisted of analysis regarding the impact that extensive reading
might have on reading comprehension, and the motivational benefit of using pre- and post-reading tasks along with the extensive reading approach.

The “peer reviewed” search filter was used when searching to assure validity in the found research articles. Furthermore, no other limitations associated with geographics were used, but studies which were conducted in an L1 setting were excluded. Hence, in the search process I only focused on studies which upper secondary EFL or L2 learners. Due to the demographic difference of the studies, the educational systems in each country varies, which could have some significance on the results and language levels of the participants.

No demographics were excluded from the search; however, English speaking countries were omitted considering that this paper targets foreign language learners (second language learners were also included). To limit down the results furthermore, I chose not to include researches which were published before the year 2002.

Table 1. Search terms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Keyword-combinations with “extensive reading EFL”</th>
<th>Total results</th>
<th>Number of relevant results</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reading motivation</td>
<td>5 023</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocabulary acquisition</td>
<td>58 000</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocabulary</td>
<td>648</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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4. Results

In this section, I present a range of research studies that investigate two possible beneficial outcomes of the extensive reading approach in EFL settings. The first potential outcome is the impact that extensive reading has on reading motivation, and the second is its effect on vocabulary acquisition.

There have been many research studies made which claim that the extensive reading approach does have a beneficial impact on vocabulary acquisition (Boutorwick, Macalister & Elgort, 2019; Leung, 2002; Mermelstein, 2014; Natsuki, 2019; Liu & Zhang, 2018; Wu, 2012). There was a significant increase in vocabulary, and several studies also indicated that the students showed a positive attitude towards the extensive reading approach, when combined with tasks and activities (Boutorwick et.al, 2019; Kirchhoff, 2015). Boutorwick, Macalister and Elgort (2019) discusses the learning opportunities that extensive reading (ER) can provide, and they investigate two approaches to implementation of extensive reading to improve vocabulary. One approach consists only of traditional ER, while the second approach is called ER-plus. The ER-plus approach differs from traditional extensive reading because in addition to the reading it also includes discussions in small groups before reading. The study took place at a university in New Zealand, but the participants came from a variety of countries with a majority from China. The students were separated according to their level of English proficiency, and a variety of word tests were made. The results showed that the group with the ER-plus approach gained more knowledge than the ER-only group. These findings not only show the effectiveness of language learning though ER, but the fact that the ER-plus benefited the students more shows that the learner-learner interaction is an important factor in developing vocabulary.

In a similar study, Leung (2002) conducted a diary study investigating the impact of extensive reading on vocabulary acquisition for an adult learning Japanese as a foreign language. The data was collected from a learner-diary, audio recordings, and vocabulary tests. The participant wrote down reflections in her journal after each reading session, and then gathered those notes and recorded diary entries regarding weekly experiences and progress. Two vocabulary tests were made to examine the gains from ER. The results show an enhancement both regarding vocabulary and reading comprehension, while also promoting a positive attitude towards reading.
Mermelstein (2014) performed a qualitative study examining the effects ER has on Asian EFL learners’ reading levels. The study was conducted at a university in Taiwan on eighty-seven EFL students who did not major in English. The participants were divided into two groups, the control group and the treatment group. Both groups had the same instructor (researcher) and received the same curriculum for the course; however, only the treatment group received the ER treatment. Communicative language teaching (CLT) was applied along with a teaching approach that was student-centered. The ER-study consisted of a weekly activity of sustained reading in class, while also being supported by outside class reading. The findings of the study indicate that ER combined with a student-centered approach can result in a successful learning outcome, in comparison to traditional curriculum- and teacher-centered approaches. Mermelstein (2014) implied that increasing reading levels results in an increase in vocabulary and automaticity in reading. This assumption was drawn not only due to the results of the study, but also through Krashen’s claim which states that “comprehensible input in the form of ER, or pleasure reading, can lead to more literacy development”.

Similar to the previous study, Aka Natsuki (2019) conducted a research study which investigates the benefit of extensive reading regarding the development of reading abilities and linguistic knowledge. The results were compared to a control group that received grammatical instruction. A total of 405 participating students aged fifteen to sixteen were selected from an early engineering institution (Kosen) to be included in this study. These students’ majors were mechanics, electronics, information technology, chemistry, and architecture. Since these majors are more science and math oriented, Natsuki (2019) assumes that the greater interests of Kosen students does not lay in learning English, since it is not a scientific subject. Similar to other studies, the participants were divided into control groups (n= 205) and experimental groups (n= 200). To examine the effects of the ER program, pre-tests and post-tests were made, which tested grammar, vocabulary and reading. The study then divided the participants further into three proficiency groups: higher-, middle-, and lower-proficiency. The results revealed that the middle- and lower-proficiency groups had a significant increase in scores compared to the higher proficiency group. Conclusively, the findings suggest that the students who participated were able to access and make use of knowledge which had been acquired in from their time in junior high, in the one-year long ER course. This resulted in a positive development in the learners’ language knowledge and reading abilities.
Liu and Zhang (2018) conducted an empirical study which explores the effect of extensive reading instruction has on learners' vocabulary acquisition, and evaluates the variation of the effect with regards to instruction length and teaching methods. The majority of the participants were university students (67%), and 19% were high school students. A small amount of the included participants were also adults, junior high school students and younger children- however, that was only 5% each. The results of the study revealed that extensive reading does in fact have a positive and beneficial effect on learners' vocabulary acquisition. It also divulged that there are many factors that plays a significant role on the learning outcome. The researchers suggested that one semester of working with improving vocabulary through extensive reading would be the most appropriate time length. Liu and Zhang (2018) also highlighted other factors that play a significant role, such as the reading materials (Graded Readers), comprehension questions, and the vocabulary practice exercises. All these factors contribute significantly to promote vocabulary acquisition amongst EFL learners.

In another study, Kirchhoff (2015) conducted a qualitative study investigating EFL students' experiences of face-to-face book talk about books of their own choosing, in an extensive reading class. The study was performed at a Japanese junior college, in an English extensive reading class. A total of 41 students participated in this study, with the ages 18-20 years. A survey was handed out to collect data on the students' experiences and evaluation of the discussions. The survey revealed that the students enjoyed being able to choose their own books and hear about other books, because it met their academic need of finding new interesting books through an interactional activity with their classmates. The findings indicated that combining extensive reading with an interactional activity, such as book talk, has a positive and beneficial impact on the students' reading motivation. The students showed a very positive attitude towards including this interactional activity with the extensive reading program, since it encouraged input and output in the target language and worked as a social practice to get to know their classmates better. These findings show that this collaboration could work as a motivational strategy for the extensive reading approach, to enhance reading motivation.

In contrast to the previous study, Huang (2015) investigated whether extensive reading has a positive effect on senior high school EFL students’ reading motivation, and if it encourages the learners to read in English. The study also observes the challenges that were faced and the attitudes that the teachers had towards the implementation of ER activities in their English classroom. The research was pursued for a period of 12 weeks, and the participants consisted of 258 EFL students.
from four different senior high schools in Taiwan. Out of these 258 students, 72 were randomly picked out for group interviews. Furthermore, six teachers were selected from the participating schools for individual interviews. Results of this study revealed that a majority of the participating students expressed a positive attitude towards the extensive reading activity. However, and despite the students’ positive attitude, the results did not show any enhancements regarding reading motivation, which the authors claim may be on account of the heavy workload that they had from other classes. It was agreed that the outcome of the study pointed towards extensive reading being time-consuming and not beneficial enough to “boost” their exam scores.

Another perspective of extensive reading was examined by Wu (2012), to investigate the effect that extensive reading has on junior high school students, regarding their reading motivation and their reading performance. To collect data for the research, a motivational survey and a reading test were handed to a total of 69 eight grade EFL students in Taiwan. The participants were divided into two groups, one experimental and one control, and both groups took pretests to measure reading motivation and reading performance. The experimental group was given the opportunity to choose one out of four books, whereas the control group was assigned a textbook. The findings of this study revealed that extensive reading did not have a major impact on the learners’ reading motivation, however it did enhance the students’ vocabulary recognition, reading and general performance.

Al-Homoud and Schmitt (2009) performed a study which compares the extensive reading approach against the more traditional approach of intensive reading which were combined with vocabulary exercises. The study took place at a Saudi college, in a challenging classroom setting when it came to extensive reading. For instance, the students were relatively weak and did not read for pleasure, and the course was only for a short period of time. Reading comprehension, reading speed and vocabulary acquisition was measured, and the results showed that the beneficial effect of the extensive reading approach did not differ much from the benefits of the intensive reading. However, the students who participated did not only show a more positive attitude towards extensive reading than their classmates in intensive reading, but they did also show the same attitude towards their class and their learning.

Namhee Suk (2016) presented a research study that investigates the effect that the ER approach has on reading comprehension, reading rate, and vocabulary acquisition. The study was executed over a 15-week semester at a Korean university, on EFL university students. The method of the
study was a quasi-experimental research method and was conducted on two control groups and two experimental groups. The control groups were the ones to receive a 100-minute per week intensive reading instruction, whereas the other two experimental groups got 70 minutes of intensive reading instruction and 30 minutes of extensive reading instruction per week. The outcomes of the study showed that the experimental groups notably outperformed the control groups when it came to the following variables: reading comprehension, reading rate, and vocabulary acquisition. These results indicate that extensive reading does in fact have a positive effect on those learning areas.
5. Discussion

The studies presented above by Boutorwick et al (2019), Leung (2002), Mermelstein (2014), Natsuki (2019), Wu (2012), and Liu et al (2018) have all provided evidence that extensive reading can have a positive effect on vocabulary acquisition. Al-Homoud and Schmitt (2009) and Kirchhoff (2015) investigated another possible beneficial angle of extensive reading, which studied its impact on learners’ reading motivation. The overall results of the presented studies all together suggest that extensive reading can have a beneficial impact on both reading motivation and vocabulary acquisition, when it is combined with social tasks such as book circles and giving the learner the authority to be part of their learning. In extensive reading, the student is given the opportunity to select their own reading material (usually from a pre-set list of books). Many researchers have claimed that one of the main reasons why extensive reading has a positive impact on students’ reading motivation is because of the ability to choose, read and learn at their own pace (Al-Homoud et al, 2009; Kirchhoff, 2015; Ro, 2013). Convenience, satisfaction and usefulness are three factors in extensive reading that contribute to enhancing learners’ reading motivation. Being able to read at any place, any time and at their own pace made the reading convenient, and not enforced. The second contributing factor to the motivational enhancement was the satisfaction of being finished with one book and starting with another. The satisfaction of building up quantity motivated the learner to read even more. The third contributing factor, usefulness, is about the self-reflection of realizing that one has improved and learned new words or phrases (Ro, 2013). This reflects well in the aim of the subject for the Swedish curriculum for upper secondary English, as it states that the teaching should help foster an awareness and understanding for how a language is learned, both in teaching and other contexts (Skolverket, 2011). Combining the extensive reading approach with pre- and post-reading tasks creates opportunities for this type of reflection to occur, since it makes the students process what they have learned and use that knowledge.

Dörnyei (2001) discusses three motivational components which are similar to the ones mentioned in Ro’s (2013) study, and are related to the learning situation: course-specific components (associated with the syllabus, teaching materials, teaching methods and the tasks), teacher-specific components (concerning impact of the teacher’s personality, behavior, and teaching style) and group-specific components (concerning the group dynamics and characteristics of the learners). These components might not have been taken into consideration in Huang’s (2015) and Wu’s (2012) studies, which could explain why the extensive reading approach failed to enhance reading motivation. For instance, Huang (2015) mentioned that the students were not motivated towards
reading due to the heavy workload from other school subjects, which could be a huge contributor to the failure. Another aspect could be that the dynamics of the learner group or the teacher-student relationship, along with a teaching style that did not allow for such reading approach to succeed in motivating the students to read more. It is however important to note that the students did enjoy extensive reading and expressed positive attitudes towards it. The Swedish syllabus for upper secondary English states that through teaching, the students should be given the opportunity to meet different kinds of both written and spoken English, and “… be able to relate the content to their own experiences and knowledge” (Skolverket, 2011). Through the extensive reading approach, students are able to pick their own reading material and discuss it, using their newly gained knowledge to relate it to their own reality, through different reading tasks and activities.

The benefits of extensive reading are further argued by George Jacobs and Thomas Farrell (2012), who claims that the extensive reading approach creates opportunities for reading, which makes the reading a habit. Reading regularly and in such quantity enhances the learner’s reading levels and also helps improving their grammar and vocabulary, as well as their writing, speaking and listening skills in the target language (Jacobs, G. & Farrell, T. 2012). According to Jacobs et. al, since the reading materials that are pitched to the student are in accordance to their reading levels, the student will be able to understand what they read without help. Even if they do not understand every word, they are able to comprehend the context and most likely figure out what those words mean. The findings of the previously mentioned studies indicated that the extensive reading approach did in fact have a beneficial impact on improving the students’ vocabular repertoire, due to creating a regular reading habit and reading in a big quantity, without omitting to adapt the reading material to the learners’ reading levels.

However, and despite all the mentioned benefits and implications of the studies, it is important to note that extensive reading might not always be beneficial for the students’ reading motivation, and does not automatically make them enjoy reading, since there are other external factors that could affect motivation (Huang, 2015; Wu, 2012). Huang (2015) implies that despite the students showing a positive attitude towards the extensive reading approach, it did not result in an enhancement in reading motivation. However, it was highlighted that the heavy workload from other classes might have had a big impact on the students’ reading motivation. On the other hand, other studies indicated that incorporating pre- and post-reading tasks, or social activities such as book circles, boosted the reading motivation and made extensive reading more enjoyable (Boutorwick et.al, 2019; Kirchhoff, 2015). This indicates that the extensive reading approach is most efficient for
enhancing reading motivation, when combined with reading tasks and activities. By incorporating these tasks and activities to the reading, students are also given the opportunity to practice and develop the all-round communicative skill that the Swedish syllabus for upper secondary English puts high value to.
6. Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to determine whether the extensive reading approach enhanced the students’ reading motivation, to create space for expanding their vocabulary repertoire. In this study synthesis, I have concluded that the extensive reading approach does create opportunities for incidental vocabulary acquisition to take place, while also being met with a positive attitude from the learners. If done right and combined with pre- and post-reading tasks, extensive reading can make reading habitual and enjoyable, while still maintaining a vocabulary development. In times where teenagers do not read as much, the extensive reading approach exposes them to a wider variety of words than they would encounter otherwise, due to the heavy reading that occurs through this approach. Furthermore, this approach offers the students freedom to choose their own reading material, to cater their own needs and reading ability. Catering the students’ needs can be seen as a key component in extensive reading, since it also gives the students the chance to learn at their own pace.

The Swedish syllabus for upper secondary English highlights the importance of offering students the opportunity to develop “the ability to express themselves with variation and complexity”, while also incorporating the importance of maintaining a good vocabulary repertoire to be able to adapt the language to the context and understand written and spoken English (Skolverket, 2011). It is therefore of high value that the students are given time and opportunity to be able to enhance their vocabulary. The extensive reading approach exposes the students to be able to learn new words and phrases, in an appreciated and enjoyable way. By making reading a habitual routine, students can develop their vocabulary without intentionally trying to practice new words. While one can argue that extensive reading might not be able to motivate students to read in their free time, this approach was still very appreciated by students and resulted in many learning outcomes such as enhanced vocabulary. It is here important that the teacher gets to know their students’ language levels and educational needs, to be able to provide them with the right reading materials and scaffold them towards improvement. If teachers start adapting our teaching to the students’ needs and follow a student-centered approach, they will be able to scaffold their learning with the knowledge and motivation they need to succeed. On the long term, this will nurture an aspiration to learn and develop, in school and out in the real world.

For my degree project, I intend to conduct research investigating the extensive reading approach through an interview-based approach. I will be interviewing teachers that have implemented
extensive reading in their teaching, and students who have been subjected to this teaching approach. The study will be focusing on the learning outcomes of using the extensive reading approach on upper secondary students in Sweden.
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