

Is It Enough? Intensive Program for ESL Students

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ABSTRACT: *In most EFL classes, the four language skills are taught to help students learn a language efficiently. When these language abilities are taught using the appropriate method, the linguistic gaps of English language learners may be filled. This study aims to investigate the level of improvement of EFL students after finishing 13-week semi-intensive language courses that concentrated on reading, writing, and conversation skills. A pre-test and a post-test of the same kind were administered to 62 participants, first-year students in the English department at the College of Basic Education, to gauge their language development. The participants were given a questionnaire to fill so as to understand their viewpoints concerning the treatment phase. The results showed that the majority of students improved after concluding the language skills courses. Most participants believed in the importance of reading as the most effective language learning skill and found it quite interesting.*

KEYWORDS: Intensive program, EFL, language learning, language teaching, program assessment

INTRODUCTION

Many English language programs provide intensive language classes to enhance students' proficiency in using their English in a variety of contexts. Intensive language courses, also known as compressed and time-shortened (Burton and Nisbet 2000), are courses where “students participate in a higher number of classes in a shorter period.” (Mukundan et. al. 2012, p 1).

While several research has looked into intensive and semi-intensive language programs and found excellent results, very few studies have focused on intensive language programs designed specifically for English language learners. These students are assumed to have basic knowledge of the English language, and hence were accepted at these English programs. Students pursuing certification as English teachers are the subjects of this study. These students receive a semi-intensive language course comprised of three basic skills courses after being admitted into the English program. These courses emphasize using the language that students already know to do various activities, which is intended to increase both their language competency and their practical language use. As a result,

these courses do not assert to teach English as a language, but rather to teach English language skills. Reading skills are an excellent illustration of it; although students can read English texts, they are taught to read texts more quickly, scan for information, and summarize. On the other hand, pupils who are proficient in writing sentences in English are now expected to create paragraphs. Moreover, students who know how to speak English learn how to give presentations and teach using the English language.

The study will begin with a brief analysis of the prior research on intensive language programs, particularly for EFL students. Then, the methodology will be presented in detail. The results obtained will be analyzed and a discussion of these results in light of the literature review will be delivered. A conclusion and recommendations will be given at the end of the study.

The study aims at answering the following questions:

1. How useful were the three intensive English language courses in the English Department in the College of Basic Education?
2. Did the students' comprehension skills in English improve after being exposed to multiple reading tasks provided by the English Department?
3. Did the student's knowledge of grammar and structure improve after being exposed to multiple reading tasks provided by the English Department?
4. Did the student's vocabulary deduction skills improve after being exposed to multiple reading tasks provided by the English Department?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Efficacy of intensive programs

According to Burton and Nisbet (2000; Mukundan et al., 2013), intensive courses are courses that are condensed in duration without sacrificing content, as Intensive courses are also characterized as timeconstrained, compressed, flexible, and alternate learning environments (Wodkowski, 2003; Scott & Conrad, 1992). While the amount of time is generally agreed to be the most effective factor in language learning as first established by the American psychologist J.B. Carroll (1967), the same consensus was not reached as to how the classes should be distributed. The concept of intense programs is founded on the teachers' constant demand for extra time, which they lack in traditional programs, to teach effectively and use interactive learning methods. It's important to keep in mind that certain schools frequently employ block intense timetables without fully comprehending the underlying theory behind intensive plans (Marchant & Paulson, 2001; Veal & Flinders, 2001). The choice was usually between a few hours spread through the course of several months, or many hours spread in less time.

The learning of a second language has not been demonstrated to be very effective in traditional second/foreign language programs, which offer a few hours of instruction per week in a

nonconcentrated time distribution (Netten and Germain, 2004, Spada and Lightbown, 1994). In order to provide enhanced second language training, a number of new programs have been created and put into place. A few different names for these programs are: rapid, intense, immersion, condensed, intensive, and hurry-up (Benseler and Schulz, 1979).

Several studies investigated the effectiveness of intensive language courses, most of which reported positive outcome (Martin and Culver 2007; Bidard and Thomas 2010). Additionally, the development of the students' Basic Interpersonal Communications Skill (BICS) and, more crucially, their Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) has been highlighted as a key effect of intensive programs (Hong- Nam & Leavell, 2006). It was found that students tend to prepare better for intensive sessions if they receive their material early on (Burton & Nesbit, 2002), or was also found that the students improve in time management skills when taking the students' preparation and management into account (Grant, 2001). Moreover, Burton & Nesbit (2020) found that intensive programs positively affect students' motivation, commitment, and engagement.

When investigating teachers' perception on intensive programs, Grant (2001) found that most teachers believed that intensive programs are encouraging and more interesting as the interaction with students is emphasized. Not only did studies note that intensive programs were found useful, but they also found evidence that intense programs are better than traditional ones. Tatum (2010) concludes that "very few studies report superior outcomes from the traditional method (page 48)." He adds "quite frequently the literature shows that accelerated format produces better learning and achievement than the traditional format (page 48)".

In the field of languages (2nd and foreign), the reported results were not very different. Buzash (1994), for example, investigated the usefulness of an intensive French course for high school students. He found that the language proficiency courses equaled one college semester. In another study conducted by Spade and Lightbrown (1994), it was found that EFL students' results were much higher than the students enrolled in the traditional class format program. In addition, Serrano & Munaz (2007), investigated the degree of time intensity of language courses on adult students; they found that the more intense (same content in less time) the program was, the more the students benefited from the program.

Inefficacy of intensive programs

Some studies have emphasized the ineffectiveness of intensive programs (Gallow & Aldi, 2009; Nasiri & Shokrpour, 2012). According to Carrington et al. (2010) in standard, non-intensive programs, learning is improved. Bateson (1990) found in a study conducted on science pupils that they actually outperformed expectations in the intensive program, reaching a conclusion that students would do better in programs extended all year. In an Iranian EFL university setting, a study comparing students' performance in intensive and non-intense English reading comprehension classes indicated that ordinary two-day-per-week English courses considerably outperformed intensive scheduling for

students of different majors (Nasiri & Shokrpour, 2012). There is also the worry that in intensive programs, students might not be able to process condensed materials and knowledge, highlighting the possibility of students feeling frustrated, exhausted, and stressed because they won't have time to review and reread previous material before new material is presented (Henbery, 1997).

As time is the main difference between intensive and traditional courses, Daniel (2000) stated that some students expressed their stress and exhaustion from the limited time available to handle too much work and materials (Scott & Conrad,1991). Faculty views of intensive courses indicated that they are critical of the fatigue, lack of time for the students to digest concepts, lack of opportunities to cover extensive coverage, and too rapid assignments (Scott & Conrad,1991). Given the findings of the research on the efficiency of intensive courses, a good example of this is a study conducted by Nasiri & Shokrpour (2012) on Iranian students of different majors who were studying English for two days a week in one group and an intensive class for the second group. The researchers found that the ones who studied in the traditional class performed better. The researchers argued that intense course does not provide students with enough time to digest the information and practice it.

Several researchers have emphasized a semi-intensive approach; however, very few studies explored the method in which this approach could be used in an EFL classroom (Anderson & Nunan, 2008; Harmer, 2007; Nation & Waring, 2020). From the few studies that investigated the semi-intensive approach, the majority found the results to be similar to the intensive program.

English in Kuwait

Kuwait, like all Arab countries, is a diglossic country, which has a standard language and a vernacular. However, unlike many other Arab countries, the status of English in Kuwait has changed gaining prestige and value (Alsafran et. al., 2020). The main reasons behind this change of status are the large number of non-Arabic speaking expats who work at homes and in shops, with English as the only means of communication between the Kuwaitis and the expats (lingua franca). In addition, private schools have become very popular in Kuwait. These schools depend on English as the means of instruction. As for public schools, English is taught daily for 45 minutes from the first year of primary school to the last year of high school. English proficiency is a requirement in many jobs. Hence, English in Kuwait has established its importance socially, academically and professionally.

However, in the College of Basic Education, a government college which graduates teachers for public schools, many registered students in the College are not highly proficient in the English language. The new students should take a placement test of English before starting their programs of study to place them in the suitable level English language proficiency. However, the students applying to join the English Department take a different exam. Based on the results of the exam, the students are accepted or rejected. In the semester during which the current investigation was conducted, all the students applying for the Department were accepted due to an error in the system of admissions.

The placement test of the Department was entirely designed by staff members of the English Department. Following the procedure of placement tests a committee of 5 academic members were assigned to design the test and constantly review the results and provide updated version of the test whenever needed. A selection of 50 multiple choice questions was included in the test, each question had 4 multiple answers where only one answer was correct. Questions were mainly designed to assess applicants' knowledge of grammatical form and vocabulary.

Significance of the study

The teaching of English as a Foreign language has been investigated extensively; however, it has been found that each context is unique by the background and culture of learners and teachers. This study investigates a scarcely addressed issue; namely, teaching time. The study is also unique in obtaining statistics on the worthiness of teaching a semi-intensive language program in an adult EFL classroom. The findings will enable educators and academics to decide on the suitable scheduling (intensive, non-intensive or semi-intensive) which could be most beneficial to students, and professors.

METHODOLOGY

To understand the importance of the skill courses, 62 participants from the English department (English teachers to be) took a pre-test and a post-test of the same form, separated by a treatment phase presented by the three classes; namely, reading, writing and conversation. The language test comprises of 50 questions, 30 tested the comprehension skills through providing two reading passages (15 questions each), 10 questions test the grammar knowledge, 5 questions test the students' punctuation knowledge, and 5 test the knowledge of vocabulary deduction.

As for the intensive courses in the English Department in the College of Basic Education, three courses are provided. Each class was taught for 9 hours per week, for a total of 13 weeks (a total of 117 hours). The pre-test was given to the students before joining the department of English as a measure for their English proficiency (entrance exam) and it was a few weeks before the beginning of Fall Semester 2022/2023. All students were registered in the three extensive language skills classes in the department of English only. The treatment phase involved the Reading class which included several reading skills: 1. Previewing 2. Scanning 3. Skimming 4. Using Vocabulary Knowledge for Effective Reading 5. Making Inferences 6. Finding Topics 7. Discovering Topics of Paragraphs 8. Understanding Main Ideas 9. Identifying Patterns of Organization and 10. Summarizing. The Basic Writing class included teaching students how to write a meaningful paragraph, starting with pre-writing skills of planning, free writing, and mind maps. Once the students understand the concepts of paragraph writing, the different styles of writing are taught, starting with descriptive and narrative writing, process analysis, comparison and contrast, and cause and effect. In the Conversation course, students learn the skill of presenting oneself, and the techniques and strategies speaking publicly.

Students were exposed to different types of tasks related to the skills, these tasks included drills, comprehension assignments, and reading aloud in the Reading class. They were taught to identify writing styles, punctuation mistakes and writing paragraphs in the Basic writing class. In addition, they were asked to evaluate presentations, discuss topics and present skillfully in the Conversation class. As for assessment, different abilities were tested, in all the skills taught throughout the term. Therefore, quizzes, and tests were given almost weekly to measure the students' ability to move to the next step/level. The aim of these three courses was to complement each other, to intensify learning.

By the end of the term, participants completed the post-test (which was identical to the pre-test). The total time allocated for the tests was 1 hour. While initially 400 students took the test, 85 participated in the post-test. However, 23 students were subsequently excluded from data analysis; one for quitting the test (late), 17 students' papers were excluded for answering only a few questions or for providing incomplete answers that could have affected the analysis negatively, and 5 were excluded as they lacked reliability for choosing the same answer throughout the test.

The data gathered was analyzed via SPSS. The analysis included frequency, mean of grades and percentages, and T-tests to compare the various results. In addition, a questionnaire was distributed with five open-ended questions to gain insight into the students' perception of the usefulness of the extensive reading class. While the same number of participants were given the open-ended questionnaire, only 37 students answered it.

RESULTS

The results were analyzed in four main categories; namely, comprehension skills, grammar, punctuation, and vocabulary. The data collected shows that students have improved significantly in the area of comprehension when comparing results before and after taking the extensive language course. Before starting the course, the average grade of the comprehension section out of 30 was 11.8 which equals 39.2%. After taking the extensive course the average increased by 13.8%.

The increase was not the same in the other areas tested. In grammar, for example, the mean out of 10 was 4.6 (45.6%). After taking the language skills classes, the grades raised by a mere 5.6%. On the other hand, the students scored poorly in both the punctuation and vocabulary questions; however, the increase of grades in the vocabulary section was higher than the punctuation. The average of the punctuation exam was 28% which increased by 2% only by the end of the term. The students scored an average of 37.4% in the vocabulary section of the entrance exam before enrollment, yet after taking the extensive language course their grades increased positively by 8.6%. Figure 1 compares the results of both the vocabulary and punctuation sections.

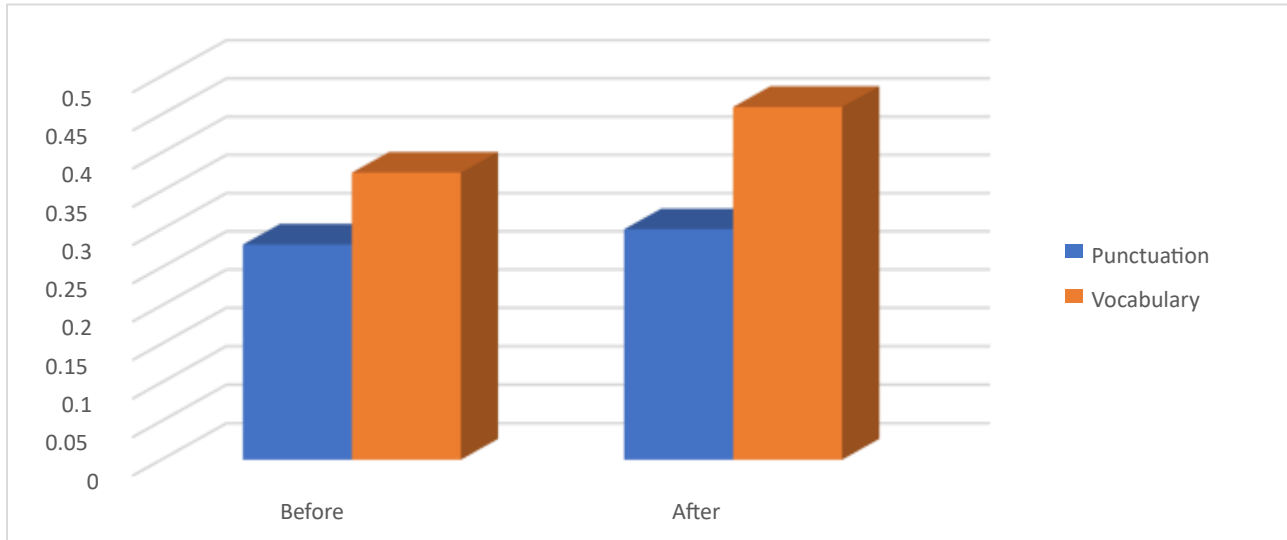


Figure 1 punctuation and vocabulary grades

The results have shown that the students have improved in general after the completion of the extensive language course. The average percentage of the total grade before entering the English language program was 35.6%. After completing the language skills courses, the average mean became 50%, which is a significant rise.

Table 1. Below reflect the mean percentages before and after taking the reading class.

	Comprehension	Grammar	Punctuation	Vocabulary	Total
Grades before entrance	39.2	45.6%	28%	37.4%	35.6%
Grades after course	53%	51%	30%	46%	50%

Further analysis of the grades through a T-test of the total scores before and after taking the language skills courses has reflected that the major increase appeared in the tests of students who scored less

than 50% in the entrance exam. The higher the grade of the entrance exam was, the less increase was found in the test taken after the completion of the course.

To understand the positive statistical change in grades, the researchers decided to gather the students' perception of what they found most useful during their first college course. The students were given a questionnaire with 5 open-ended questions that asked the students about their opinion on what they felt was the most useful course of the three courses? What learning strategies overlapped between the courses? what they felt was most useful in these classes? what part was least understandable/clear of the language classes? And what students would like to improve?

37 students answered the open-ended questions, and all the participating students had the three language skills courses as part of the English language program. Most students did not feel that the conversation course overlapped with their writing or reading courses as it depended mainly on presentations and PowerPoints. The students did not see the connection between the conversation course and the other courses in the program, although the syllabus contained description, process analysis and chronological order. On the other hand, 23 students believed that the writing course overlapped with the reading course in terms of punctuation and grammar only. Some students added that their punctuation was corrected throughout the writing class just as the case of the reading class. Most students said that the reading comprehension techniques—previewing, skimming, scanning, and summarizing—were the most beneficial aspect of the reading classes. According to seven pupils, the course was too brief for them to fully comprehend all of its prerequisites. Five students thought summarizing should not be included in the reading lesson since it required extensive writing abilities. 19 students felt that the more they read in class and on their own time for homework, the better they understood English texts than they had before enrolling in the English Department. The lack of emphasis on punctuation in class was highlighted by seven students. They continued by saying that they did not believe punctuation needed to be emphasized because they did not perceive how it altered meaning. Majority of students stated that they have started reading more since they have taken the reading class to be able to read more quickly.

As for what the students wanted to change in the language skills classes, 80% of the students did not appreciate summarizing as they felt it was part of the writing class. Most students felt that summarizing was very challenging as opposed to scanning and skimming and understanding the vocabulary. The student added that while comprehension skills became easier over time, punctuation was still very challenging until the end of the term. Many students believed that there should be another conversation class, as they felt that one class was not enough to improve their English-speaking proficiency. Two students commented that they do not understand the importance of having to learn about punctuation and editing in class. It seemed from their comment that they have not understood till the end of the term the reason they were studying punctuation in both the writing and reading class.

Finally, when the students were asked what they would like to improve in their reading class, nine students believed that the course was too short, and that they didn't have enough time to learn all the skills required. Seven students believed that the reading class should contain more timed reading practices as it was their favorite method of learning reading skills. While 3 students suggested reading novels as part of the course work, 4 students stated that they were overwhelmed by homework and practices; they suggested less homework would be given to give students time to comprehend the skill and not only answer for the sake of getting grades. The rest of the students (9 students) believed there was nothing to change in the courses' syllabus and application. While majority of the students felt that the reading class was the most useful class of the three classes, they also stated that the conversation class was the easiest.

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

Intensive programs for ESL students have been a topic of discussion among researchers, educators, and policymakers alike. In this paper, we tried to assess the intensive program offered to the students who enroll in the English Department, at the College of Basic Education in Kuwait. For the researchers, assessment of the program meant exploring its benefits, identifying the challenges that come with them, and recommending better practices that can be implemented to ensure its success. The results of the current study clearly showed that the three English language courses were quite useful and very effective with a variety of improvement. Hence, the answer to the first research question RQ1 was fulfilled, and this finding is consistent with Netten and Germain, 2004, Spada and Lightbown, 1994. In addition, students showed a significant improvement in language comprehension after the extensive language course (RQ2). Therefore, students responded positively to the intensive course as in Martin and Culvar 2007; Bidard and Thomas 2010. So, the study has shown that the program has several benefits for ES students who are admitted to the English Department, College of Basic Education. Firstly, the program has provided the students with more exposure to the language, which helped to improve their fluency, comprehension and speaking skills. In other words, it has accelerated their learning by providing them with more hours of instruction, individualized attention, and additional support. Secondly, the program has offered students more opportunities to improve their language skills, which, to some extent, increased their confidence and motivation. Finally, the results showed that the program provided a more structured and supportive learning environment, which helped to address the specific needs of the students.

However, while the benefits of the program are obvious, these benefits also came with challenges. Concerning the third research question RQ3, which is related to the acquisition of grammatical and structural knowledge, students showed a slight increase in their performance after the intensive course, yet, this performance reflected their improvement to an extent. In this case, it could be argued that the degree of time intensity of language courses on adult students was crucially involved (Serrano & Munaz 2007). Being intensive, and thus demanding, the program can lead to burnout and stress for students. This is seen more clearly in the participants' responses to the questionnaire. One group

believed that one conversation course was not enough and asked for another one. Another group saw that the whole program was too time-compressed, which did not help them to grasp some of the basic contents of the three courses. A third group complained that due to the compression of the program they were more than often overwhelmed by the homework and assignments. Concerning grammar and punctuation, these areas need more individualized attention, which the program, for reasons that go beyond the scope of the study, could not provide. We can speculate that this is because the teacher-student ratio was too high due to the class size, which prevented students from understanding grammar and punctuation better. A different view is that teachers were not properly informed on the most effective teaching techniques and approaches to employ while instructing students in these subjects. Here, we can recommend that additional research be done to evaluate these aspects of the program that the current study neutralized.

Regarding RQ4 (Did the students' vocabulary deduction skills improve after being exposed to multiple reading tasks?), results showed that students reported a positive outcome after exposure to the intensive course which is consistent with Grant, 2001, Burton & Nesbit 2020. However, the improvement was not as high as in the area of comprehension, even though both areas go hand in hand. That is to say, enhancing the students' comprehension requires enhancing their vocabulary reservoir. Again, our conjecture here is that the teachers, due to the intensity of the program, could not include a range of activities and materials that would cater for this area. We recommend that further research be conducted to investigate the reasons for such a shortage.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, the study is consistent with other studies that support efficacy of intensive programs. However, to avoid the pitfalls of the program, enhance its efficacy, and, thus, ensure its success, it is important to provide a more efficient implementation. Firstly, it is necessary to align the curriculum of the program with its objectives, which would help in providing a more integrative approach to teaching language skills. Secondly, it is important that the program should provide a range of activities and materials that meet the learning needs of the students. Thirdly, it is important to provide students with regular and timely feedback on their progress. Finally, as assessment is an ongoing process, it is necessary that the program designers subject the program to a periodic evaluation in order to enhance its efficacy and ensure its success. Further study is recommended on a bigger sample of students to assure results found in this study. It is believed that this study would help EFL classes design and teaching.

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