

The Effects of Extensive Reading on Learners' Reading Ability Development

Samuel P-H Sheu *

ABSTRACT

This paper reported two studies on the effect of an extensive reading program (ERP) on the reading development and learning attitudes of Taiwanese 2nd-year junior high school students. In each study, two ERP groups using graded readers (GR) and books for native English speaking children (BNESC) respectively, and one control group receiving grammar-based instruction, were involved. The results showed that when the reading time was limited and only reading was involved in the experiment, the reading speed of the three groups was improved, but they performed differently in the language tests after the experiment, and also their attitudes became negative to English learning and reading. When the time was doubled and collaborative activities were included, the two ERP groups came out as clearly better to the control group in all aspects of language development, and also developed positive attitudes. This suggested that the longer the learners are immersed in a pleasurable and meaningful environment, the bigger the benefits they will receive. Implications are deduced for language policy in input-poor settings, and for such concepts as the use of L1 materials and supportive activities in the organization of ER programs.

**Key words : EFL reading, extensive reading, Graded readers, Books for
native English speaking children, reading development,
learning attitudes**

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Reading Ability Development

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Introduction

Extensive reading (ER) has been seen as an indispensable means of developing learners' reading ability and enriching their knowledge of the language and the world. Moreover, such an approach also allows students to practise strategies they learn in skill-based instruction and to experience authentic reading they will encounter in their daily lives. However, in Taiwan, not only has extensive reading been excluded from English teaching syllabuses, but it has also lacked recognition among English language teachers and English teaching circles. Instead, reading instruction at secondary level is still focused on a close study of vocabulary and grammar (known as the text-based intensive reading approach), despite the fact that this type of language lesson is not reading at all (Alderson & Urquhart, 1984; Robb & Susser, 1989). Lack of reading practice, therefore, has hampered secondary students' learning development and students have not developed an ability to read fluently outside the classroom. The aim of ER in helping students to become willing and able readers in the target language appears to be an appropriate option for supplementing the current teaching instruction. The question arises: 'Can an ER program be successfully implemented at secondary schools in Taiwan for improving the current learning and teaching situation?'

Extensive Reading

In the 1960's, Michael West, when he was creating supplementary readers, referred to the aim of reading extensively as "to confer greater facility in the use of the vocabulary already gained, to give the child a sense of achievement and a taste of the pleasure to be derived from his accomplishment" (1955, p.45). Then, Bright and McGregor (1977) defined extensive reading as reading a quantity of SL/FL materials

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over a certain length of time. After that, a considerable amount of literature and research has been devoted to amplifying its meaning and use, and among them, Davis (1995) summed up the notion of extensive reading: "pupils are given the time, encouragement and materials to read pleasurably, at their own level, as many books as they can, without the pressures of testing or marks" (p. 329).

In short, the important characteristics in an ER program are (Bamford, 1984; Bright & McGregor, 1977; Day & Bamford, 1998; Hedge, 2000):

- (1) to access a variety of interesting materials;
- (2) to read a large quantity of printed materials;
- (3) to have freedom to choose or change books;
- (4) to read at one's own pace for pleasure or information;
- (5) to create a tension-free and enjoyable environment;
- (6) to give opportunity to experience real-life reading.

The potential of ER is based on the concept that by exposing students to an input-rich and enjoyable environment, their knowledge of language will increase and their eagerness to learn will develop naturally (Hedge, 1985). That is, a large amount of reading practice contributes to English language acquisition, interesting materials stimulate motivation to read, and freedom in choice of books gives control of learning over to learners. Recent research has consistently provided evidence for the effects of extensive reading on language learning at different ages and in many ESL/EFL settings. The reported benefits are associated with all aspects of English learning: reading comprehension and speed (Bell, 2001; Davis, 1995; Elley, 1991; Hafiz & Tudor, 1989; Krashen, 1993; Lai, 1993; Nation, 1997); positive attitudes (Constinito, 1995; Dupuy et al., 1996); vocabulary acquisition (Cho & Krashen, 1994; Coady, 1997; Nation, 1997); grammar (Elley, 1991; Elley & Mangubhai, 1983; Tudor & Hafiz, 1989); reading habit (Camiciottoli, 2001); reading strategy (Hayashi, 1999); listening and speaking (Cho & Krashen, 1994); writing (Janopoulos, 1986; Lai, 1993; Mason & Krashen, 1997; Tsang, 1996).

The findings of previous research demonstrate the effect of ER on learners' language development and attitudes toward learning. However, such evidence should also be taken into account in the book selection. Graded readers written under structure and information control are the main materials in most studies on ESL/EFL ER, and

have been reported as successful in developing learners' language proficiency. However, books for native learners containing a variety of interesting stories should also be able to capture ESL/EFL learners' interests via a careful selection. As Aebersold and Field (1997) suggest, such books should be included in any circumstance and situation. With all the same intentions as ESL/EFL graded readers, they provide similar important factors – "entertainment, information, learning to read, and becoming hooked on books" (Day & Bamford 1998, p. 61). In fact, research as yet has not investigated the effects of books for native learners on ESL/EFL learners' language learning, and thus, it is pertinent to address this issue for expanding resources for ER programs.

Study One: Extensive Reading Program

Research Questions

The present study focused on the effects of ER on Taiwanese junior high students' language and attitude development, compared with the current skill-based instruction. It aimed at investigating the following questions:

1. Will the students in the two experimental groups perform differently in the language and reading speed tests from those in the current instruction? If so, in what aspect?
2. Will the students in the two experimental groups develop different attitudes toward learning English and reading from those in the current instruction?

Method

Subjects

During 2001, 3 classes of 2nd-year students at I-Jea Junior High School in Kaohsiung County, Taiwan, participated in the study. They were all native speakers of Chinese, aged 13-14 years old, and have had a year of learning English as a foreign language in their secondary education. That is, their English proficiency was at beginning level and they have experienced reading texts containing approximately 100

words in the textbook in which texts are constructed linguistically for second language learners.

Procedure

The 3 classes were divided into two experimental classes and one control class. The two experimental classes were devised to be exposed to two different inputs: one reading graded readers (GR), and the other reading books for native English speaking children (BNESC). The subjects in the two experimental classes were free to choose any book they would like to read or to change it for a new one if they wished, and dictionaries were made available. In the control group, the subjects were asked to do the exercises in the textbook or in the self-study reference and practice books. One 45-minute lesson per week was specifically allocated for the three classes over 4 months.

The book selection was carried out through a two-stage process. First, based on a questionnaire survey on reading preferences completed by 763 junior high school students in Taiwan (Sheu, 2001), the criteria for book selection was the appropriate level of language (i.e. beginning level) and attractiveness of materials (e.g. colourful illustration and artwork). Then, graded readers at beginners' level, level 1 or stage 1, were chosen. However, books for L1 teenagers were excluded because the level of the language was too difficult for the students and the lack of colourful illustrations also made them unattractive. Instead, books of colourful appearance for native English children, assessed by Fry's Graph (1977) as being at the 3rd grade level to the selected graded readers, were chosen. Second, a sample collection of 26 GR and 31 BNESC was given to two different 2nd-year classes for assessing their attractiveness. The results showed that students rated the selected books at or above the satisfactory level and showed interest in reading them. Then a class library of 57 GR and 55 BNESC was set up.

Data

In order to answer the research questions, all three groups were given the questionnaires and the tests before and after the experiment. The questionnaires were aimed at tracing the development of students' attitudes toward learning English and reading and their reactions to the experiment. In the language proficiency test, the students' knowledge of vocabulary and grammar, and reading comprehension were

measured; a modified version of the Cambridge Key English Test (KET) was selected and divided into pre- and post-test (a total number of 20 questions in each test). To measure reading speed, Nuttall's (1996) assessment was conducted before and after the experiment, and six texts in *'New Year Around the World'* (2000, Oxford University Press) were selected for the reading speed tests.

A reading record was also used for students to write their reasons for choosing books (before reading), time spent on reading and pages read each time (during reading), and reflections on the stories and satisfaction with their choices (after completing reading a book). Although some collaborative activities, such as group discussion, could be used for motivating learners, none of them was included in this study. The intention was to see whether reading books for interest only has any positive impact on students' attitudes toward learning English and reading.

Results

In order to establish the comparability of the three groups, one-way ANOVA was conducted, and the analysis confirmed that there was no significant difference between the three groups in the average score of the pre-test ($F:2.554$, $df_1=2$, $df_2=87$, n.s.). T-test results of the language proficiency and reading speed tests are presented in Table 1. In the vocabulary test, the GR group achieved a remarkable improvement in the post-test, and this change was statistically significant ($t=3.541^{**}$, $p<.005$). However, the scores of the BNESC and control groups were lower than when they started and the drops were significant ($t=-4.680^{**}$, $p<.005$). It can be seen that the GR group managed to increase their scores slightly, while no improvement was found in the BNESC group and the scores in the control group in the post-test were lower. No statistical significance can be observed in the results. The table also shows a significant increase in the mean score of the reading comprehension test after the treatment appears in the GR ($t=-2.378^*$, $p<.05$) and BNESC ($t=-2.448^*$, $p<.05$) groups, compared with a drop in the mean score in the control group. The reading speed of the three groups after the experiment was increased and interestingly, the improvement was significant, as is also shown in Table 1. This indicates that both types of treatments (extensive reading and normal reading instruction) are effective in developing learners' reading speed.

Table 1 Results of Pre- and Post-Language Proficiency Tests

	Mean (pre test - post test)	Gains	T-value
Vocabulary			
GR group	3.45 - 4.18	+ 0.73	3.541**
BNESC group	3.97 - 3.47	- 0.50	- 2.311*
Control group	3.24 - 1.81	- 1.43	- 4.680**
Grammar			
GR group	3.94 - 4.21	+ 0.27	.953
BNESC group	3.71 - 3.71	0	.000
Control group	3.14 - 2.67	- 0.47	- 1.096
Reading comprehension			
GR group	2.67 - 3.30	+ 0.63	2.378*
BNESC group	2.71 - 3.56	+ 0.85	2.448*
Control group	2.57 - 2.14	- 0.43	- 1.337
Reading speed			
GR group	59.7 - 95.8	+ 36.1	6.780**
BNESC group	98.6 - 136.0	+ 37.4	4.128**
Control group	85.2 - 118.6	+ 33.4	3.820**

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .005$

As to students' attitudes after the experiment, there was no significant difference between the three groups in their attitudes toward the treatment ($F:1.454$, $df_1=2$, $df_2=99$, n.s.). The T-test results of the students' attitudes toward learning English and reading before and after the experiment are shown in Table 2. It shows no change in students' attitudes toward learning English in the GR group, but the mean scores decreased significantly in the BNEC ($t=-3.369^{**}$, $p<.005$) and control ($t=-2.957^{**}$, $p<.005$) groups after the treatment. Surprisingly, the T-test results on subjects' attitudes toward reading also showed that the mean scores of the three groups decreased after the treatment. This means that no treatments had a positive effect on students' attitudes toward learning English and reading.

Table 2 T-test Results of Students' Attitudes Toward Learning English and Reading

	Mean (pre test - post test)	T-value	df
Attitudes toward learning English			
GR group	2.818 - 2.818	.000	64
BNESC group	2.853 - 2.324	-3.369**	66
Control group	2.455 - 1.939	-2.957**	64
Attitudes toward reading			
GR group	2.818 - 2.606	-1.381	64
BNESC group	2.853 - 2.529	-1.894	66
Control group	2.333 - 2.182	-.926	64

** $p < .005$

Discussion and Implications for Study Two

On the whole, this study showed that the treatments exhibited their strength in different aspects. The three methods were effective in increasing students' reading speed and the improvement was significant. Aiming at reading for meaning, the two experimental groups demonstrated the strengths of GR and BNESC in advancing learners' reading comprehension. However, the results also indicated that the former was clearly superior to the latter on the vocabulary test. The reason for this may lie on one of the important characteristics of graded readers: a careful control over vocabulary used in the texts. Although the BNESC contains a variety of vocabulary and grammatical rules, the students have not benefited from being exposed to such characteristics by means of a reading time of 45 minutes in average per week over 4 months. This raises a question about whether an increase of reading time would have different impact on students' language development.

In assessing students' language improvement, the number of questions given in each test should be taken into account. That is, the language tests consisted of only 20 questions in total as mentioned earlier. Although this study showed some differences between the three groups in the language tests, given the limited number of questions, we should be cautious about the extent to which the significance can be pinpointed. I should point out that, due to the availability of only 25 minutes for the assessment, it was decided to include 20 questions in the language tests. Obviously, the limited time and question items would have hampered the assessment. In order to unveil a genuine picture of students' achievement, including more question items in the language tests is a requisite in further research.

Since the students had not developed sufficient proficiency to allow them to read for meaning and pleasure, the students' report on reading difficulties (e.g. vocabulary and grammar rules) indicated that they applied the bottom-up decoding approach which they learned in normal English lessons to extensive reading. This might also have contributed to the negative development of their attitudes toward reading, and with this in mind, providing aids to learners to read in a manageable way is vital; otherwise, learners may stop reading or read without care if they find it difficult. This raises an important implication: further study should include training lessons about

equipping learners with essential strategies (e.g. guessing from the context) for extensive reading before the introduction to an ER program, so that they are able to use the strategies to cope with reading problems whenever and wherever necessary.

As mentioned in the method section, no collaborative activities were used in this study. The intention was to examine the effect of reading books for interest only on students' attitudes development. However, the students were asked to write a reading record individually for keeping their reading process and their reflections on the books they read. The results showed that although the books were interesting to the students and the students were happy to be involved in the ER program, neither their views on learning English, nor their attitudes toward reading were improved. Since it has been suggested that collaborative activities could stir up students' attitudes (Jacobs et al., 1997), it is worth investigating whether adopting such activities would have a positive influence on students' feelings about learning English.

Study Two: Extensive Reading With Encouraging Activities

The Modified Program

Based on the implications made from the findings of Study One, the extensive reading experiment was modified and then carried out in Kan-Do Junior High School in Taipei city, Taiwan, from February to June in 2002. For the two experimental groups, the modifications were that (1) an introductory lesson and a strategy training lesson were carried out at the beginning of the experiment, and (2) three collaborative activities were included: a wall-chart for showing students' reading progress, students' group discussions for sharing their reading experience, and teachers' reports for demonstrating their participation and for encouraging students to read. The activity selection was based on a questionnaire survey on what activities would motivate students (Sheu, 2001). Two changes were also made in the three groups: (1) two 45-minute lessons per week were allocated for the experiment over 4 months, and (2) pre- and post-tests were integrated into one test (40 questions in total), and conducted before and after the program.

Research Questions

Based on the implications deduced from Study One, the experiment was modified for ascertaining the extent to which the ER program could be effective on students' learning process. The research questions remained the same in examining learners' performance on the language tests and their attitude changes as in Study One, but the focus was shifted to the differences between this study and the previous one in order to probe the causes.

Results

One-way ANOVA was conducted for measuring the comparability of the three groups. The result was confirmed that there was no significant difference among the three groups in the pre-test scores ($F: .759$, $df_1=2$, $df_2=38$, n.s.). Table 3 presents the T-test results of the language proficiency and reading speed tests. After 4 months, the two experimental groups gained and achieved a statistically significant level of improvement in all the three language tests, especially in the vocabulary test, but the degree of significance was different in the other two tests. While GR group ($t=3.674^{**}$, $p<.005$) performed better in the grammar test, BNESC group ($t=5.838^{**}$, $p<.005$) did better in the reading comprehension test. However, for the control group, the results showed weaker performance on the grammar test, and there was a statistical significance in the vocabulary test ($t=2.856^*$, $p<.05$). As can be also seen in Table 3, the students' reading speed increased significantly after the experiment. The improvement of the two experimental groups was also confirmed by the record of the students' reading journal. That is, at the end of the experiment, the students spent less time but read more pages.

With regard to students' attitudes toward the treatment, there is no statistically significant difference between the three groups ($F: 2.628$, $df_1=1$, $df_2=48$, n.s.). The T-test results in Table 4 shows that in the two experimental groups, the students' attitudes toward learning English and reading after the experiment became significantly positive. However, such positive development did not appear in the control group.

Table 3 T-test Results of Pre- and Post-Language Proficiency Tests

	Mean (pre test - post test)	Gains	T-value
Vocabulary			
GR group	3.60 - 7.33	+ 3.73	3.336**
BNESC group	3.82 - 6.00	+ 2.18	4.500**
Control group	4.92 - 8.31	+ 3.39	2.856*
Grammar			
GR group	6.40 - 8.80	+ 2.40	3.674**
BNESC group	7.82 - 9.45	+ 1.63	3.317*
Control group	7.54 - 7.23	- 0.31	- .395
Reading comprehension			
GR group	5.20 - 7.33	+ 2.13	2.978*
BNESC group	8.00 - 10.00	+ 2.00	5.838**
Control group	5.69 - 6.15	+ 0.46	.507
Reading speed			
GR group	51.1 - 77.8	+ 26.7	6.093**
BNESC group	62.5 - 91.1	+ 28.6	4.100**
Control group	62.3 - 87.1	+ 24.8	3.212*

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .005$

Table 4 T-test Results of Students' Attitudes Toward Learning English and Reading

	Mean (pre test - post test)	T-value	df
Attitudes toward learning English			
GR group	2.778 - 3.222	2.406*	17
BNESC group	2.846 - 3.231	2.739*	12
Control group	3.133 - 3.133	.000	14
Attitudes toward reading			
GR group	2.611 - 3.222	3.716**	17
BNESC group	2.462 - 2.846	2.739*	12
Control group	2.667 - 2.533	- .807	14

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .005$

Discussion and Implications

It is recognised that ESL/EFL learners benefit from reading extensively, with its access to written English and self-controlled and pressure-free environment, compared with the traditional grammar/translation-based instruction (as a form of intensive reading, IR). The evidence of the studies reported in this paper was consistent with this line. It is clear that learners who experienced reading a wide range of interesting L1

materials performed ahead of those who received skill-study instruction in the language proficiency tests. It also showed that the former approach appeared to be more effective than the latter in developing learners' positive attitudes. The educational authorities who focus mainly on one single teaching approach like that of Taiwan should consider open-mindedly what benefits would accrue from an extensive reading program, with its access to written English and self-controlled and pressure-free environment. At least they should recommend teachers to encourage their learners to read extensively outside the classroom. If intensive and extensive reading can be adopted in English learning, learners are more likely to benefit from items mentioned in tables 3 & 4 and can find out the treasure of reading for themselves.

It is generally believed that in extensive reading programs, giving learners freedom of choice of books appears to have a positive impact on learners' attitudes toward reading and learning English. However, the results of Study One indicated that simply giving learners interesting books to read was insufficient to make such an impact. By contrast, when other collaborative activities were used as in Study Two, learners' attitudes were more likely to become positive. Certainly, the evidence of the studies supports the desirability of employing collaborative activities, so as to motivate students. A variety of options is available to teachers to adopt in their ER programs, such as creating reading materials (Davidson et al., 1997), discussion (Constantino, 1995; Elley, 1991; Elley & Mangubhai, 1983), role play or retelling (Elley & Mangubhai, 1983; Lituana et al., 1999), wall-chart (Lai, 1993), and playing games (Elley, 1991; Lai, 1993). We as teachers should be aware of their benefits and apply them wherever is appropriate.

The different outcomes of learners' language development in the two studies might result from the amount of time allocated for learners to read. In Study One, students were given a 45-minute lesson per week to read L2 books, and in this aspect, the GR group came out as clearly superior to the BNESC group in developing learners' language proficiency. However, when the amount of time has doubled, such superiority no longer existed. Instead, while the two types of materials demonstrated their effectiveness in vocabulary acquisition, they functioned differently on other aspects of language learning. That is, GR advanced learners' knowledge of

grammatical rules, but BNESC strengthened their reading comprehension. On the basis of the results, due attention should be paid to the connection between the availability of time for an ER program and the effect of different materials. If individual teachers want to show the effectiveness of ER to their authorities for funding or support, a combination of different materials would offer an ideal resource.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that an ER program creates access for learners to a variety of English materials in a reading-input-poor setting like that of Taiwan, and provides a learning method which is different from the one in the current English lessons. We as teachers should consider the merits of exposing students to a wide range of interesting English materials in developing learners' English language proficiency in the early stage of learning to read, and be aware of the rich variety and the benefits of different types of materials available to us, and then use them wherever and whenever is appropriate.

It has been argued that for ESL/EFL beginners, insufficient language proficiency would increase difficulties and reduce confidence in reading, and consequently, hamper their learning. However, the studies indicate that if learners are given the choice of reading materials which are interesting and linguistically appropriate to them, they will read with enthusiasm and their English proficiency will improve. If the reading time and their capability to use strategies increase, they will improve more. If other adequate collaborative activities are also employed, the love for learning is more likely to develop. Adding these together, the more elements involved in the success of ER on ESL/EFL learning are met in an ER program, the more benefits our students are likely to get in terms of language development, love for reading and life-long habit.

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廣泛閱讀對學習者 閱讀能力發展之成效

許炳煌*

摘 要

本論文概述二個以國中生為研究對象的廣泛閱讀教學研究，旨在探討參與廣泛閱讀教學後，學生閱讀能力與學習態度之發展。每個研究中，參與的學生分為閱讀為英語學習者所寫的英文讀本和閱讀為英語為母語的兒童所寫的英文書兩組實驗組及一組以文法教學為主的對照組。研究結果發現當廣泛閱讀時間不足而學生只參與閱讀活動時，閱讀為英語學習者所寫的英文讀本的效果比閱讀為英語為母語的兒童所寫的英文書好，但是兩組的學習態度卻未改善。另一方面，當閱讀時間延長並且採用學生互助活動時，實驗組在閱讀能力評量及學習態度的表現遠超過對照組。這些結果皆旨向學生沉浸在有樂趣與有含意的閱讀環境下，學生閱讀能力的發展越大。本研究希冀推展廣泛閱讀教學，為英語為母語的兒童所寫的英文書和互助活動。

關鍵詞：英語閱讀，廣泛閱讀，為英語學習者所寫的英文讀本，為英語為母語的兒童所寫的英文書，閱讀能力，學習態度

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