



The Reading Matrix

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EFL LEARNERS' RESPONSES TO EXTENSIVE READING: SURVEY AND PEDAGOGICAL APPLICATIONS

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Abstract

This study investigated the responses of two groups (n=85) of EFL learners toward their experience with extensive reading in a three-month EFL college reading class in which two novels (narrative) and fourteen expository texts were the main reading text. Using a three-part survey questionnaire and the follow-up interviews, this study attempted to examine (1) the factors attributed to a successful extensive reading program, and (2) the EFL readers' preferences regarding the classroom activities for reading extensively. The analysis of frequency of responses indicated that no single factor was chosen by the students and there was a discrepancy between learners with different proficiency levels and learning backgrounds. Some pedagogical implications and limitations were also discussed.

Background of this Study

Extensive reading (ER) has for many years been recognized as the most successful approach in second /foreign language education. It is defined as reading in relatively large amount of texts compared with what is called intensive reading, which usually involves a slower reading of a small amount of materials and often with translation exercises. Extensive reading program is administered "to develop good reading habits, to build up knowledge of vocabulary and structure, and to encourage a liking for reading" (Richard & Schmidt, 2002: 193-194).

A considerable amount of research investigating the benefits of ER in L1/L2 context has shown that learners benefit in a range of language uses and language knowledge. ER has been shown to be effective in increasing reading speed and comprehension (Bell, 2001; Manson & Krashen, 1997). A number of studies have also shown that ER appears to lead to substantial vocabulary learning and learners show their development in spelling and vocabulary knowledge (Nation, 1997; Pigada &

Schmitt, 2006; Robb & Sussner, 1989). The measures of language use in Elley's (1991) study indicated the learners' dramatic improvement in writing two years after the conducting the book flood. Tsang (1996) also found positive results of using simplified reading for learners' writing performance. ER has also reported to enhance learners' affective domain, such as motivation and attitude to read (Cho & Krashen, 1994; Leung, 2002; Manson & Krashen, 1997).

Despite the above-mentioned evidence supporting ER, implementation of the extensive reading program has been less than a complete success. Some researchers indicated such problem as lack of reading materials and inadequate preparation of teachers (as cited in Jacobs, 2002). Others suggested that the key impediment to successful ER implementation lies in a teacher-centered view of reading instruction (Day & Bamford, 1997, as cited in Jacobs, 2002). Elley (1991, pp. 378-9) attributes the success to five factors: 1.) extensive input of meaning print; 2.) Incidental learning; 3.) The integration of oral and written activity; 4.) Focus on meaning rather than form; 5.) High intrinsic motivation. However, little attention has been paid to EFL learners' concerns and attitude pertaining to their own learning.

As an educator in an EFL learning context, I have been bothered by what the adequate amount of reading is for an extensive program and how to administer an effective reading program for my students. I have also been frustrated by the learners' moans and groans and the disappointing results of implementing an extensive reading program without considering what the learners like or dislike. This study was thus motivated by such a failure experience and aimed to investigate the learners' perspectives about reading extensively. The most important feature of the study is that it focused on the experience of those students who have actually engaged in extensive reading over an extended period. The present study took a different approach by investigating EFL learners' perspective and then accordingly providing classroom applications for teaching while the previous studies on extensive reading mainly were focused on its effects on learners' development. Specifically, the research questions were addressed as follows:

1. What is the EFL readers' perspective concerning the factors attributed to a successful extensive reading program?
2. What are the EFL college readers' preferences regarding the classroom activities for reading extensively?

Method

Participants

The participants were 85 Taiwanese technical university students (51 at day program; 34 at night program). They were English-majors who enrolled in their first

year reading class. The students at the day program were full-time students; approximately half of them had academic background in language and half in business before enrolling in the reading program in which two novels for teenagers in ESL context and fourteen expository texts from Neil Andersen's (2002) *ACTIVE* (book III) were the main reading text. The students at the night program were part-time students and have less time for studying in comparison with those at the day program.

Instruments and Data Collection Procedures

A survey (Appendix A) used in this study consisted of three parts. Part one probes the students' perspectives on factors attributed to a successful extensive reading program. The identified factors includes text difficulty (i.e. vocabulary, syntactic structure), materials selection (i.e. genres), self-selecting reading materials, peer cooperation (i.e. small group work, discussion, and presentation), teacher's roles (i.e. explanations), and class activities (i.e. summary, Q&A). Part two asks about the learners' preference for the classroom activities. This section contains items of classroom activities the students practiced in class, including summary writing, Q & A, personal reflections, oral presentation, student-student cooperation, teacher-student conference, and on-line sharing. For part one and two, the students were asked to rank the list of factors and activities from the most influential / like to least / like. Part three contains three open-ended questions in which the students described their difficulties (if any) when reading extensively and elaborated more on why they ranked certain item as the top three choices.

The data were analyzed by looking into the frequency of responses on each item and the results were presented in percentages. The items that received the highest percentages of response in the top three ranking were identified, followed by the others.

Results

Q1: Students' Responses on Factors Influencing an Extensive Reading Program:

Table I shows the frequency of responses in percentages. As shown in Table 1, the students did not concur on a single item as the most influential factor for a successful extensive program; instead, each item received different percentage of ranking as number one factor. Nevertheless, the factors that received the highest percentages of responses in the top three rankings were:

- Materials selection on genres (i.e. romantic, detective, mysterious, etc..) 41.17%
- Text difficulties in vocabulary and syntactic structures 25.88%

- Peer cooperation on discussions and presentation 22.35%

Table 1. *Percentages of Students Responses on Factors Influencing an Extensive Reading Program (%)*

| Rank \ Factors | Text Difficulties | Materials Selection | Self-Selecting Reading Materials | Peer Cooperation | Teacher's Roles | Classroom Activities |
|----------------|-------------------|---------------------|----------------------------------|------------------|-----------------|----------------------|
| 1. | 12.94 | 41.17 | 23.5 | 3.52 | 15.29 | 8.23 |
| 2. | 25.88 | 29.41 ¹ | 14.11 | 9.40 | 10.58 | 10.58 |
| 3. | 20 | 8.2 | 10.58 | 22.35 | 18.82 | 14.11 |
| 4. | 7 | 8.2 | 15.29 | 17.67 | 12.94 | 20 |
| 5. | 10.58 | 5.88 | 16.47 | 16.47 | 14.11 | 9.4 |
| 6. | 16.47 | 4.7 | 10.58 | 16.47 | 9.4 | 25.88 |

Note. If the item (e.g. “materials selection”) was identified as first on the top one ranking, and appeared to be first again on the second ranking, the first position was replaced by the other with the second highest percentages of response (e.g. “text difficulties”). This analysis was applicable to items in Table 3.

Following the top three factors were those ranked as the least influential: classroom activities, self-selecting reading materials, then teacher’s roles. Table 1 reveals the scattered choices of what was ranked as the fourth, the fifth, and the sixth influential factors. Indeed, a conflict ranking was observed, with an overlapping choice for peer cooperation and classroom activities. While a majority of students ranked peer cooperation as the third, it also received the highest percentage on the fifth rank. The same case was also found in the item of classroom activities.

The contradictory results from the last three items led to a further analysis of the differences between the two subject groups--the students at the day and night programs. The results were presented in Table 2. As shown in Table 2, a great different result between the two different subject groups was found in the items such as self-selecting reading materials, peer cooperation, teacher’s roles and classroom activities.

While the students at the day program ranked “self-selecting reading materials” as the top influential factor (day 27.45% v.s. night 17.64; day 13.72% v.s. night 5.88%), those at the night program ranked it as a least important one (day 11.76% v.s. night 20.58%; day 9.88% v.s. night 26.47%). Whereas 13.72 percentages of day program students chose “peer cooperation” as the second influential factor, only 2.94 percentages of their counterparts did so. There was a great deal of discrepancy concerning “peer cooperation” between the two groups of students for the third and fourth rankings (15.68% v.s. 32.35%; 9.80% v.s. 29.41%). Moreover, day program students relied less on teacher’s roles for reading program than those at the night program (9.80% v.s. 23.52% for the top one; 13.72% v.s. 2.94% for the last). The

students at the day program indicated “classroom activities” to be important (for the top three 11.76% v.s. 2.94%; 11.76% v.s.8.82%; 19.60% v.s.5.88%), whereas those at the night program put this factor at the last (15.68 % v.s.29.47%; 5.88 % v.s.14.71%; 13.72% v.s. 44.11%).

Table 2. *Comparisons of Differences between Day and Nigh Programs on Responses to Factors Influencing Extensive Reading Program (%)*

| Factors Rank | Text Difficulties | Materials Selection | Self-Selecting Reading Materials | Peer Cooperation | Teacher's Roles | Classroom Activities |
|-----------------|-------------------|---------------------|----------------------------------|------------------|-----------------|----------------------|
| 1. Day | 13.72 | 41.17 | 27.45 | 3.92 | 9.80 | 11.76 |
| Night | 11.76 | 41.17 | 17.64 | 2.94 | 23.52 | 2.94 |
| 2. Day | 23.52 | 29.41 | 13.72 | 13.72 | 9.80 | 11.76 |
| Night | 29.41 | 29.41 | 14.71 | 2.94 | 11.76 | 8.82 |
| 3. Day | 19.60 | 9.80 | 13.72 | 15.68 | 9.8. | 19.60 |
| Night | 20.58 | 5.88 | 5.88 | 32.35 | 32.35 | 5.88 |
| 4. Day | 7.84 | 9.80 | 11.76 | 9.80 | 11.76 | 15.68 |
| Night | 5.88 | 5.88 | 20.58 | 29.41 | 14.51 | 29.47 |
| 5. Day | 9.80 | 0 | 9.88 | 15.68 | 13.72 | 5.88 |
| Night | 11.76 | 5.88 | 26.47 | 17.64 | 14.71 | 14.71 |
| 6. Day | 7.84 | 5.88 | 9.80 | 15.63 | 13.72 | 13.72 |
| Night | 20.58 | 2.94 | 11.76 | 17.64 | 2.94 | 44.11 |

Q2: Students Responses on Classroom Activities for An Intensive Reading Program

Table 3 shows the frequency of responses on classroom activities in percentages. As shown in Table 3, no single activity was chosen by a majority of students as the only preference; instead, each item received different percentage of ranking as a preferred activity. Nevertheless, the activities that received the highest percentages of choices in the top three rankings were:

- Peer cooperation on group discussions and presentations 24.70%
- Oral presentation 15.29%; Teacher-student conference 15.29%
- Personal reflection 15.23%

The following preferred activities were Q & A 16.47% (Questions & Answers), summary 9.41%, and on-line sharing 18.82%.

The scattered choices of preferred activities led to further analysis of the differences between the two different subject groups, namely day program and night program. As shown in Table 4, a great different result between the two different

subject groups was found in the items such as summary, oral presentation, peer cooperation, and teacher-students conference. For “peer cooperation,” more day school students chose it as the top preference than their counterparts (27.45% v.s. 20.58%; 29.41% v.s. 23.53%) although the difference was slight. A much more obvious discrepancy was that while a majority of students at the day program ranked “oral presentations” as the top preference, those at the night program ranked it less favorably (*Rank 1 and 2*: day 32.59% v.s. night 0%; day 19.60% v.s. night 8.82%; *Rank 5 and 6*: day 7.84% v.s. night 14.70 %; day 0% v.s. night 23.53%). Another distinctive difference was found in “teacher-student conference.” Whereas a few day program students ranked “teacher-student conference” as the top two choices, those at the night school tended to rely on this activity working together with their teacher (*Rank 1 and 2*: day 5.88% v.s. night 23.52%; day 11.76% v.s. night 20.58%). Moreover, there was also a great deal of discrepancy between the two groups of students concerning “summary” as a classroom activity. More students at the night program ranked “summary” as the top favorably than six other activities (*Rank 1*: day 15.68% v.s. night 32.35%)

Table 3. *Percentages of Students Responses on Classroom Activities for Extensive Reading Program (%)*

| Activities Rank | Summary | Q&A | Personal Reflections | Oral Presentations | Peer Cooperation | Teacher-student Conference | On-line Sharing |
|--------------------|-------------------|-------|-------------------------|-----------------------|---------------------|-------------------------------|--------------------|
| 1. | 22.35 | 14.12 | 5.88 | 21.18 | 24.70 | 12.94 | 9.41 |
| 2. | 10.59 | 10.59 | 8.23 | 15.29 | 27.05 | 15.29 | 5.88 |
| 3. | 11.76 | 5.88 | 15.23 | 8.23 | 15.29 | 18.82 | 14.11 |
| 4. | 8.23 | 16.47 | 10.59 | 9.41 | 4.70 | 12.94 | 8.23 |
| 5. | 8.23 | 15.29 | 10.59 | 8.23 | 5.88 | 11.76 | 7.05 |
| 6. | 9.41 ¹ | 10.59 | 18.82 | 10.59 | 4.70 | 8.82 | 8.23 |
| 7. | 20 | 5.88 | 10.59 | 9.41 | 3.52 | 1.18 | 18.82 |

Note. Please refer to Table 1 for analysis.

Results of Analysis of Students’ Responses from The Open-ended Questions

Seven students at night program and five students at day program didn’t answer the question. Five students at day program responded “ok” with the reading program. There were totally sixty-eight respondents for this open-ended question.

Table 4. *Comparisons of Differences between Day and Nigh Programs on Responses to Classroom Activities for Extensive Reading Program (%)*

| Activities Rank | Summary | Q&A | Personal Reflections | Oral Presentations | Peer Cooperation | Teacher-student Conference | On-line Sharing |
|-----------------|---------|-------|----------------------|--------------------|------------------|----------------------------|-----------------|
| 1. Day | 15.68 | 13.72 | 9.80 | 35.29 | 27.45 | 5.88 | 9.80 |
| Night | 32.35 | 14.70 | 0 | 0 | 20.58 | 23.52 | 8.82 |
| 2. Day | 11.76 | 7.84 | 5.88 | 19.60 | 29.41 | 11.76 | 5.88 |
| Night | 8.82 | 14.70 | 11.76 | 8.82 | 23.53 | 20.58 | 5.88 |
| 3. Day | 11.76 | 5.88 | 19.60 | 5.88 | 11.76 | 17.64 | 13.72 |
| Night | 11.76 | 5.88 | 8.82 | 11.76 | 20.58 | 20.58 | 14.70 |
| 4. Day | 5.88 | 17.64 | 11.76 | 7.84 | 3.92 | 13.70 | 5.88 |
| Night | 11.76 | 14.70 | 8.82 | 11.76 | 5.88 | 11.76 | 11.76 |
| 5. Day | 9.80 | 15.68 | 9.80 | 9.80 | 3.92 | 9.8 | 3.92 |
| Night | 5.88 | 14.70 | 11.76 | 5.88 | 8.82 | 14.70 | 11.76 |
| 6. Day | 7.84 | 11.76 | 13.72 | 7.84 | 3.92 | 5.88 | 9.80 |
| Night | 11.76 | 8.82 | 26.47 | 14.70 | 5.88 | 0 | 5.88 |
| 7. Day | 17.64 | 7.84 | 7.84 | 0 | 1.96 | 1.96 | 19.60 |
| Night | 23.53 | 2.94 | 14.70 | 23.53 | 5.88 | 0 | 17.64 |

The questions in the last part of survey asked about the difficulties the students had from the assigned reading. The analysis of data from the open-ended questions revealed the following themes: 1) too many difficulty words 68%; 2) overwhelming reading amount 34% (lack of time for reading 10%; 3) sentence complexity 13%; 4) no willingness to read long passages 13%; 5) being unable to find the main idea 9%; 6) poor grammatical competence 7%; 7) lack of writing ability 7%; 8) slow reading rate 6%; 9) less interest in reading materials 3%.

One of the most difficulties both the groups had in common was with words they encountered while reading. A great majority of students reported they had difficulties in dealing with unfamiliar words. Some others moaned about the great amount of unknown words in the reading text. Over thirty percentages of students groaned about the overwhelming amount of reading because they could not manage to finish the reading assignment per week. Among them, ten percentages of students reported their lack of time for reading. Some other minor difficulties resulted from the students' deficiency in linguistic competence (i.e. poor grammar knowledge and writing skills), as well as in reading habits (i.e. use of reading strategies, reading fluency).

Discussion

The participants' responses provided intriguing insights on the factors and classroom activities influencing the administration of an extensive reading program. The study suggests a variety of factors, rather than a single one, are necessary for an effective reading program. Most of the students at both programs ranked materials selection (i.e. genres) and text difficulties as the top two factors, as shown in Table 1. The response data from the question revealed the same opinions. It might be that the teacher did not adequately control text difficulty (Nation, 2001). It was believed by the teacher that this novel written for nine to thirteen teens in the western world was suitable for the EFL students at low intermediate level. Perhaps the level of the text difficulty was misinterpreted because there were too many difficulty words in the novel for the participants. Research (Laufer, 1992) indicates that at least 95% of the words should be known to the participants if they want to comprehend and thus learn from the text. Lack of appropriate extensive reading methods for novels might be another reason that hindered the learners' reading comprehension.

It was discouraging to observe that over 30% of the participants did not manage to finish reading the assigned chapters every week. The study discussed so far might have not been implemented under "extensive reading" conditions as suggested by Elley (1991)—appropriateness of difficulty and interest. In extensive reading program, students read relatively simpler materials because appropriateness of difficulty and interest are the guiding principles of book selections. However, for the sake of evaluation in a large-size class, in this study the students weren't allowed to select all the texts they wanted to read. The participants were given only text to read which might not have been interesting or motivating enough for them. As Day and Bamford (1998: 29) comment, "in the absence of interesting texts very little is possible." Thus, it is also important to give students a chance to select their texts. Each student has different preferences depending on their backgrounds, their level of maturity, and their L2 proficiency level.

The survey empirically supports the individuality of learning--that is, the learners are different; they have different perceptions and require different classroom activities. Consequently, teachers should be aware of the varying ability and needs of students when teaching different student groups (Rusciolelli, 1995). In the present study, the findings indicated that compared with their counterparts at the day program, the night school subjects tended to rely on teachers' assistance with less care with a chance to select their texts to read. Meanwhile, as shown in Table 2, they ranked less favorably on such factors as "peer cooperation" and "classroom activities." This may have something to do with their comparatively lower level of English proficiency, since it is most of NFU English teachers' common impression that students at the

night program have low commitment to studying and have lower English proficiency level.

The comparatively lower proficiency level and lack of time for studying might also be the reasons to explain why the night program students ranked “oral presentation” and “personal reflection” less favorably than their day school counterparts, as shown in Table 4. It seems that the night school students with lower proficiency had more resistance to the activities which require speaking ability to present what they thought in class. They showed their preference for “summary” because it was a “safe” activity which they could finish it at home, instead of presenting what they learned in English in class.

The reader’s reading attitudes and habits as well the teacher’s view of reading and learning might be other reasons that hinder the effect of reading intensively in EFL learning context. In this study, some students complained about the amount of reading and others revealed their difficulties in slow reading rate and poor comprehension ability, as shown in the findings from the open-ended questions. This might be caused by the fact that some students still dwelled in their old reading habit—read slowly and carefully. Although the benefits of extensive reading (i.e. linguistic development and improvement of positive attitude toward reading) have been proposed for decades, however, this article emphasizes the importance of understanding learners’ attitudes and nurturing positive attitudes to reading extensively as much as possible (Yamashita, 2004) in EFL learning context.

Conclusion, Pedagogical Implications, and Limitations

The present study examined EFL learners’ perceptions on the factors influencing an extensive reading program and their preferences concerning the classroom activities. In general, material selection was ranked as the top one factor and student-student cooperative learning as the most favorite activity. However, results further showed that no single factor was chosen by the students and there was a discrepancy between learners with different proficiency levels and learning backgrounds. Different subject groups showed different perspectives and preferences for the influential factors and classroom activities. The study empirically supported the individuality of learning--that is, learners are different; they have different perceptions and require different classroom activities. This article also argues that extensive reading *per se* is never a panacea for all reading problems and the local educational environment (i.e. Asian culture) might be an influential factor to be considered for a successful implementation of extensive program.

Although the findings may not be generalized to other learners, they provide a holistic understanding of EFL learners and fruitful insights for reading instruction to

other teachers who encountered the same problems as the author. While the previous study found that positive feelings, whether L1 or L2, motivate students to read more (Yamashita, 2004), an important pedagogical implication in the present study suggests that teachers should attempt to understand learners' internal affective reactions to the entire reading program to avoid wrong assumption in terms of text difficulty, material selection, teaching methodologies, and course design.

Additionally, the differences among different learning groups found in this study shed some light on the special needs from special groups, namely day program and night program. They have different emphasis on the needs to learning due to different learning backgrounds and language proficiency. All students in different learning context should not be treated with the same standard approach because the learners are different; they have different perceptions and require different classroom activities.

The results of this study also imply that guided reading from teachers is necessary for some EFL low proficient readers. Pre-instruction of some target vocabulary might be helpful for reading comprehension. Additionally, they also have to be guided to read beyond the words. Most of the EFL students are more familiar with intensive reading methods—read slowly and carefully. When being flooded with a huge amount of reading text, they would be frustrated and would not be able to enjoy reading. It is suggested that EFL teachers should show students appropriate extensive reading methods (i.e. text structure, purposes). What the teacher does is to ensure course materials relate to students' lives and bridge the gap whenever student readers met difficulties in understanding the text. The teacher should then guide them to comment on the story's organization, the characters, and the plot.

It is also necessary to integrate reading strategy instruction, i.e. scanning and skimming, inferring word meaning from context, and reading fluency, into the extensive reading implementation. Thus, it will be helpful to lessen the students' moans and groans for a reading assignment and help them read more efficiently.

EFL low proficient learners often avoid reading; thus, they need teachers to create a learning environment where they can be engaged as much as they can. By involving themselves in the cooperative reading tasks, the students might feel empowered to break out of the cycle of failure. They might find themselves capable in reading and sharing with other learners. Most important, the teacher should allow students to have some degree of control over learning—i.e., self-selected reading. Each group of the students decided what they like to present and lead the discussions in a way they choose. It is very enlightening for students to see how differently they make a visual representation of the story.

Although some interesting findings were obtained in the present study, they should be taken as suggestive rather than definitive due to the following limitations. A replicated and modified study is needed because this was a small-scale study. The results might be more successful if implementing the same tasks with students' choice of their own reading texts. The number of survey questions should also be added. Moreover, this study did not make distinctions among different types of reading materials. The responses towards the classroom activities might be affected by the genres of reading that learners are involved in, and this needs further research. Moreover, a further study might be necessary to investigate students' engagement in reading and their achievement, attitudes, and persistence.

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Appendix A: Survey Questionnaire

Dear students,

This reading course for this semester covered fourteen expository texts, two novels, as well as your self-selected reading articles from the internet. The purpose of reading extensively was to expose you to a great amount of reading materials, enhance your reading fluency, and develop a good reading habit.

Please complete the following survey to help me with a more effective course in the future. Thank you for your help.

PART ONE:

Please rank the following items from number 1 to 6 depending on their significance to a successful extensive reading program.

- | | |
|--|--|
| _____ Text difficulty (vocabulary, syntactic complexity) | _____ Peer cooperation (group work, discussions, presentation) |
| _____ Materials selection (i.e. genres) | _____ Teacher's roles (i.e. explanation, help) |
| _____ Self-selecting reading materials | _____ Classroom activities |

PART TWO:

Please rank the following items from number 1 to 7 depending on your preference.

- | | |
|----------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| _____ Summary writing | _____ Student-student cooperation |
| _____ Q & A | _____ Teacher-student conference |
| _____ Personal reflections | _____ On-line sharing |
| _____ Oral presentation | |

PART THREE:

Do you have any difficulties when reading extensively? Why do you rank certain item as top one, or two, but other as the last? Please write your reasons for the ranking.