A One-Year Study of SSR: University Level EFL Students in Taiwan

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Taiwan has been a productive laboratory for the study of free voluntary reading in school, or "sustained silent reading" (SSR). A series of studies involving university level students in English as a foreign language classes (EFL) studied the impact of time set aside especially for self-selected reading of graded readers, books written especially for students of English (Sims, 1996, Yuan and Nash, 1992, Lee, 1998, 2005a, 2005b, 2005c; Hsu and Lee, 2005). Except for Yuan and Nash (1992), students participating in these studies have been non-English majors, not taking other classes using English as a medium of instruction, and having little exposure to English outside of school.

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In this study, the duration was a full academic year. This is still not the optimal length (studies longer than one year have produced the best results; Krashen, 2004), but one year was all that was possible due to practical constraints.

The subjects in both experimental and comparison groups were freshman non-English majors who were taking a required course in English as a foreign language, and they were not taking other English courses at the time of the study.

Comparison group

To account for at least some individual variation in instruction, three different classes, taught with different instructors, were used as comparison groups. Classes had 40, 45, and 54 students. The comparison classes were randomly selected from 26 freshman English classes at National Taipei University. The comparison groups had traditional instruction, reading, analyzing and discussing texts, student presentations based on issues related to the assigned readings, and direct instruction in language "skills." There were frequent quizzes and examinations. A MANOVA revealed no significant difference among the three comparison classes on pre-tests, so scores for the comparison classes were therefore combined. The same comparison groups were used in a previous study (Lee, 2005c).

Experimental group

Students in the experimental group (n = 41) did self-selected reading of graded readers. Students chose from about 1,200 titles varying in difficulty from 300 headwords to 3300 headwords. Students devoted half of the once weekly three hour class to reading, 20 minutes to checking in and out books, and the rest of the class to shared reading, giving short presentations or interacting with group members. Students were required to record what they read (titles, pages, time spent on reading) and write short reflections on what they read in either English or Chinese. These reading logs were handed in each week. Grades were based on participation and students' logs (time spent reading, pages read, and reflections on reading).

Measures

The tests used for both groups included (1) a 100 item

cloze test measuring reading ability, developed by Mason (2003), which was used as both a pre and post test; (2) vocabulary tests developed by Schmidt (2000) that test the 2000 level words, 3000, 5000, 10,0000 and academic vocabulary levels, with 30 items at each level, also used as both pre and post-tests. Tests were given at the beginning of the academic year and at the end of the year.

Results

The effect of the in-class SSR treatment was determined by examining differences between gain scores (table 1). At each level of the vocabulary test, the experimental group made better gains, and the experimental group also made superior gains on the cloze test.

Table 1: Vocabulary Test Results

	COMP PRE	EXP PRE		
	means (sd)	means (sd)		
2000	27 (3.3)	26.4 (3.8)		
3000	22.1 (5.7)	20.6 (5.7)		
5000	17.5 (6.0)	17.3 (5.6)		
10000	4.6 (4.1)	3.8 (3.2)		
ACADEMIC	20.6 (5.5)	19.7 (6.2)		
TOTAL	91.7 (20.3)	87.8 (20)		
	COMP POST	**EXP POST**		
	means (sd)	**means (sd)**		
2000	27.6 (2.4)	27.8 (2.3)		
3000	23.5 (4.9)	24.8(4.3)		
5000	19.4 (5.6)	21.6 (4.7)		
10000	6.0 (4.6)	8.1 (3.1)		
ACADEMIC	22.4 (5.5)	22.6(4.1)		
TOTAL	99 (18.7)	104.8 (14.7)		
	DIFF pre/pst			
	COMP	**EXP**	**t**	**p**
2000	0.66	1.32	-1.39	0.08
3000	1.47	4.22	-3.74	0.00013*
5000	2.0	4.35	-3.26	0.0007*
10000	1.37	4.27	-4.46	0.0000083***
ACADEMIC	1.76	2.85a	-1.31	0.10
TOTAL	**7.23**	**17.02**	**-4.90**	**0.0000018***

*: $p < .008$ (see text)

Table 2: Cloze Test Results					
	PRE	**POST**	**DIFF**	**t**	**p**
comp	46.9 (10.1)	51.8 (9.8)	4.9	-7.92	0.00000
exp	44.4 (8.2)	58.9 (7.9)	14.5		
N of comparison group = 139 N of experimental group = 41					

Because multiple t-tests were used, the alpha level, the level of significance necessary to achieve statistical significance, was adjusted using the Bonferroni procedure (Rosenthal and Rosnow, 1984). Using the adjusted alpha of .008 (.05/6), the experimental group significantly outperformed the comparison group on the combined vocabulary test, on the cloze test, and on three levels of the vocabulary test.

Discussion

In this study, readers easily outperformed comparison students. A factor that may have contributed to the success of the study was the fact that students had access to a substantial amount of reading material, approximately 1000 different titles (compared to 570 titles in Lee, 2005b, and 700 total books in Sims, 1996). In addition, the study lasted one academic year; as noted above, this is not the optimal length but in this case it was clearly long enough to produce a positive result.

What is clear from the entire group of studies from Taiwan is that free reading works. In addition to its value in increasing test scores, reading results in increased knowledge of the world and subject matter knowledge, and is regarded by students as more pleasant than traditional instruction (Krashen, 2004).

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