

## Extensive Reading and EFL Junior College Students in Taiwan

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### Abstract

This study investigated the effect of a one year sustained silent reading program on junior college students' development in reading comprehension and vocabulary size. A one semester pilot study was conducted in the first semester (Hsu & Lee, 2005). Results indicated that the reading group made the same gain as the control group did after one semester and one hour less of intensive instruction did not cause any loss in language learning. The pilot study showed the feasibility of in-class SSR on junior college students and thus gave the authors the reason and confidence to extend the program to one full year so as to observe how extensive reading effected English acquisition. Results showed that the experimental group outperformed the control group in vocabulary, reading comprehension, and students' learning of academic language reflected in their final examination.

### Introduction

A plethora of research evidence in second/foreign language acquisition and teaching has shown that *a curriculum that incorporates extensive reading* is worth trying (Day & Bamford, 1998; Krashen, 2004). The term also used to refer to ER in the classroom is in-class sustained silent reading or in-class SSR. Studies done with ESL/EFL learners at different levels (university, junior college, and children) have been fruitful in other areas in Asia (Cho & Kim, 2004; Elley, 1980, 1989, 1991; Elley & Mangubhai, 1983; Lao & Krashen, 2000; Mason, 2003; Mason & Krahsen, 1997; Young, 2001). Extensive reading in these studies has been confirmed repeatedly to be very effective in nearly all aspects of language learning without intensive formal instruction, e.g. vocabulary, reading, listening, grammar accuracy, spelling, and writing. In addition, students' learning attitude improved because of an extensive reading program in which materials were easily reached and pressure was low (Hung, 2003; Lee, 1998).

There is also evidence showing that extensive reading helps students who lag behind

in language learning at school. A six week program of self-selected reading successfully helped a group of 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> graders with low reading proficiency in the US. The readers outperformed the non-reading (traditionally taught) group with traditional approaches on the Altos test of reading comprehension and vocabulary as well as the Nelson-Denny test of reading and vocabulary (Shin, 2001). Lao (2003), in a study of how reluctant readers develop a reading habit concluded that the presence of a print-rich environment and the opportunity to select one's own reading materials are crucial in creating a reader.

Lee (2005a, b, 2006) also reached the same conclusion. In her three consecutive studies with Taiwanese university non-English majors, Lee found that book access, self-selection, and a sufficient duration (at least one full year) were preliminary conditions for an extensive reading program to be effective.

A number of experimental studies done in Taiwan examined the effect of extensive reading on EFL learners. Studies compared extensive reading with comparison classes using methods currently popular among contemporary scholars and teachers. Results have been consistently in

favor of in-class ER, or in-class sustained silent reading (SSR) (Cheng, 2003; Liu, 2005; Sheu, 2004; Sims, 1996). Some studies found no significant difference between the reading group and the control (instructional) group due to different reasons. In Yuan and Nash (1992), university English majors were used in both groups, which may have caused a confound in comparison due to the rich input from many other courses offered in the English department. This result, however, could also be interpreted as showing that extensive reading is as effective as the intensive instruction in the regular curriculum. Similarly, Cheng (2003) proposed that students should be taught with word guessing strategies in addition to reading only because the group who were taught with word guessing strategies and also read graded readers (ERWG) outperformed the group who did reading only (ER-only) in the measure of word recognition. The former group, however, did not surpass the ER-only group in reading comprehension. Her result that the ERWG group did not, either, win over the ER-only group in the measure of the ability to apply word guessing strategies actually showed that the effect of teaching guessing strategies was unclear. Also, whether a word can be successfully guessed depends on how much the reader comprehends the context, and one's reading comprehension is believed to be built by reading (Smith, 1984).

There are few ER studies on EFL low proficient learners or beginning readers. In Sheu (2004), junior high school students, who were beginning learners of English and have rare chance to do extensive reading in and outside of school, participated in the study. Results showed that the two reading groups (the graded reader group and the children literature group) outperformed the control group who received grammar-based instruction in the measures of grammar, vocabulary, reading comprehension and reading speed. In addition, the reading groups also developed significantly positive attitudes toward learning English and reading in English, while the control group did not.

In Lituanas, Jacobs, and Renandya (1999), remedial secondary school students in the southern Philippines who read books of their own choice for six months outperformed a control group that took a regular remedial reading class on tests of reading comprehension, reading speed, and grammar accuracy.

Although few studies have done with students with low levels of proficiency, the results of other studies give us reason to suspect

that extensive reading will be of benefit to these readers as well. In the present study, the group of interest to us consists of students at five-year vocational schools in Taiwan. Most of these students did not perform well on the Senior High School Entrance Examination, and chose vocational schools for practical purposes: to receive training that would enable them to enter the job market after graduation. Inasmuch as English proficiency is highly required in almost all professional domains, a deficiency in English is a serious hindrance for these students as well as those at universities.

In order to understand the reasons underlying this fact, researchers have conducted a series of studies and have found that students at vocational schools are low in English proficiency because of small vocabulary size, insufficient hours of English classes, inefficient learning strategies, and lack of learning motivation (游毓玲, 蔡佳怡, 莊文琪, 郭金芳, & 盧惠瑛, 2000; 林茂松, 1995; Huang, 2003). Although suggestions such as teaching strategies were made and outside reading was discussed (盧惠瑛, 游毓玲, & 周碩貴, 2003; Cheng, 2003), self-selected extensive reading with rich book access in the classroom has not been tried or even seriously considered in curriculum design for these students.

Therefore, the main question address here is: if extensive reading is included in the curriculum, will these students make more, or at least the same, improvement, in English, in comparison with a curriculum that teaches language skills and strategies directly? The hypothesis underlying this study is that extensive reading can also benefit students of English as a foreign language at a lower proficiency level compared to students of general universities.

## Methodology

### The Pilot Study and Results

In this one academic year study, the first semester treatment was actually a pilot study testing the feasibility of ER on the target subjects, providing 354 Penguin titles of graded readers. Two measures were used for the pilot study. Vocabulary tests on words at the 2000 and 3000 frequency level (Nation, 1990). Each test was pilot tested before the experiment and divided into two forms (Form A, odd number items, was used for the pretest and Form B, even number items, was used as a post test given at the end of the first semester.) Each form of the 2000 VLT had 27 items. For the 3000 VLT,

Form A had 29 items and Form B had 28 items. Correlations of each form with the full test ranged from .86 to .93 (Hsu & Lee, 2005). The other measure that tested reading comprehension was a 100-item cloze test, termed Cloze test A, was designed by Mason (2003). The readability level, according to Mason, was at a 6<sup>th</sup> grade level (6.8 in Flesch Readability Level), assumed to be somewhat difficult for her subjects, Japanese College English majors. With the same reason, it was used for the target subjects in the present study. It was used as pre and post tests. Spelling was not considered in determining scores on the cloze. The mean scores for the target subjects and the Japanese college students were 25.85 and 28.68, respectively, with no significant difference.

Result<sup>1</sup> showed no statistically significant differences between the reading group and the control group in all measures in pre and post tests (Tables 1). The reading group, however,

improved more on the 3000 word level test and cloze test A in raw scores; while the control group improved more on the 2000 word level test. Similarly, the finding of “no significance” in this short term pilot study could be very meaningful: students who received less instruction on skill building improved as well as the control group who were more intensively instructed. Three course required examinations (Final-1, Midterm, & Final-2) were also compared to see if the one hour reading that had replaced instruction had affected their academic language learning (Table 2). Consistently, no difference was found in the three examinations required for both groups, with the reading group performed slightly better in the final exam for the semester. (Also see details in Hsu & Lee, 2005).

The results of the pilot study thus led us confidently to the second part (semester) of the project.

Table 1. Results of the Pilot Study on Vocabulary and Reading

	GROUP	Mean	SD	Independent T	
				t	Sig.
Pre-2000	Control	10.28	4.86	-1.37	.17
	Experimental	11.80	5.33		
Post-2000	Control	13.28	4.36	-.80	.43
	Experimental	14.05	4.52		
Pre-3000	Control	6.44	2.88	-.18	.86
	Experimental	6.58	4.32		
Post-3000	Control	7.60	3.59	-.17	.25
	Experimental	8.65	4.64		
Pre-Cloze A	Control	24.86	11.26	-.76	.45
	Experimental	26.84	12.67		
Post-Cloze A	Control	27.47	11.63	-1.78	.08
	Experimental	32.28	13.49		
Gain on the 2000 VLT	Control	3.00**	4.04	.94	.19
	Experimental	2.26**	3.26		
Gain on the 3000 VLT	Control	1.16*	3.08	-1.32	.19
	Experimental	2.07**	3.28		
Gain on Cloze A	Control	2.64**	6.53	-1.82	.07
	Experimental	5.44**	7.58		
Gain on Vocabulary <sup>a</sup>	Control	4.16**	5.59	-.14	.89
	Experimental	4.33**	4.95		

<sup>a</sup>Total gain on both the 2000 VLT and the 3000VLT.

\*\* p < .01, \*p < .05, meaning both groups made significant gains after one semester indicated by Paired Sample T tests. N = 43 for each groups. df = 84

Table 2. Both Groups' Academic Performance on Three Consecutive Examinations for the English Course

	Group	N	Mean	SD	T	Sig.
Final-1	Control	43	81.35	9.87	.38	.71
	Experimental	43	80.51	10.72		
Midterm	Control	43	71.09	11.30	-1.71	.09
	Experimental	43	75.63	13.21		
Final-2	Control	43	70.42	11.42	-.61	.55
	Experimental	43	72.12	14.35		

df = 84

### Subjects

The subjects were ninety-one (91) 3<sup>rd</sup> grade junior college students in Department of Applied Foreign Languages at vocational junior college, 47 in the experiment group (extensive reading group) and 44 in the comparison group. Students aged from 17 to 18 and had learned English for 5 years. The study was done in the reading class which met twice a week: one for 100 minutes and 50 minutes for the other session. Both groups were taught by the same instructor. Mandarin was the language for instruction, a different situation from those in general English departments at the university level.

*Control group.* The control group, consisting of 12 male and 32 female students, followed traditional instruction three hours per week, which included vocabulary teaching, grammar analyzing, text translation, comprehension questions and group discussion. Quizzes, mid term, and final examinations were given as the curriculum required.

*Experimental group.* The experiment group, consisting of 10 male and 37 female students, also followed the same traditional instruction for 100 minutes per week, but did extensive reading for a 50 minute period each week. The experimental students were still required to take the same quizzes and examinations as the control group did for the purpose of evaluation of student performance for this course.

*Treatment materials.* In the second semester, the instructor brought in about 500 graded readers (*Penguin Readers* and *Oxford readers*) to the class. Penguin Readers are divided into 6 levels ranging from 300 headwords to 3000 headwords. Oxford readers

also consist of six levels containing headwords up to 3000. Compared to many other studies, the quantity of the book collection and the book-student ratio were obviously larger so that reading with real self selected materials could be ensured. The students chose materials according to their own interests and language proficiency level and were encouraged to read at least one book per week. They were also asked to fill out a reading log recording how many pages they read and how much time they spent on reading. In addition, students were required to write a brief reflection paragraph or summary after they finished reading each book, either in English or Chinese.

*Measures.* For the second half of the project, the tests used for both groups included (1) Cloze test B, a newly developed cloze test by Dr. Mason using the materials in the same text as Cloze A; (2) three new vocabulary level tests compiled by Huang (2003) that tested the 1000, 2000 and 3000 level words; (3) Final-3 that measured their performance on the texts taught in class after one academic year.

Cloze test B had a readability of 6.9 in Flesch Grade Level, similar to Cloze test A. The test-retest reliability for Cloze B was .87 with one week interval on 96 college students of various academic backgrounds. The correlation between Cloze A and B was .81; however, we did not consider them as pre and post tests and did not calculate the difference as gain, since the difficulty levels for the items in the two cloze tests were not necessarily equal. Using Huang's vocabulary measures was due to its acceptable reliability on Taiwanese vocational high school students, a similar group of students as the target subjects in the present study. Huang created a 1000 VLT by taking 36 items from West's General Service List (1953). He also compiled the 2000 and 3000 VLTs using Nation's items,

with nearly no overlap with the VLTs used in the pilot study. In Huang, the mean scores for the three tests were from high to low, and “none of the subjects failed to reach the 1,000 word level, while still achieving the 2,000 or 3,000 word level” (p. 44). This descriptive data showed that these were “reliable tools to measure vocational senior high school students’ vocabulary size” (p. 44).

Midterm, Final-2 and 3 consisted mostly (70%) of material taught in class, as well as items drawn from the GEPT (General English Proficiency Test) practice test (about 30%). This

was not the case for Final-1, a measure of students’ achievement for the English reading course in the previous semester; all material on this test was covered in class. This difference explains why both groups appeared to obtain lower scores on the following examinations. The result of Final-3, held at the end of the academic year, will be discussed in the next section.

Therefore, this one year project was carefully controlled by collecting data at three different stages (Table 3) and thoroughly observed and discussed based on the results obtained from the various measures used.

Table 3. Collection and Measures Used at Different Stages

Stages Measures	At the beginning of the 1st semester	During the 1st semester	At the end of the 2nd semester
vocabulary	Pre 2000 & 3000 VLTs (A) (Nation)	Post 2000 & 3000 VLTs (B) (Nation)	1000, 2000, & 3000VLTs (Huang)
reading	Pre cloze test (A) (Mason)	Post cloze test (A) (Mason)	Cloze test (B) (Mason)
Course related tests	Final score for the previous semester (Final-1)	Mid term & final for the first semester (Final-2)	Final score for the second semester (Final-3)

## Results

Table 4 presents results of the new measures on vocabulary and reading after one year in-class extensive reading. Significant differences were found on the 3000VLT and cloze test B. Both groups performed equally on the 1000 and 2000 VLTs, which is not surprising. According to Huang (2003), an average vocational high school student might have a vocabulary size of 1690 words. The subjects in

this present study were the third year students at a 5 year vocational junior college. These students with some English learning experience in earlier schooling may all be at the similar level with Huang’s subjects. Therefore it may not be easy for the 1000 and 2000 VLTs to detect any noticeable difference between the two groups. Second, the reading materials provided contained headwords from 300 up to 3000. The difference found in the 3000VLT might be more capable to indicate the real difference.

Table 4. Results of Vocabulary Level Tests and Cloze Test B

	Con (n = 41)	Exp (n = 41)	T	Sig.
1000 VLT	12.49 (2.88)	12.61 (2.49)	-.21	.84
2000 VLT	8.07 (3.39)	9.46 (3.84)	-1.74	.09
3000 VLT	6.71 (3.35)	8.51 (3.38)	-2.43	.017
Cloze B	21.66 (10.16)	29.35 (10.52)	-3.35	.001

df = 80

The huge discrepancy on Cloze test B is regarded as an indicator of the superiority of the reading group in a more global aspect of language acquisition, considering the nature of a cloze test (Hughes, 2003). The raw scores,

however, were lower than those for cloze test A. As previously mentioned, we do not consider these two tests as pre and post tests, since there was no knowledge of the difficulty levels of the individual items in both tests.

As for the performance for the course required examinations, which indicated the students' academic language learning, results showed that the experimental group did as well as their counterparts on the first three examinations, but slightly better in the raw

scores. The subjects, however, finally surpassed the control group who received more instruction directly related to the assigned content in Final-3 after one year reading extensively in and out of the class, as shown in Table 5.

Table 5. Comparisons of Four Course Required Examinations

		Final-1	Midterm	Final-2	Final-3*
Con (n = 43)	Mean (SD)	81.35 (9.87)	71.09 (11 .30)	70.43 (11.43)	69.27 (11.27)
Exp (n = 43)	Mean (SD)	80.51 (10.720)	75.63 (13.21)	72.13 (14.35)	74.74 (11.89)

\* T = 2.22, df = 84, p = .03

The time they spent on reading out of the class may have taken away part of their time studying intensively for the course, but the outcome suggested that the time spent on reading was well spent, since it did not at all affect their academic performance. It is believed that the time for reading has helped them acquire English more globally than one has expected. The experimental students actually read more pages in the second semester than they did in the first semester (525.36 pages vs. 357.52 pages,  $t = 5.93$ ,  $df = 41$ ,  $p < .000$ ), a similar result as in Yuan and Nash (1992). This result suggests that the subjects did enjoy self-selected, self-paced reading with a richer book access via this ER program. Certainly, the advantage of the reading group might be due to their extra time on reading out of the class; however this is exactly what a reading program aims for, to help students build a love for reading and reading independently.

## Discussion and Conclusion

This study confirms that EFL students can benefit from a well designed ER program. Their gains are not limited to the acquisition in the language aspect. A more positive attitude toward reading and learning English is our ultimate goal in language education. This study also provided evidence that extensive reading can be exercised with students who are lower proficient (than university students).

A program emphasizing the importance of independent, individualized reading is also a program that values individual differences in a language classroom where learners do not worry about being constantly evaluated, corrected, and compared. Foreign language anxiety (Young, 1986, 1991) is enormously reduced to the minimal level. Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis has shown us the impediment of anxiety, stating that language input does not

reach a learner's Language Acquisition Device when the learner is anxious, has low self-esteem, then does not consider himself/herself as a potential user of the language (Krashen, 2002, p. 6). An ER program as an inviting literacy club helps solve most problems in many conventional language classrooms and positively changes a learner's attitude toward language learning (Smith, 1988).

In the pilot study, done in the first semester, a survey questionnaire was distributed to probe the subjects' views about the program they had never experienced before. Most students (about 70%) felt that this new experience was pleasant and helpful and that they hoped this program to be continued, as well reflected on the more pages they read in the second semester (see details in Hsu & Lee, 2005). A few students were still not sure how much they had improved after one semester, although the pilot results suggested they did. In the second semester, an easier book access (from 354 to 500 titles) gave them a wider choice of books that interested them, and a well-trained teacher with more experience on running an ER class after one semester was more ready to help with students' reading difficulties by providing suggestions and advice during the whole reading process. The results due to the improvement of the extended ER program (e.g. more books and longer treatment duration) in the second semester show us the power of reading on students with lower proficiency level.

While there might be some who question ER studies on their validity and reliability, pointing out that many of these studies were unable to tell exactly what the factors are to cause language acquisition (e.g. input from out of the classroom, extra time reading at home, etc), Pigada and Schmitt (2006) in their case study found that learners might learn more vocabulary words from extensive reading than

previous studies have suggested.

Nonetheless, it might be also true that students in an ER program have more input of the language through reading out of the class, causing the concern of some researchers (Horst, 2005). And, one limitation of the present study was that the subjects were English majors at a five-year junior college. As previously described, however, these students did not do well in a national high school entrance examination, and had very rare chance to have outside exposure to English. A control group with the same disadvantage serving as the control group was believed to be able to fix the problem. In addition, due to their low proficiency level, Mandarin was used in nearly all instruction. The concern of more input out of the classroom was not likely.

However, their extra reading experience out of the classroom was extremely welcome. With the set goal in mind, to help learners build a true motivation to read, their self initiated reading behavior out of the class was the first sign of our success. The most important evidence was they felt doing extensive reading more enjoyable than their previous learning experience, a result consistent with McQuillan's (1994); and there was not any sign of regressing in academic language learning revealed by the results of midterm and finals.

Finally, this study did not suggest that reading only contributed to the subjects' improvement, because students received some instruction during the treatment year, only less than that given to the control group. The study, however, provides strong evidence that adding one variable—extensive reading—can make a difference for EFL learners with a lower proficiency level, to enhance language acquisition and to motivate more reading.

## Note

<sup>1</sup> The results of the pilot study have been presented in *The 22nd International Conference on English Teaching and Learning in the Republic of China (ROC-TEFL)*, 2005.

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應用外語系

### 摘要

本研究探討為時一年的課內默讀課程對於台灣技職學校學生在英語字彙與閱讀習得上有何影響。本研究之前半段為一初探性研究 (Hsu & Lee, 2005)。結果顯示，閱讀組與對照組在英語學習上有同樣的進步。而且以廣泛閱讀取代一小時之課堂教學並不影響學生在課程內容上的表現。初探性研究之結果證明廣泛閱讀在技職學校執行之可行性，也因此給予作者足夠的信心將此閱讀課程延伸至一整年，繼續觀察廣泛閱讀對技職學生英語習得之成效。結果顯示，在經驗一年之廣泛閱讀後，閱讀組在幾乎每一樣測試中，包括字彙、閱讀、及課程期末考，表現皆優於對照組。