

The Robustness of Extensive Reading: Evidence from Two Studies

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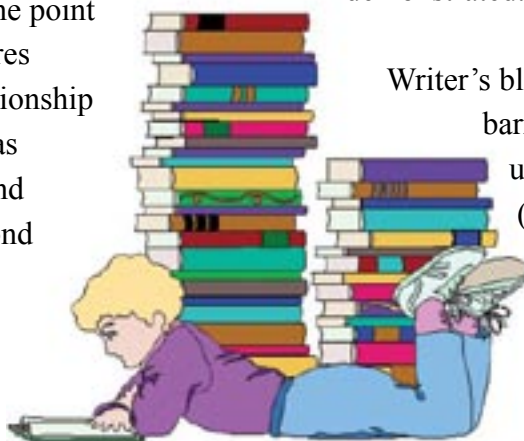
This paper describes two studies that are very different in design, but that come to a similar conclusion: Recreational reading is a good way to increase competence in English as a foreign language. The first study was correlational, in that information was gathered at one point in time and statistical procedures were used to discover the relationship among different factors, such as literacy behaviors, attitudes, and writing performance. The second was experimental in that it involved a group of students that had a special treatment (extensive reading) and was compared to another group that did not.

Study One

The correlational study was part of a series of studies intended to measure the impact of writing apprehension and writer's block on writing quality. Writing apprehension can be considered an affective barrier to writing. In many studies, the Writing Apprehension Scale (WAS), created by Daly and Miller (1975a,b) has been used to measure writing apprehension. This questionnaire includes questions about writing enjoyment (e.g. "I look forward to writing down my ideas"), fear of evaluation ("I am afraid of writing essays when I know they will be

evaluated."), and self-evaluation ("I feel confident in my ability to clearly express my ideas in writing.") In a series of studies, Daly and Miller reported that scores on the WAS were related to various measures of writing performance with native speakers of English, and also reported that writing apprehension is most likely to develop via negative past experiences, especially from teachers' low expectations, and excessive error correction.

Lee (1996, 2001, 2002), Lee and Krashen (1997), and Cheng, Horwitz and Schallert (1999) have shown that the WAS is a valid and reliable tool for measuring EFL students' apprehension toward English writing (as well as Chinese writing), but whether apprehension leads to lower writing performance has not been conclusively demonstrated.



Writer's block can be considered a cognitive barrier to writing and has been measured using the Writer's Block Questionnaire (Rose, 1984), which included questions related to the experience of being unable to write (e.g. "At times, I sit for hours unable to write a thing"), self-evaluation of writing ability (e.g. "I've seen really good writing, but my writing doesn't match up to it."), writing enjoyment (e.g. "Writing is a very unpleasant experience for me."), difficulties in composing (e.g. "I'm not sure, at times, of how to organize all the information I have collected for a paper.), and an unwillingness to delay editing (e.g. "Each sentence I write has to be just right before I'll go on to the next."). Although there is some overlap with the WAS, the focus of this questionnaire is cognitive, that is, it considers writing block to be the result of an inefficient composing process.

This study was designed to determine the impact of writing apprehension and writer's block on writing performance in English as a foreign language. To make sure relevant predictors were included that could affect

the results, I also examined the impact of recreational reading, writing practice, and attitudes toward reading and writing instruction. There is overwhelming evidence that those who read more write better (Krashen, 2004). Research has failed to support the common-sense hypothesis that writing frequency was related to writing quality (Krashen, 2003, 2004), it was decided to include a measure of writing frequency, however, because of the popularity of this assumption. Research has also failed to support the hypothesis that formal instruction is useful in improving writing (Krashen, 2003, Elley et al 1976), but measures of writing instruction were also included because of the wide-spread assumption that instruction is effective.

Those who said they read more did significantly more leisure writing in English, and the amount of recreational reading done was the only significant predictor of writing performance.

This model hypothesizes that (1) writing apprehension and writer's block are related to each other; (2) both writing apprehension and writer's block are related to writing performance (more apprehension and greater blocking mean lower quality writing); (3) more free reading is related to more writing (those who read

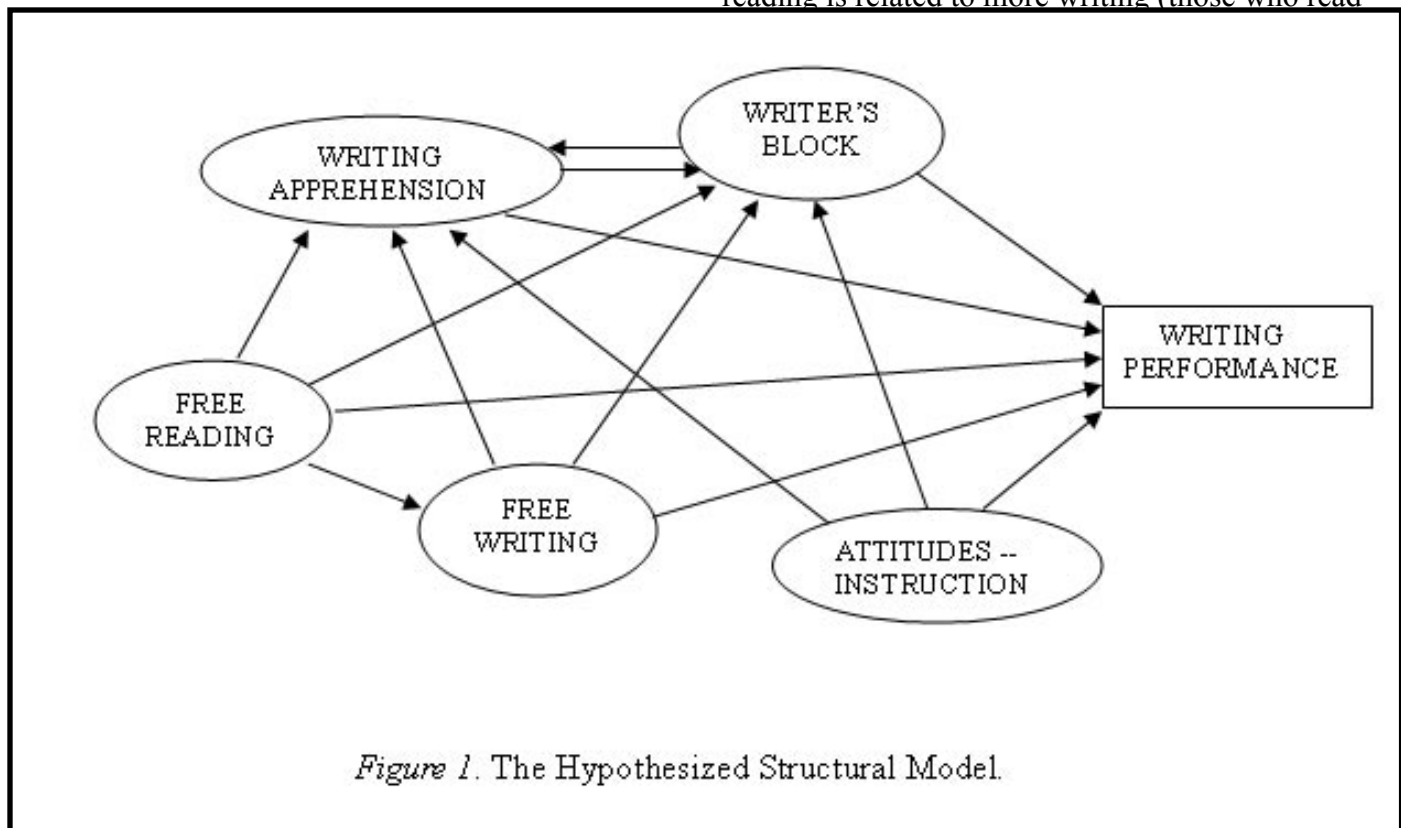


Figure 1. The Hypothesized Structural Model.

The Method, the Measures, and the Subjects

As noted above, this study was correlational, but it utilized the most sophisticated correlational tool available, structural equation modeling (SEM). In SEM, researchers are able to test whether the data is consistent with predicted relationships among the variables. The SEM used here was as follows:

more will write more); (4) more instruction is related to better writing; (5) free reading, instruction and writing will reduce writing apprehension and writer's block.

Two hundred seventy university students in Taiwan participated in the study. All were taking an English writing course. Subjects filled out Chinese language versions of the WAS and Writer's Block survey. In

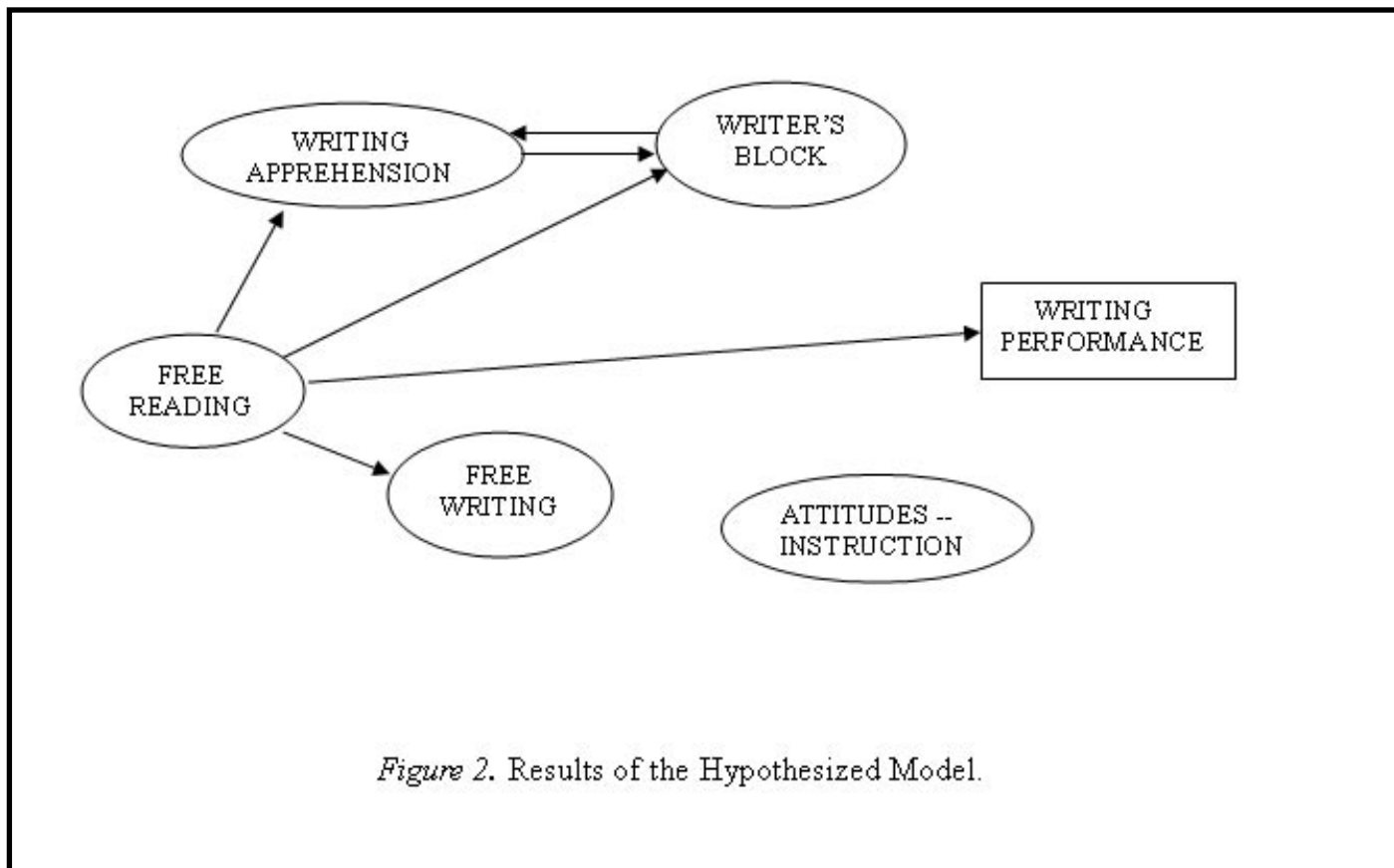


Figure 2. Results of the Hypothesized Model.

addition, subjects filled out a questionnaire designed by the author that probed how much reading and writing subjects did in English, and their views on instructional activities that may or may not be helpful for their English writing. Questions probing reading frequency included “I read in English for pleasure,” “I visit the library or check out books (for outside reading).” Subjects indicated whether they engaged in these activities “almost always, often, sometimes, occasionally, or almost never,” with points assigned from 1 to 5. Questions probing writing frequency included “I have regular mail exchanges in English with foreign pen pals,” and “I keep a diary and/or journal in English.” Questions related to instructional activities included student opinion of the effectiveness of both reading and writing instruction, e.g. “analyzing the grammar and syntax of a text,” and “teachers comments and error correction.”

Subjects were also asked to write a short essay with a 40-minute time limit. The time limit was imposed in order to induce a certain amount of apprehension so that the ability to write under some strain could be seen. (For details and the actual questions used, as well as the method of rating the composition, see Lee, 2005).

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The results were startling: the only clear winner was recreational reading. Those who said they read more did significantly more leisure writing in English, and the amount of recreational reading done was the only significant predictor of writing performance.

In agreement with previous research, neither the amount students wrote nor their attitudes toward instruction were significant predictors of writing. In addition, more free reading was related to lower writing apprehension and less writer’s block.

Lee (1996) also found a significant relationship (also using SEM analysis) between reading and writing apprehension in Chinese as a first language.

To summarize, the goal of the project was originally to determine the impact of writing apprehension and writer's block on writing proficiency. I found, however, that neither predicted writing proficiency, and that recreational reading emerged as the only significant predictor of writing ability. This result is especially important because of the use of SEM: even when we take other possible factors into consideration, reading emerges as the only winner. In addition, more reading meant more writing, lower apprehension, and less blocking.

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The Second Study

As noted earlier, the second study was experimental. Recreational reading has been put to the experimental test many times and it has done well: Students who participate in in-school free reading programs, such as sustained silent reading, do at least as well as comparison students in traditional classes, and often do better.

Studies have begun to clarify the conditions that help ensure success in in-school free reading: (1) Programs that last longer than one academic year are more effective (2) students read more when there is more access to interesting books and (3) supplementing reading with writing or writing combined with correction does not increase the effect of reading. (Mason, 2004; Krashen, 2004). It has also been suggested that SSR is more effective when it is done a little each day, rather than in a large time-block once a week (Pilgreen, 2000).

This study examines the impact of extensive reading under less-than-optimal conditions: Students read

for only 12 weeks, students had access to a limited amount of reading, were asked to write summaries of what they read, and their in-class reading took place only once a week. In addition, it is likely that the students were not serious about English class. The study took place in the second half of a year-long course; the first semester was devoted to viewing films with Chinese subtitles. For obvious reasons, a new instructor was brought in for the second semester, this researcher.

| Results of Study 2 | | |
|--|-------|------------|
| | cloze | vocabulary |
| Reading Group | 46.39 | 116.24 |
| Traditional Comparison | 43.32 | 114.42 |
| Vocabulary Emphasis Comparison | 47.92 | 120.14 |
| <i>All means adjusted for pre-test differences</i> | | |

These conditions were not set up on purpose: they were a result of practical constraints. Nevertheless, the situation offered an opportunity to see how robust recreational reading is, and to determine if it is worthwhile to utilize a recreational reading approach when the situation is not optimal.

There were, however, conditions present that should enhance the effect of reading: Students were taught language acquisition theory and were presented with the research evidence demonstrating the effectiveness of reading. This was done to help them understand the process they were going through. In a previous study of Taiwanese students, students reported that they found this kind of information to be helpful and interesting (Lee, 1998).

Subjects and Measures

Subjects were first-year university students at National Taipei University in Taiwan, 65 in the experimental (recreational reading) group and 38 in each of two

comparison groups. Subjects had studied English formally for six years. All were students in a required freshman English class, and none were English majors.

Students in the experimental group, the group that did recreational reading, were provided with 215 graded readers, books written for students of English as a second language. This is not a lot. It amounts to about three books per student. Students were also encouraged to read their own books if they did not find interesting or appropriate material in the classroom collection, but only one student did this.

The class met once a week for three hours over a 14-week period, but because of the midterm and final exams, students actually read only for 12 weeks. Approximately one hour and 40 minutes of each class was devoted to reading; students were also required to read at home at least three hours per week, and recorded how much they read. Students were also required to write a short summary or response to what they read in either Chinese or English. One hour of each three hour class session was devoted to language acquisition and reading theory, which included the research evidence showing the efficacy of reading.

The reading group was compared with two different comparison groups. One comparison group used a textbook and did traditional reading comprehension and writing exercises. It was, in other words, a “regular” English class. The other comparison group was unusual for two reasons: They did some recreational reading outside the class (but no record of the reading was kept), and the instructor of the second group also devoted a great deal of class-time to vocabulary instruction. Neither comparison class did any grammar study.

Students were given a cloze test constructed by Beniko Mason at the beginning and end of the

semester, the Nation Vocabulary test, and those in the reading group also filled out a questionnaire at the end of semester.

The Results

The reading group made significantly better gains on the cloze test than the traditional comparison group (in fact, the comparison group did not make any significant gain at all on the cloze test). The reading group also made better gains on vocabulary, but the difference was not statistically significant.

The second comparison group, the group that did so much extra work on vocabulary and also did at least some outside recreational reading, made the best gains on both tests, but were not significantly better than the readers on the cloze test, and the difference between this group and the readers on vocabulary fell just short of statistical significance. This comparison group did especially well on parts of the test that contained less frequent words, words that were not contained in the graded readers that the reading group read.

I present here the most relevant and interesting results of the questionnaire given to the class that did self-selected reading. In one question, students were asked how the class could be made more effective. Only five students out of the 65 suggested grammar instruction. Many recommended either literature classes (analysis of stories = 21) or book discussions (n = 9). The most popular suggestion was increasing the number of books available (n = 27).

Students were also asked if the books made available were interesting. Only 18.5% of the students said that the books were genuinely interesting, but only two (4%) found them dull. The rest said the books were moderately interesting.

In response to another question, 38 students said they

[Back to top](#)

would continue to read to improve their English; only one said she would not and 26 were unsure. Eighty percent said that the summary writing was boring and unnecessary.

Discussion

This is a study that appeared to be doomed to failure. Subjects were not particularly motivated, had only a modest supply of books available, books that they did not find particularly compelling, were forced to write summaries, which they found boring, and the study was short-term. Nevertheless, the readers did better than one comparison group on the cloze test and did not differ significantly from the other group. The vocabulary-emphasis comparison group did best on less frequent words, words not contained in the materials read by the reading group.

The results of this study are consistent with previous reports of the efficacy of using graded readers (Mason and Krashen, 1997), and with the desirability of sharing language acquisition and reading theory with students (Lee, 1998). It was also shown that students of English as a foreign language can improve without producing language, without form-focused activities, and without being tested on what they read.

Although one comparison group did slightly better than the reading group on vocabulary, there is good reason to prefer reading to direct instruction, even when conditions are not optimal. The readers clearly made adequate gains. Also, it is unlikely that students will continue to engage in reading comprehension and vocabulary exercises to improve their English after the EFL program ends. It is, however, likely that students will continue to read if they have access to interesting material; recall that many students said they would continue to read, and when asked for suggestions for improving the course, recommended more books and “literature study.” And if they continue to read, they will certainly read texts with more infrequent vocabulary.

Finally, readers get much more from reading than vocabulary and grammar, and reading is a tremendous source of pleasure. Thus, extensive reading may be a better bet if we are concerned with long-term effects and more than modest differences on performance on vocabulary and cloze tests.

Conclusions

As noted in the introduction to this paper, the two studies were done with very different methodologies, yet arrived at the same conclusion. They join an impressive body of research confirming the power of reading (Krashen, 2004), and add to this literature by confirming the efficacy of reading with acquirers of English as a foreign language controlling for writing apprehension, writer’s block, frequency of writing, and instruction, and by confirming that recreational reading in school can be effective even when conditions are less than perfect.

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“Children have become faceless student numbers computer-matched to student scores, individuals being forced into the same mold with no recognition of their differences. School is monotonous drill instead of the creative, exciting, stimulating environment that it should be.”

—Sherrie Bjurstrom, longtime Ohio teacher, 5/2/05

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