

Investigating the Effects of Outside Reading on Reading Tendency and English Proficiency



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Many studies have found a correlation between extensive reading and language competences among first language learners; conversely, little research in this area is found in foreign language settings. This researcher advocates leisure reading in an informal language learning setting to help elevate students' reading motivation and language proficiency. For that purpose a quantitative study was conducted to investigate students' reading tendencies and to discover the effect of outside reading on English proficiency. The results indicated that students favored reading in small groups in a less structured environment. Students' vocabulary size and other language skills were also greatly improved through outside Extensive Reading.

Reading skills are required to achieve academic goals and to do well in today's knowledge-based economy. According to Cummins (2008), reading is critical to all aspects of academic achievement. Hunter also believes that "reading is a way to empower and vitalize students in their current lives and for [the] future" (2009, p. 38). Thus, English teachers are endeavoring to find ways to encourage improvement of students' reading skills. Reading programs such as reading clubs, reading circles, and reading corners have sprung up to promote reading and to cultivate independent readers. The benefits of reading go beyond the development of linguistic skills; they include improved thinking ability and improved quality of communication among students.

Literature Review

Reading for Leisure

Many studies have shown benefits of reading (Krashen, 2004; Maley, 2009). However, how can teachers convince students to start reading and/or sustain their reading habits? While instructional reading texts are certainly valuable, too often they are sterile. Outside reading that is fun may be the key to convincing students to read more. If students feel pressured to read, reading will become a chore rather than an enjoyment. As Greenberg, et al. (2006, p. 83) suggest, it is important that the reading goal in a non-academic setting is "pleasure and general comprehension". After all, getting students to engage in reading activities and stick to reading is already a challenging task for teachers (Lapp & Fisher, 2009).

Extensive Reading

Students improve their reading by reading. The more students read, the more they will acquire vocabulary and knowledge. Students need to immerse themselves in a rich reading environment and read for a significant amount of time. Many studies in different countries have shown that Extensive Reading has positive effects on various competences. Anderson, Wilson, and Fielding (1988) found a correlation between Extensive Reading and reading ability among children, and a study by Greenberg, et al. (2006) yielded similar results with adult learners. Lee's study (2008) on sustained silent reading with children in Taiwan reveals that the longer students read, the better the reading results. Wang (2006) observed a significant impact of Extensive Reading training on the communicative competence of college students. Studies by Hsu and Lee (2007) and Smith (2007) with college students in Taiwan also showed positive effects of reading on writing. Huebner concluded that students involved in enhanced reading programs outperformed students not only in reading-related skills but also in other areas of academic achievement (2009). According to Krashen (2004), Extensive Reading is more effective in the development of reading skills than direct teaching of the skills. In fact, he attests that reading extensively elevates not just reading skills but all language skills. McNeil's (2006) study with South Korean students manifests that Extensive Reading enhances not only overall language competence but also motivation for continued reading. The aforementioned research shows that Extensive

Reading aids first and foreign language acquisition and fosters positive feelings toward reading in a foreign language.

Drawing from the literature and personal experience in applying Extensive Reading with students in curricular and co-curricular reading activities, the researcher has observed numerous benefits from repeated reading exposure, such as more positive attitudes toward reading, increased reading time and more active in-class participation. However, these anecdotal observations called for an empirical study to find connections between reading habits, reading attitudes, and English proficiency.

Methodology

This research consists of two studies intended to investigate the reading tendencies of a group of college students, equivalent to freshmen and sophomores. The first study was set up to investigate students' reading habits and attitudes, whereas the second part was conducted to examine the relationship between outside reading and English proficiency, especially in vocabulary and grammar. This research addressed two main questions:

1. What attitudes do learners have about outside reading?
2. Does outside reading have an effect on English proficiency?

Participants/Procedures

In the first study, conducted in 2010, twenty-two college students majoring in English or business volunteered for an eight-week, outside reading and discussion program. Participants took part in weekly discussion sessions, which they freely selected based on schedule, content and language level. Students were required to do the set reading prior to each discussion session, which was moderated by an English teacher. Following the program, a reading survey was administered and an informal, follow-up interview was conducted to verify survey results and yield further insights.

In the second study, conducted in 2011, a total of forty-nine English students were recruited for an investigation on language proficiency. The participants were divided into a control group (24 students), who received regular English instruction, and an experimental group (25 students), who were given extra outside reading materials in addition to regular

English instruction. Both groups took a simplified English proficiency test—a simulated TOEIC test—prior to and after the treatment. The experimental group also took an additional survey to gauge their opinions regarding the outside reading materials.

Results for Reading Habits and Preferences

Students were asked to report on their reading habits and preferences. According to the survey, most participants did have a reading habit. But it is notable that the majority of respondents were reading Chinese for pleasure but reading English for language learning. Regarding preferences in reading materials, most of the respondents preferred leisure-oriented reading, such as novels. For many students, however, the majority of their English reading was limited to English learning materials. Up to 75% of the students revealed very high interest in reading novels that had been made into movies, indicating that current entertainment trends have a strong influence on students' tastes in literature. When asked about their expectation for the reading program, many students mentioned their goals for improving their speaking and listening.

As for the students' reading habits and reading preferences, the interview findings were consistent with the survey results. As expected, most students spent much more time reading in Chinese—their native language—than in English.

It is interesting to note that although these students signed up for a reading program, the majority of them hoped to develop their speaking and listening skills rather than reading and writing. Results indicated that students may already have sufficient class time devoted to reading and writing and that many currently hope for more opportunities for speaking and listening. However, when given the choice, students preferred the outside reading program over the English Chat Room (a speaking program), showing that students take joy in reading and feel they can use it as a vehicle for developing their skills in communication or other areas.

Results for English Proficiency

As for the effects of outside reading on English proficiency, the pre- and post-test results of the simulated TOEIC test showed that the experimental group showed significant gains, $t = -2.62$, $p = 0.01$, 2-tailed, while the control group did not show significant improvement, $t = -0.37$, $p = 0.72$, 2-tailed.

The researcher also ran a t-test on the students' performance on the vocabulary section of the course midterm and final exams. Results for the midterm vocabulary section did not show a significant difference between the two groups. The *t* value of the t-test between the two groups was 0.304, and the two-tailed significance was 0.76. However, the experimental group scored significantly higher than the control group in the final vocabulary section. The *t* value of the t-test between the two groups was -2.08 and the two-tailed significance was 0.04.

As for student participation, course records showed a significant difference between the control and experimental group. The researcher offered extra credit to students who voluntarily spoke during class time. The average frequency of the control group was 1.25 voluntary utterances per class session, whereas it was 2.96 times for the experimental group.

In terms of the students' opinions of the outside reading materials, students from the experimental group overall manifested positive attitudes toward the additional outside reading materials. According to the attitude survey, the participating students felt that the outside reading materials were relevant to their lives ($M=3.87$) and mostly importantly, helped increase their vocabulary ($M=4.13$). Most students also thought that outside reading helped increase their understanding of issues ($M=3.91$) and enriched their knowledge ($M=3.87$).

Conclusion

This study examined the reading habits and preferences regarding L2 English reading of Taiwanese college students and the effects of outside reading on language proficiency. Results show that outside reading materials can greatly enhance students' vocabulary size and their grammar skills. Students also experienced gains in knowledge, communication resources, and language skills. Another notable point is that students participating in the outside reading program had a strong motivation to build their speaking skills. The fact that the students used the outside reading program and reading materials as a means to sharpen their other language skills further supports Extensive Reading as a learning strategy. The students in this research were motivated to read extensively in English, and that motivation helped strengthen other language skills.

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