Improving EFL Learners' Reading Levels through Extensive Reading

Aaron David Mermelstein
Ming Chuan University

ABSTRACT

Today there is an increasing amount of research promoting the effectiveness of extensive reading (ER) towards increasing learners' vocabulary, comprehension, reading speed, and motivation towards reading. However, little has been done to measure the effects of ER on learners' reading levels. This quantitative study examined the effects of ER on Asian EFL students' reading levels. The 12 week study was conducted at a Taiwanese university using forth year, non-English major, EFL students as its participants and applied communicative language teaching (CLT) and student-centered teaching approaches. Eighty seven participants were engaged in the study. Two formal reading level assessments were taken and two informal assessments were carried out throughout the length of the study. The ER treatment used a weekly in-class activity of sustained silent reading (SSR), supported by outside class reading. The statistical analysis indicates significant reading level gains within the treatment group and significantly higher reading level gains within the treatment group vs. the control group. The findings suggest that utilizing ER and a student-centered teaching approach can provide a successful alternative to the traditional teacher-centered or curriculum-centered approaches currently being used towards improving Asian learners' reading levels. Pedagogical suggestions for implementing ER are also provided.

INTRODUCTION

For many English as a foreign language (EFL) students, reading is their main learning goal (Carrell, 1993), and for most of these EFL students, reading will also be the most important of the four language skills in the second language. Therefore, it is no surprise that in many countries throughout the world, reading has become one of the most emphasized skills in the EFL classroom. And, in spite of the current emphasis around the world on communicative language teaching (CLT) (e.g. Rao, 2002; Richards, 2006), vocabulary learning remains a primary focus in many EFL classrooms in Taiwan. Although Huang (1995) states that most Taiwanese second language students want to improve their speaking and listening skills, English instruction at all levels are primarily using the traditional methods of teaching English, which means memorizing vocabulary and grammar rules and then being tested repeatedly. Supporters of this believe that the emphasis on the repetition of testing increases accuracy. Critics of this

method believe that it is this over-emphasis on repetition and testing that doesn't allow students to achieve communicative competence in the target language.

In order to promote effective reading, some teachers are looking for additional or alternative methods to achieve this goal. In the field of teaching EFL, there has been a trend for teachers to rely on skill-building textbooks that attempt to develop strategies for the learner to comprehend different genres of texts. These strategies are usually designed for the purpose of teaching the reader how to find general or specific information in the text. In Taiwan, this approach compliments the test-based education system.

Today, however, there is an enormous amount of research spanning decades promoting the effectiveness of extensive reading (ER) (i.e., Nuttall, 1982; Robb & Kano, 2013; Sheu, 2003). In fact, Nuttall (1982) stated that "an extensive reading programme…is the single most effective way of improving both vocabulary and reading skills in general" (p. 65). This belief has been echoed throughout the more recent research as well (e.g. Day & Bamford, 2002; Day, & Hitosugi, 2004; Cho, 2007; Ellis, 2005; Fernandez de Morgado, 2009; Grabe & Stroller, 2011; Pigada & Schitt, 2006). For the purpose of this study, ER is defined as reading as much as possible within the learner's peak acquisition zone, for the purpose of gaining reading experience.

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

In Taiwan, English is one of the subjects that are on the competitive university entrance exam. Six years of English instruction during junior high and high school are viewed as an important requirement for getting accepted into what is considered a "good" university. Yet, the language of instruction in many English classrooms during junior high and high school is mostly Mandarin Chinese. Outside the classroom, many students have limited opportunities to speak or even use the English language, unless they specifically take the initiative.

When students attend universities, the medium of instruction continues to be Mandarin Chinese, although a majority of their textbooks are written in English. In order to complete academic work, it is necessary for students to interact with English texts. Therefore, it is not simply a challenge on the university entrance exam and many students experience difficulties in making the transition from knowing English well enough to pass a test, to actually using the language for authentic academic purposes.

In many Taiwanese EFL classrooms, there is an emphasis on grammar and sentence structures and a lack of alternative models for teaching vocabulary. This belief has been echoed throughout recent reading research in Taiwan (e.g. Lai, 2004; Wang, 2013a; Wang, 2013b). Generally, vocabulary instruction is believed to be an essential part of teaching a language, but it is often taught from readings in a textbook or as a by-product of a syllabus. Usually new vocabulary is taught through direct instruction. In many classrooms, the strategy of inferring is not taught. Often, students learn vocabulary using rote memorization just before a quiz or exam, but then quickly lose this information because afterwards the information is no longer deemed important or valuable by the students. This type of test-based system is based on external motivation, which the learner can easily lose after completing the exam. However, motivation has been acknowledged as one of the main predictors of success in EFL learning.

Students in Taiwan are well aware of the fact that they lack vocabulary and this has a huge impact on their language learning. In fact, many EFL learners claim that learning vocabulary is the largest obstacle they have to overcome in order to learn English and will

complain about too many unknown words while reading texts. Often, they will stop reading and consult a dictionary, but this takes up too much time because of the large amount of unknown words. Nuttall (1982) described this situation as the students being trapped in a "vicious circle", where they read slowly because they have to use a dictionary to translate words, but then because they are slow readers they do not end up reading very much. If they do not read very much, they are not being exposed to more vocabulary and then they will come across many unknown and unfamiliar words. Then, they are right back at the beginning, looking up unknown words in a dictionary, which slows them down.

Unfortunately, in Taiwan relatively little attention has been given to the use of ER as a main method of improving reading comprehension or increasing learners' reading level. Most likely, this is due to the high demands of test performance, budgetary concerns, and/or the general lack of knowledge about ER. Nevertheless, Taiwanese students need a sufficient amount of English proficiency in order to read and understand authentic materials printed in English and most students will probably need a high reading level and a variety of English reading skills in order to perform well in the future.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM AND PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

In order to better enhance Taiwanese students' English reading abilities, EFL teachers need to develop English teaching programs that apply teaching approaches, methodologies, and reading materials that are efficient, effective, and match the students' abilities and interests. Although the current system is achieving some success, it is still lacking alternative models for teaching vocabulary and reading. If the Taiwanese education system continues to use the same teaching approaches and methodologies, it will continue to only have limited success and many students will exit the education system with limited English proficiency.

The purpose of this study was to examine the effects of ER on the reading levels of 4th year Taiwanese university students in order to find an appropriate alternative to the current teaching methodologies used in Taiwan. Therefore, the main purpose of the research was to answer the following question: Can the addition of a 12 week extensive reading program produce significantly better results on 4th year Taiwanese university students' reading levels as a similar program that does not include extensive reading? There were two hypotheses being tested. The first was that a 12 week ER program will produce significantly improved results on the participants' reading levels, and the second was that the students in the ER group should demonstrate significantly better reading level improvement, as measured by reading level tests, than the group without the ER treatment.

A REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

One of the major theories underlying the initial development of the extensive reading approach in second and foreign language classrooms is Krashen's (1985) Input hypothesis, which is based on the distinction between acquisition and learning. The term *acquisition* is used to refer to an intuitive process or subconscious process of "picking up" a language. The term *learning* is used to refer to a conscience active effort to understand information. Later, Krashen (1991) created a more specific part of the Input Hypothesis known as the Reading Hypothesis which states that comprehensible input in the form of reading can also stimulate language acquisition. Further, reading itself is the cause of reading ability. Krashen (1991, 1993a, 1993b,

1995) argues that reading can be the primary cause of vocabulary development, competence in spelling and writing, and in the ability to understand and produce sophisticated grammatical structures. Krashen (1995) states that free voluntary reading "is responsible for much of our literacy development, in both first and second language acquisition" (p. 188). Krashen (1993a) defines Free Voluntary Reading (FVR) as reading that is selected by the reader, which is read for its own sake, or simply reading because you want to read and argues it is the most powerful device in language education.

Krashen's beliefs have been supported in several recent studies. Ivey and Broaddus' (2001) study found that most middle school students who participated in their study regarded SSR as the most enjoyable reading activity. Similarly, Guthrie, Schafer, Von Seeker, & Alban (2000) highlighted the value of creating classrooms with large amounts of reading materials that are interesting and available to all of the readers. Robb and Kano's (2013) study looking into ER done outside the classroom during the learners' free time and found it had a significant effect on reading improvement.

One point that hasn't been challenged is that vocabulary control is a necessity. However, there has been some debate among researchers regarding the amount of vocabulary knowledge that is necessary for a second language reader to accurately comprehend a text. In order to learn word meanings incidentally through reading, it's important for learners to encounter a suitable number of unfamiliar words in a text, but what is a suitable number. According to Liu and Nation (1985), Laufer (1987), and Hirsh and Nation (1992), learners need to understand about 95% of the text in order to gain an adequate comprehension and to accurately guess unknown words from the context. Hill and Thomas (1988) suggest 90%, but the Extensive Reading Foundation (ERF) (2011) sets the percentage much higher at 98%. A 95% coverage means that there is approximately one unknown word in every two lines of text, if each line of text contains about ten words. However, it is vital that learners know a sufficient amount of word families in order to understand 95% of the words in a text. According to the ERF (2009), research indicates that reading is at an 'instructional' level when the students know between 90% and 98% of the words on a page. If the students know 98% or more of the words, then they are in the extensive reading 'sweet spot' and can read at a quick and constant pace and is most likely more enjoyable for the reader as well.

Extensive Reading

Extensive reading has been widely advocated for language learning throughout the world (e.g. Belgar and Hunt, 2014; Day and Bamford, 2002; Fernandez de Morgado, 2009; McQuillan, 2006; Waring, 2006; Yamashita, 2013). Susser and Robb (1990) defined ER as: 1) reading large quantities of material or long texts for global or general understanding with the intention of obtaining pleasure from the texts, 2) individualized reading with students selecting the texts they want to read, and 3) not being required to discuss the book in class. As previously mentioned, ER in this study is reading as much as possible within the learner's peak acquisition zone, for the purpose of gaining reading experience.

Day and Bamford (2002) offered the following ten top principles of ER to help clarify the common characteristics of successful ER programs:

1) Students read as much as possible.

2) A variety of materials on a wide range of topics are available.

3) Students select what they want to read.

4) The purpose of reading is usually related to pleasure, information, and general understanding.

5) Reading is its own reward.

6) Reading materials are well within the linguistic competence of the students.

7) Reading is individual and silent.

8) Reading speed is usually faster rather than slower.

9) Teachers orient students to the goals of the program.

10) The teacher is a role model of a reader for students.

One factor of ER that has been in dispute is how much reading is considered extensive. Some measure ER by the number of pages read per day or per week, while others measure in terms of total books read. For example, the EPER (1992) suggest that at least one book a week or 50 books per year should be the target for the average student, in order to better receive the benefits of ER. Consistency is most likely the key to successful ER. If the learner is reading materials that are within their ability level and if the reader is reading materials that are interesting to them, it is more likely the reader will have intrinsic motivation to read extensively.

ER can make a positive contribution to the development of competence in a second language (Tudor & Hafiz, 1989). ER provides learners several encounters with unknown and previously unlearned words. It expands the learners' interaction with the language by placing different words in different contexts, so that learners can receive a more complete understanding of their meaning and use (Simensen, 1987). The pedagogical value to ER is based on the assumption that having students interact with large amounts of interesting, meaningful, and comprehensible language materials will produce positive effects on the learners' ability to use a second language.

Several influential second language studies involving ER have taken place over the past few decades and have demonstrated several distinct benefits language learners can receive through ER. They can acquire more vocabulary knowledge, increase reading speed, create more positive attitudes towards reading and the target language, and develop linguistic knowledge (Bell, 2001; Cho, 2007; Fernandez de Morgado, 2009; McQuillian, 2006; Nation, 2008).

METHODOLOGY AND DESIGN OF THE STUDY

Setting

This quantitative study took place in Taipei city, Taiwan, at a middle ranked private university that requires all of its non-English majored students to participate in four years of EFL courses. There is a standardized curriculum using course books designed by the university's EFL teachers, although teachers are not required to follow it. Students are placed into the program into classes with their major's classmates with no specific placement exam upon entering the university. Therefore, all of the classes within this program have mixed-ability students.

Specifically, the study took place during the first semester of the fourth year. Both of the participating classes, the control group (CG) and the treatment group (TG), had the same researcher/ instructor and received the exact same course curriculum with the only exception being the treatment of ER. Instead of the treatment, the CG received additional time to complete class tasks (e.g. pair work or cooperative learning activities). Both classrooms can be described as high level communicative language classrooms with rich input focusing on all four language skills. Both classes emphasized interaction as both the means and primary goal of classroom. Thus, classroom activities took on several forms of pair and group work that required both negotiation and cooperation. Weekly activities were fluency-based in order to encourage the students to develop their self confidence and authentic language skills, but also included other tasks involving vocabulary quizzes, writing assignments, etc.

Neither of the classes adhered to the EFL curriculum established by the department. The class curriculum was instead created by the researcher/ instructor and specifically designed to follow a student-centered approach that focuses on authentic learning, the student's needs, abilities, interests, and learning styles instead of the others involved in the educational process, such as textbook authors and administrators (Mermelstein, 2010).

Participants

Since the population of interest was undergraduate EFL learners in Taiwan, two fourth-year university classes of EFL learners were involved in the study. The total number of participants involved in the study was 87 and students were already divided into separate classes by the university, with the researcher randomly assigned as their instructor. The two groups were randomly designated as the CG and the TG prior to the beginning of the new school year. The participants had had no previous contact with the teacher/researcher prior to the study. Due to university policy, the same instructor is not allowed to teach more than one class per academic level within the same school department, so different class majors had to be selected for the study.

The CG consisted of 13 male students and 28 female students with their major of study as Insurance. The TG consisted of 13 male students and 33 female students, and their major of study was International Business. All of the participants had previously studied EFL full-time for 9 years.

Reading Materials

The reading materials provided for this study were two separate graded reader series, the *Oxford Bookworms* and the *Penguin Classics*. For this study, only levels 1-6 were provided for the participants, as no starter levels were available. However, it is estimated, that in total, there were approximately 500-600 graded reader books available for this study, with a minimum of 50-100 books available for participants to select from at each level.

The graded reader levels are determined by the number of head words used by the publishers for each series. A headword is similar to a dictionary entry where a group of words share the same basic meaning (e.g. helps, helping, helpful, helpless). The two graded reader series were selected due to their similarities in head word ratings.

Description of the Intervention

An extensive reading activity took place in the classroom once per week as a sustained silent reading (SSR) activity. During the SSR activity, the students sat at their desks are read

their individually selected graded reader books silently to themselves. The duration of the SSR activity was on average between 15-20 minutes. Students were encouraged to use inference as the main method of understanding new or unknown words. They were not allowed to talk with classmates or use dictionaries during the SSR activity. The SSR activity was selected for the treatment for several key reasons. First, the SSR activity provided a more direct and personal interaction between the text and the individual learners. Second, it is a learner-centered activity that focuses on the needs and abilities of the individual learner. Third, SSR is supported by Day and Bamford's (2002) recommendation that *Reading is individual and silent*. And finally, SSR is perhaps the only viable method of individualized extensive reading that can take place in large mixed-ability classrooms, as it allows for the maximum amount of individualized participation and interaction with texts, while at the same time also allows for the maximum amount of teacher observation.

In addition to the classroom treatment, students were expected to continue extensive reading in their free time, with a minimum expectation of three pages being read from their graded reader books daily. Of course, participants were given permission, and even encouraged, to read more. In addition to reading, participants were to keep track of their daily reading times and page amounts on a student reading record sheet. There were no additional assignments given to participants related to the SSR activity and they were not required to answer questions or give book reports. Students were given freedom to select any book of interest at their assigned reading level and permission to stop reading a book and select an alternative if they found their original choice too boring.

The overall framework of this study was based upon Day and Bamford's (2002) top ten principles for conducting a successful extensive reading program and strictly adhered to all 10 principles. During week 1, a class discussion took place where the teacher/researcher explained the purposes of conducting research and the benefits it can provide for students, researchers, and other teachers. Participants also received an informed consent form written in Mandarin Chinese and English, read the explanations of the study and the participants' rights, and signed it to indicate their agreement to participate. During week 2, the participants completed a pre-study graded reader reading level test and there was a class discussion on the importance of reading, in general, and the overall benefits of reading within the proper reading level. During week 3, instructions were given on how to read the graded reader books using inference. The participants were also taken to the school library and shown where to locate the graded reader books. During week 4, the first SSR activity was initiated for approximately 20 minutes, followed by the participants filling out their graded reader record sheets. Weeks 5 through 15 were similar. However, during week 15 a second graded reader reading level test was given to both the TG and the CG serving as the post-test.

Data Collection Instruments

Two formal and two informal instruments were used to gather data and the results were computed statistically. The two formal instruments were graded reader reading level tests. Prior to the start of the ER treatment, a graded reader reading level test was administered to the students to determine the optimal reading level for each student within the graded reader series. This pre-treatment test was also used as a placement test for the treatment. The graded reader reading level tests were designed by the researcher/ instructor to correspond to the graded reader book levels. The test was assessed to be of 'average' reading ability for each level based upon the comparisons of dozens of books within each level. To ensure a higher level of reliability, the

test was also assessed by three other full-time English instructors at the same university. There was full agreement by all four instructors, ensuring a high level of inter-rater reliability.

The participants were given 30 minutes to complete the reading level test. The results were evaluated in order to determine the average percentage of known/unknown words for each level. For the purpose of level placement, the recommendations of several researchers were followed (e.g. ERF, 2009; Hu and Nation, 2000). It was decided in advance that students should be placed into reading levels where they understood approximately 95% of the texts. In addition, since both of the graded reader series used in the study only extend to level six, it was determined prior to the testing that participants who were rated at a level higher than level six be noted as "7", but be placed into a level 6 for the duration of the study. However, in evaluating the pre-treatment reading test, none of the participants were rated as level 7.

Upon the completion of the study, a post-treatment reading test was administered. The design of the test, and inter-rater reliability, was the same as the pre-treatment reading test. However, the actual texts used for the second test were not the same. A comparison of the participants' pre and post-reading tests were used for data analysis. On the post-treatment reading test, participants who surpassed level six were ranked as level 7. However, since there are no levels above seven, it could only be estimated their exact level of improvement and no students were given a score of higher than 7.

The first of the informal data collection methods used was classroom observations, which Mason (1996) defined as "a method of generating data which involves the researcher immersing in a research setting, and systematically observing dimensions of that setting, interactions, relationships, actions, events, and so on within it" (p. 60). Therefore, the purpose of conducting the classroom observations of each reading class was to obtain valuable information regarding the implementation of the extensive reading program, and to assess student behavior (i.e. who is on task and who is not, based on eye movement and page movement). And, although the teacher was also an active participant in SSR, as suggested by Day and Bamford (2002), the teacher was also able to move throughout the classroom in an undisruptive manner.

The second informal instrument used to collect data was the participants' graded reader record sheet. It was the participants' method to log daily information regarding their reading including dates, number of pages read, and the amount of time they read. The purpose of the graded reader record sheets was so the participants can track their own improvement and increase their internal motivation and so the teacher/researcher can track each participant's reading habits and identify participants who are not reading regularly.

RESULTS

Reading Level Tests

First, a measure of the means and standard deviations of the results of the pre and post reading level tests were taken and can be viewed in Table 1. Next, a categorical analysis was done on the reading level data using Chi-square. A two-way contingency table was conducted to evaluate whether or not the participants in the study improved their reading levels. The two variables were starting reading level and ending reading level, and they were found to be significantly different with Pearson Chi-square (2, N = 87) = 115.72, $p = 0.000$, Cramer's V = 0.52.

Table 1. Pre and Post Study Mean Scores for Reading Tests.

		Reading Level		
		N	Mean	SD
Pre-measures	Treatment	N=46	5.17	1.21
	Control	N=41	4.02	1.44
Post-measures	Treatment	N=46	6.18	1.41
	Control	N=41	4.48	1.86

Teacher Observations

Teacher observations of the TG took place in class every week of the study. The results are represented in Table 2 as a percentage of time on task reading during the in-class SSR activity. The mean % of time on task for the TG was 94%. All of the participants, except for one, were observed to be on task 80%-100% of the time. The one exception, participant no. 34, was only observed to be on task reading 50% of the time allotted for the in-class SSR activity.

Table 2. Mean Scores for Teacher Observations and Student Reading Record Sheets

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD
Observation	46	50	100	94.13	9.79
Outside reading	38	10	100	62.21	27.55

A correlation analysis was conducted using Pearson's R to measure the correlation of the time on-task reading during the SSR activity with two other variables, the amount of outside reading each participant self reported and the participants reading level gains. The results indicate a high, almost perfect, direct relationship of ($r = 0.90$, $p < 0.001$) to the amount of outside reading the participants self reported, also indicating a high significance level. The results also indicate a high level of relationship of ($r = 0.30$, $p < 0.005$) to the amount of level gained, also indicating a high significance level.

Student Reading Record Sheets

Approximately half of the participants' reading record sheets were informally observed every week of class during the study by the teacher on a rotating basis. Students who demonstrated poor reading behavior were noted and then followed up by an informal interview. At the end of the study, the student reading record sheets were collected and the self reported reading data was analyzed and is represented in Table 2 as a % of the time on task reading outside of classroom.

Of the 46 participants in the TG who kept the self reported records, 38 sets of student reading records were retrieved. The mean % time of the participants' reading in and outside of the classroom, as self reported, was 69%. This number represents 4.83 days per week of on task reading. Nine participants (23% of the TG) self reported reading every day.

A correlation analysis was conducted using Pearson's R to measure the correlation of the time spent outside of class reading with two other variables, the amount of time on-task reading during the in-class SSR activity and the participants reading level gains. The results indicate a

high, almost perfect, direct relationship of (0.90) to the amount of in-class SSR reading observed by the researcher with a *p*-value of 0.000, also indicating a high significance level. The results also indicate a high level of relationship (0.37) to the amount of reading level gained with a *p*-value of 0.001, indicating a high significance level.

DISCUSSION

Summary of Main Results

Hypothesis one posited that a 12 week extensive reading program will produce significantly improved results on the participants' reading levels. The results from the pre and post graded reader reading level tests indicated a mean level gain of the TG of 1.109 with a standard deviation of 0.875. In addition, the spread of deviation is narrow indicating a balanced increase in reading level across the treatment. The results of the Chi-square analysis also indicated a large strength in the relationship of the results. Therefore, the first hypothesis appears to have been proven correct.

Hypothesis two posited that the group of participants of the TG would demonstrate, on average, significantly better results in English proficiency, as measured by reading level tests, than the CG of students. In regards to reading level, the results from the pre and post reading level gains indicated that the mean level gain of the TG is 1.109 with a standard deviation of 0.875, and the mean level gain of the CG is 0.463 with a standard deviation of 1.325. Thus, the mean level gain difference between the TG and the CG was 0.6453, with the TG posting a higher level gain score. While the CG still gained in their reading levels within the CLT learning environment, the TG more than doubled the gains of the CG. Therefore, the results appear to indicate the second hypothesis was proven correct.

Since at the time of writing this article the author could not find any other studies directly relating to ER and reading levels, it is difficult to do any direct comparisons. However, the results of this study do lend support to the findings of other researchers (e.g. Horst, 2005; Kao, 2004; Lao and Krashen, 2000; Liu and Wu, 2011; Robb and Susser, 1989; Tudor & Hafiz, 1989; Wang, 2013) who reported positive results from implementing ER programs, specifically in the area of reading comprehension and vocabulary learning. It also lends support to Krashen's Input Hypothesis (1985) and his Reading Hypothesis (1991), which states that comprehensible input in the form of ER, or pleasure reading, can lead to more literacy development. While this study did not measure any specific vocabulary gains, it did measure improvements in reading levels. Therefore, an assumption can be made that with an increase in one's reading level comes an increase in one's acquisition of head words and sight vocabulary or automaticity in reading. Grabe (2009) defined automaticity as "…processing operations that are rapid, relatively resource-free, not subject to interference, unconscious, and hard to suppress" (p.29). Some researchers (e.g. Berglar and Hunt, 2014; Kuhn and Stahl, 2003) believe automaticity increases accuracy, reading rate, and fluency, which appears to have taken place in the current study.

Other comparisons of similar studies can be made, including Krashen (2007). He did a meta-analysis of nineteen previously reported ER studies that had been published in professional journals or conference proceedings. Of the nineteen studies, twelve of them were situated in Asia, and ten of these were situated in Taiwan, like the current study. All ten of the studies in Taiwan reported positive results, which led Krashen (2007) to state that the most obvious finding of the studies was that ER is consistently effective, although Krashen also noted five factors

which he believed played a role in the findings. These include the duration of the ER program, the length of time and frequency of the reading sessions, the extent of comprehension checking, whether or not the reading activity was encouraged, and whether or not the learners are under academic pressures.

Another similar ER study which took place using university students in Taiwan is Wang's (2013), using college freshman. This study involved forty five low-level EFL participants and took place over a fifteen week period. The goal of this study was to measure if incidental vocabulary gains could be made through ER and the results noted a 6%-15% gain in vocabulary acquisition. Therefore, the current study supports the effectiveness of using ER with Taiwanese learners.

One important aspect of the current study, which no doubt had a positive effect on the outcome, was the learners' reading outside of class on their own time. Class time is often a factor of whether or not teachers feel they can add ER into their program (Takase, 2002). The current study demonstrates that only approximately 15 minutes of ER needs to take place in the classroom if it is supported by outside reading.

There have also been other studies looking at ER done outside of the classroom, which achieved similar results. Arnold (2009) reported an increase in his learners' motivation to read in a L2, which was German as a foreign language. His participants reported doing more outside reading than what was required for the course and enjoyed learning more about the culture of the L2. Robb and Kano (2013) reported on an ER program set up at a Japanese university where the participants were required to do outside reading as part of their course requirements. They termed this ER as *additive*, as it was meant to support in-class learning and not take away from classroom learning time. Although they also reported higher gains from their participants, there was a high amount of accountability on their participants, as their outside reading was tracked through a program known as "Moodle Reader". Their study appears to have relied on external motivation, but the current study relies on internal motivation, as no such burden was placed on the participants.

In addition, a by-product of this study was that several members of the treatment group benefited in several other ways. Students expressed pleasure from having read in English, and from having completed entire books in English; most students began to abandon word-by-word translations and used inference instead; and many students expressed that they were more confident to read in English. These appear to be common threads of ER as several other researchers have discussed similar findings (e.g. Fernandez de Morgado, 2009; Wang, 2013).

The data collected in this study also appears to suggest that an addition of an ER program may be superior to a CLT approach without ER. However, there are several factors that should be considered when interpreting the results. First, is that the CLT approach and/or student-centered approach to teaching are not the standard teaching approaches used in Taiwan. Therefore, it is possible that some of the positive results gained within the two groups reading levels may not accurately reflect the treatment alone. Second, researchers have also discovered and reported that allowing students more independence and freedom in the classroom can enhance learning (Nunan, 1991). Students in both groups enjoyed an enormous amount of independence and freedom, since both classes were intentionally designed to be student-centered. Several researchers (e.g. Arnold, 2009; Day & Bamford, 2002; Kirchhoff, 2013; Wang, 2011) have also noted that one's individual choice and interest are the prime motivating factors in reading programs.

However, one should not simply assume that the addition of ER is a better approach to teaching ESL/EFL than CLT alone. It is possible that ER is a richer activity towards language learning than other CLT activities for some learners. It is also possible that the findings could be the result of the time spent engaged in English. As designed, the participants of the TG reported reading outside of the classroom. The suggested reading time was approximately 15 minutes, but several participants reported reading for longer periods. Whereas, when the control group was given additional English activities to do outside of class, there was no measurement of how long each student spent engaged in English.

CONCLUSIONS

Perhaps it is premature to conclude too much from the current study due to the limited amount of data one study can provide, the number of participants involved in the study, and the limited amount of time that the EFL learners actually experienced the SSR approach. However, the results do suggest that ER can have a positive effect on reading performance and it is suggested that other researchers continue to investigate the effects of ER on learners' reading levels.

For many EFL teachers, the issue of promoting effective and proficient reading is important. The research reported in this study suggests that ER is both an effective and enjoyable method for students to improve their reading abilities before exiting the educational system and entering into the work force. If language learning only focuses on the form of a language, it will generally only lead to the acquisition of a limited amount of new vocabulary items. Therefore, it is probably necessary that language learning from context be used both inside and outside of the classroom and ER can provide an excellent format for such an approach.

Realizing the limitations of the classroom and the time available for teachers to directly interact with each student, ER may be able to help second language learners become more autonomous learners, especially in EFL environments where exposure to the target language may be limited. If a student-centered ER approach is as effective as the results of this study suggests, then the implications for using an ER approach as a primary or secondary method of improving learners' reading abilities in the teaching of EFL in Taiwan, or elsewhere, may be extraordinary. It could greatly improve the reading abilities of the learners and have a dramatic effect on the teachers as well. By providing learners more freedom to select which materials they would like to read, the students' intrinsic motivation to learn the target language would most likely increase as well. Teachers could become less dependent on textbooks and covering materials in which to test students on. Instead, they could spend more time planning and preparing lessons designed to match the students' needs or working one-on-one with individual students. Given the high level of importance that reading plays in the acquisition of a language and all of the evidence that has been provided supporting the use of ER, it seems only prudent for ESL or EFL teachers to seriously consider using the ER approach to assist learners in their classrooms.

If teachers are not aware of how to create an ER program in their classrooms, it is suggested that they follow Day and Banford's (2002) suggestions for a successful ER program. In this researcher's opinion, the most important aspect of a successful ER program is being student-centered and matching the correct level of texts with the learners' reading abilities. There are also several resources available online for teachers and it is recommended to start with the Etensive Reading Foundation's website, which will provide links to other vital information.

Aaron David Mermelstein, *Ph.D., is an Assistant Professor in the School of Education and Applied Languages at Ming Chuan University, Taiwan. He taught ESL K-12 in the USA and has been teaching EFL for 15 years at the university level. His research interests include student-centered teaching, teaching methodologies, and reading.*

Email: merman2@hotmail.com

REFERENCES

Arnold, N. (2009). Online extensive reading for advanced foreign language learners: An evaluation study. Foreign Language Annals, Vol. 42 (2), pp.340-366.

Belgar, D. & Hunt, A. (2014). Pleasure reading and reading rate gains. *Reading in a Foreign Language, Vol. 26*, No. 1, pp. 29-48.

Bell, T. (2001). Extensive reading: Speed and comprehension. *The Reading Matrix, 1*. Retrieved June 1, 2012, from http://www.readingmatrix.com/archives/archives_vol1_no1.html

Carrell, P.L. (1993). Introduction: Interactive approaches to second language & reading. In Carrell, P.L., Devine, J., & Eskey, D.E. (Eds.), *Interactive approaches to second language reading* (pp. 1-7). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Cho, K.S. (2007). An elementary English reading program for free reading. *Journal of Language Science*, 121-143.

Day, R. & Bamford, J. (2002). Top ten principles for teaching extensive reading. *Reading in a Foreign Language, 14,* 136-141.

Day, R., & Hitosugi, C. (2004). Extensive reading in Japanese. *Reading in a Foreign Language, 16* (1), 20-39.

Edinburgh Project on Extensive Reading (1992). *The EPER guide to organizing programs of extensive reading*. Edinburgh: IALS, University of Edinburgh.

Ellis, R. (2005). Principles of instructed language learning. *System, 33*, 209-224.

Extensive Reading Foundation (ERF), (2009). Retrieved June 1st, 2012 from http://www.erfoundation.org/.

Extensive Reading Foundation (ERF), (2011). *Extensive reading foundation's guide to extensive reading.* Retrieved January 14, 2013, from http://keera.or.kr/wpcontent/uploads/2012/10/Guide_to_Extensive_Reading_web.pdf

Fernandez de Morgado, N. (2009). Extensive reading: Students' performance and perception. *The Reading Matrix, 9*, 31-43.

Grabe, W. (2009). *Reading in a second language: Moving from theory to practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Grabe, W., & Stoller, F.L. (2011). *Teaching and researching reading.* (2nd ed.) Harlow, England: Pearson Education.

Guthrie, J., Schafer, W., Von Seeker, C., & Alban, T (2000). Contributions of integrated reading instruction and text resources to achievement and engagement in a statewide school improvement program. *Journal of Educational Research, 93*, 211-226.

Hill, D., & Thomas, H. (1988). Survey review graded readers (Part 1). *ELT Journal, 42* (1), 44 52.

Hirsh, D., & Nation, P. (1992). What vocabulary size is needed to read unsimplified texts for pleasure? *Reading in a Foreign Language, 8* (2), 689-696.

Horst, M. (2005). Learning L2 vocabulary through extensive reading: A measurement study. *The Canadian Modern Language Review, 61*(3), 355-382.

Hu, M., & Nation, P. (2000). Vocabulary density and reading comprehension. *Reading in a Foreign Language, 12*(1), 403-430.

Huang, Y. (1995). Developing your students' communicative competence: Some practical ideas for the classroom teachers. *Proceedings of the 9th Conference on English Teaching and Learning in the Republic of China*, 54-64. Taipei: Crane Publishing Ltd.

Ivey, G, & Broaddus, K. (2001). "Just Plain Reading": A survey of what makes students want to read in middle school classrooms. *Reading Research Quarterly, 36*, 350-377.

Kao, Y. M. (2004). *A study of using extensive reading as a supplement in a senior high school English curriculum* (Unpublished master's thesis). National Tsing Hua University, Hsinchu, Taiwan.

Kirchhoff, C. (2013). L2 extensive reading and flow: Clarifying the relationship. *Reading in a Foreign Language, Vol. 25*, No.2, pp. 192-212.

Krashen, S. (1985). *The input hypothesis*. London: Longman.

Krashen, S. (1991). The input hypothesis: An update. *Georgetown University round table on language and linguistics* (pp. 427-431). Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press.

Krashen, S. (1993a). *The power of reading*. Englewood, Co: Libraries Unlimited.

Krashen, S. (1993b). The case for free voluntary reading. *The Canadian Modern Language Review, 50*, 72-82.

Krashen, S. (1995). The reading hypothesis, the expanded reading hypothesis, and the greatly expended reading hypothesis. *School Library Media Quarterly, Spring*, 187-193.

Krashen, S. (2007). Extensive reading in English as foreign language by adolescents and young adults: A meta-analysis. *International Journal of Foreign Language Teaching, 3*(2), pp. 23-29.

Kuhn, M., & Stahl, S. (2003). Fluency: A review of developmental and remedial practices. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 95*, pp. 3-21.

Lao, C. Y., & Krashen, S. (2000). The impact of popular literature study on literacy development in EFL: *More evidence for the power of reading. System, 28*(2), pp. 261-270.

Laufer, B. (1987). The lexical perspective of reading comprehension. *English Teachers Journal, 35*, 58-67.

Lai, S. (2004). *High school English teacher's beliefs on grammar instruction in Taiwan* (Unpublished master's thesis). National Taiwan Normal University, Taipei, Taiwan.

Liu, H., & Wu, H. (2011). Impact of extensive reading on young EFL learners' vocabulary knowledge, reading proficiency, and motivation for learning English. *NPUST Humanities and Social Science Research, 5*(1), pp. 1-21.

Liu, N., & Nation, P. (1985). Factors affecting guessing vocabulary in context. *RELC Journal, 16* (1), 33-42.

Mason, J. (1996). *Qualitative Researching*. London: Sage.

McQuillan, J. (2006). The effects of print access and print exposure on English vocabulary acquisition of language minority students. *The Reading Matrix, 6*, 41-51.

Mermelstein, A. D., (2010), Matching teaching styles to promote student success, 2010 *International Conference and Workshop on TEFL & Applied Linguistics*, Crane Publishing co. LTD, Taipei, Taiwan, pp. 351-360.

Nation, P. (2008). *Teaching vocabulary: Strategies and techniques*, Heinle Cengage Learning: Boston.

Nunan, D. (1991). *Language teaching methodology: A textbook for teachers*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Nuttal, C. (1982). *Teaching reading skills in a foreign language*. London: Heinemann.

Pigada, M., & Schitt, N. (2006). Vocabulary acquisition from extensive reading: A case study. *Reading in a Foreign Language, 18*, 1-28.

Rao, Z. (2002). Chinese students' perceptions of communicative and non-communicative activities in EFL classroom. *System*, 30, 85–105.

Richards, J.C. (2006). *Communicative language teaching today*. Cambridge University Press: NY.

Robb, T., & Susser, B. (1989). Extensive reading vs. skills building in an EFL context. *Reading in a Foreign Language, 5*, 239-251.

Robb, T., & Kano, M. (2013). Effective extensive reading outside the classroom: A large-scale experiment. *Reading in a Foreign Language, 25* (2), 234-247.

Sheu, S. P.-H. (2003). Extensive reading with EFL learners at beginning level. *TESL Reporter*, *36*, 8–26.

Simensen, A. (1987). Adapted readers: How are they adapted? *Reading in a Foreign Language, 4* (1), 41-57.

Susser, B., & Robb, T. (1990). EFL extensive reading instruction: Research and procedure. *JALT Journal, 12*, 161-185.

Takase, A. (2002). The effects of extensive reading on Japanese high school students. *JALT 2002 Conference presentation* summary.

Tudor, F., & Hafiz, I. (1989). Extensive reading and the development of language skills. *ELT Journal, 43*, 4-13.

Wang, Y. (2013a). Creating Taiwanese EFL learners' positive reading attitudes through the paired think-aloud reading method. *Journal of National Kaohsiung University or Applied Sciences, 42*, 201-220.

Wang, Y. (2013b). Incidental vocabulary learning through extensive reading: A case of lower-level EFL Taiwanese learners. *The Journal of Asia TEFL, Vol. 10*, No. 3, pp. 59-80.

Waring, R. (2006). Why extensive reading should be an indispensable part of all language programs. *The Language Teacher, 30*(7), pp.44-47.

Yamashita, J. (2013). Effects of extensive reading on reading attitudes in a foreign language. *Reading in a Foreign Language, Vol. 25*, No. 2, pp. 248-264.