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## CURRICULUM & TEACHING STUDIES | RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Why don't they do it? A study on the implementation of extensive reading in Taiwan

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**Abstract:** The study aims to verify whether extensive reading (ER) is able to promote senior high school students' English reading motivation and foster positive attitude towards reading in English. It further explores the teachers' perceptions of and the challenges faced in the implementation of ER activities. An ER activity was held for 12 weeks with 258 participants from 4 senior high schools in Southern Taiwan. Focus group interviews were then carried out with 72 randomly selected participants, after which individual interviews were conducted with 6 English teachers from these participating schools. Findings reveal that despite the challenges encountered in implementing the activity, the English teachers observed its benefits and were willing to encourage students to read extensively. The majority of the student participants also held positive attitudes towards the ER activity. Their positive attitudes, however, did not lead to the enhancement of their motivation in reading extensively due to the heavy workload from tests, homework or cram school. It was generally agreed that ER was time-consuming and not efficient enough to boost their exam scores. Accordingly, the study suggests that coordinated efforts and change of attitudes among the stakeholders are indispensable in the promotion of ER among senior high school students.

**Subjects:** Classroom Practice; Curriculum Studies; Education Studies

**Keywords:** extensive reading (ER); motivation; attitudes; EFL learners

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Yi-Cheng Huang is currently teaching as an assistant professor at Centre for General Education, I-Shou University, Taiwan. His research interests include learner attitudes and motivation in English learning. The research paper centres on a current issue that has received growing attention, that is, the promotion of English learning through extensive reading (ER).

### PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

Among different approaches for reading, extensive reading (ER) has a resurgence of interest, which might be the result of insights from second language acquisition studies into the role of input in language learning. A wealth of research has reported the positive influences ER has on a range of L2 skills and abilities, such as reading comprehension, reading fluency, reading strategies or skills and positive attitudes. Despite the growing interest in ER and awareness of its advantages in language learning, ER has neither received much attention nor been prevalent in practice in many contexts, such as Taiwan. The study aims to verify whether an ER activity is able to foster positive attitudes towards reading in English among senior high school students. It further explores English teachers' perceptions and the challenges they faced during the implementation of the ER activity, from which the reasons why ER cannot be more prevalent are revealed.

## 1. Research background

Reading is undoubtedly one of the essential skills that second or foreign language learners should acquire. We learn to read by reading, which is something that can be indulged in from the beginning of learning a language. In the past decades, reading extensively has been widely discussed, and its advantages to language learners have been approved by a variety of studies (Bell, 2001; Day & Bamford, 2009; Leung, 2002; Yamashita, 2008). A wealth of research has reported the positive influences extensive reading (ER) has on a range of L2 skills and abilities, such as reading comprehension (Bell, 2001; Hafiz & Tudor, 1989; Leung, 2002; Nakanishi & Ueda, 2011; Yamashita, 2008), reading fluency (Iwahori, 2008), reading strategies or skills (Hayashi, 1999; Hitosugi & Day, 2004), writing (Hafiz & Tudor, 1989; Mason & Krashen, 1997), linguistic knowledge (Hedge, 1985; Yang, 2001) and positive attitudes (Constinito, 1995; Yamashita, 2013).

ER is also called by alternative terms such as “sustained silent reading” (Grabe, 1991) or “free voluntary reading” (Krashen, 1993). It refers to reading which students do mostly, although not exclusively, when they are away from the classroom (Harmer, 2007). It is defined as “the practice of reading large amounts of text for extended periods of time” and is believed to be a central part in the building of academic reading abilities (Grabe & Stoller, 2001). Students engaged in ER activity are encouraged to read self-selected, large quantities of materials for general understanding (Renandya & Jacobs, 2008). To achieve this, the level of the reading text should correspond to the students’ proficiency level.

Despite the growing interest in ER and awareness of its advantages in the learning of a second or foreign language, ER has neither received much attention nor been prevalent in practice in the context of Taiwan since more than a decade ago (Sheu, 2004). The exam-oriented English learning environment in Taiwan leads English teachers to adopt the text-based intensive reading approach, concentrating on a close study of vocabulary and grammar (Sheu, 2003). The intensive reading approach is generally believed to be efficient in enhancing students’ grades on English tests and exams. The prevalence of intensive reading might also be a result of the limited weekly teaching hours for the English course, which puts senior high school teachers under the pressure of both the scheduled-linked progress and preparing students to pass examinations.

As Guo (2012) indicated, it is from the classrooms that EFL students receive most of their language input. They generally do not take the initiative to obtain resources about foreign language learning outside of class or to do extra reading beyond a course requirement. EFL learners in Taiwan are similar in that they are mostly passive in learning English. Their contact with English is mainly through teachers’ class instruction, which is very much guided by the English textbooks and various types of tests and exams.

Since ER activity in English is uncommon in high school due to the rigid schedule and limited teaching hours, little has been known concerning EFL learners’ attitudes towards ER. It has not been further explored whether Taiwanese EFL learners favour the activity of ER and the reasons why ER cannot become more popular. For these reasons, this study intends to investigate students’ attitudes towards the ER activity. It then explores teachers’ perceived challenges during the implementation of the activity as well as the possibilities of including it in the high school English curriculum. Based on an understanding of both students’ and teachers’ perceptions of ER, suggestions will be made on how to overcome the obstacles during the promotion of ER. It is hoped the findings can raise awareness of the importance of ER among stakeholders and further provide pedagogical suggestions concerning ER to educators in contexts with similar challenges.

## 2. Review of literature

### 2.1. Extensive reading

Reading has been widely recognized as a complex yet crucial activity for foreign language learners. Reading written texts extensively helps to enhance the process of the learners’ language acquisition.

Among different approaches for reading, ER has a resurgence of interest, which might be the result of insights from second language acquisition studies into the role of input in the language learning process. Individual ER outside class time, for example, can be regarded as a valuable input-enabling activity (Hedge, 2000).

According to Hedge (2000), there hasn't been a consensus among researchers on the definition of ER, but one of its key characteristics is reading large quantities of material, including novels or short stories, newspaper or magazine articles. Other characteristics include reading consistently on a regular or frequent basis, and reading for general meaning mainly for pleasure, curiosity or professional interest (Hedge, 2000).

An alternative term used to define ER is "pleasure reading" (Mikulecky, 1990) since apart from acquiring new information and ideas, the readers may also find pleasure in the process of reading. I think ER can also be named "joyful reading" because extensive readers should feel joyful in reading when reading is its own reward. Richards and Schmit (2002) pointed out that ER intends to develop good reading habits. It could help learners not only enjoy reading but acquire the lifelong reading habit (Jacobs, Davis, & Renandya, 1997). Through ER, learners are likely to form a reading habit that will develop into a pastime of their life (Haider & Akhter, 2012).

The advantages of ER have been extensively discussed, and the research interest in its value has also developed considerably. Two of the most well-known academic frameworks that are in support of ER are Krashen's (1982) input hypothesis and reading hypothesis (Krashen, 1993). The input hypothesis states that second language learners require comprehensible input, input that is a little beyond their current level of understanding, to progress in language learning. The reading hypothesis, on the other hand, claims that comprehensible input in the form of reading helps to stimulate language acquisition:

Reading is responsible for much of our competence in reading comprehension, writing style, vocabulary, spelling and advanced grammatical competence. (Krashen, 1994, p. 46)

According to Krashen's (1985) theories, language learners should be exposed to large amounts of comprehension input which is meaningful, relevant and interesting. In other words, language learners can advance their language competence through ER on the condition that the reading materials are carefully selected to suit their level of comprehension.

Hedge (1985) claimed that when students are exposed to an input-rich and enjoyable environment, their knowledge of language will increase and they will naturally become more eager to learn. Other researchers have proven the positive effects ER may have on language learning, such as on students' vocabulary knowledge, spelling or writing (Harmer, 2007). Students learn the way how sentences, paragraphs and texts are constructed through the demonstration of reading materials. Moreover, interesting topics introduced by good reading texts can excite the readers' imagination and stimulate discussion (Harmer, 2007).

Hafiz and Tudor (1989) set up a three-month ER programme, in which graded readers were used to investigate the effects of ER for pleasure in the improvement of subjects' linguistic skills. The results indicated that the experimental subjects had a marked improvement in their performance, particularly in terms of their writing skills. Day and Bamford (2009) also argued that ER advances learners' understanding of the structure of sentences as well as English writing, which furthers the improvement of their reading comprehension.

Hayashi (1999) investigated reading strategies and the effects of ER on Japanese university students' proficiency in English. Findings of the study indicated that compared with learning reading strategies, reading extensively in second and foreign languages was more crucial in enhancing EFL

learners' reading skills. The students also reported that the ER programme helped them in improving their vocabulary recognition, reading strategies and motivation for reading more in English.

Similarly, Carrell, Devine, and Eskey (2000) stressed the importance of ER in the improvement of reading skills. They argued that reading extensively for a given period was beneficial to the development of both top-down and bottom-up reading skills. Concerning the bottom-up skills, Adams (1998) claimed that ER improved the readers' decoding ability and word recognition through exposure to large amounts of written materials. As for the top-down skills, Grabe (2009) pointed out that ER extended readers' conceptual and background knowledge, which helps them to comprehend similar contents when reading other materials.

Advocates of ER suggest that students should be encouraged to read extensively both inside and outside the language classroom. For example, Nuttall (2005) asserted that students should be encouraged to do ER because the more they read, the better they become in reading. Grabe (2009) argued that readers' background knowledge and reading comprehension could be enhanced through ER. Students' attitudes towards reading would become more positive when they are provided with reading materials that are written or adapted to suit their level (Day & Bamford, 2009).

Observing the advantages that ER may bring, many suggest that ER should be incorporated in the English reading activities whether inside or outside of the EFL classrooms. A number of EFL researchers examined the effects of ER through incorporating an ER programme into the classroom and concluded that it was a good way to enhance learners' reading proficiency (e.g. Day & Bamford, 1998; Krashen, 1982). It is a general belief that students need to receive extensive input to develop their language proficiency.

## **2.2. Attitudes and ER**

Understanding L2 learners' attitudes towards reading is believed to be important in encouraging their involvement in ER. It was asserted that positive feelings in L2 motivated students to be engaged more in ER (Yamashita, 2004). Day and Bamford (2009) reported that students' reading attitudes were likely to be influenced by ER when the reading materials were of interest to them. As a result of the developed positive attitudes towards the people and culture of the second language, learners' internal or integrative motivation might be promoted. They proposed a number of factors that may influence learners' second language reading attitude, claiming that students who have positive attitudes to reading in their native language tend to have good attitudes towards reading in a second language.

Asraf and Ahmad's (2003) study explored whether and how students would benefit from ER and the possibility of making the ER programme a feature of the English language programme for rural schools. They implemented an ER programme in three Malaysian rural secondary and middle schools. As the programme progressed, most of the students who were initially reluctant readers developed positive attitudes towards reading in English. Due to the limited period of time the programme was held, findings of the study did not confirm whether students' English proficiency had been promoted.

Powell (2005) examined the theory and practice of ER in foreign language learning in the context of Japan. The study reported on a survey carried out at a high school with a functioning ER programme. The first-year high school students joined an ER programme in which they were required to do ER activity twice a week for a whole year. Findings revealed that ER played a vital role in high school English teaching, as it contributed to the improvements of not only students' ability in but also their attitude towards reading in English.

More studies have proved that students who engaged in ER programmes were highly motivated and might develop a positive attitude towards reading in the L2 (Nakanishi & Ueda, 2011; Safaiea & Bulca, 2013; Takase, 2007). The atmosphere of the second language classroom is crucial in the

development of learners' positive reading attitude. Day and Bamford (2009) argued that ER programmes facilitate a harmonious classroom environment, which allowed learners to have an enjoyable reading experience and develop positive attitude to English reading. In addition, timely assistance from the teachers is beneficial in helping to develop learners' positive attitude. Mckenna, Ellsworth, and Kear (1995) noted that when teachers give appropriate assistance, learners are likely to have a successful experience of reading in the second language and generate positive attitudes towards reading.

Since teachers play an important role in encouraging and assisting students with the reading tasks they take during and after class, their perceptions are critical in the promotion of ER, particularly in a teacher-centred EFL context like Taiwan. Haider and Akhter (2012) explored the current practices of ER in the EFL classrooms at junior secondary schools in Bangladesh. One of their major findings was that English teachers exhibited positive beliefs about the benefits of ER. However, the techniques teachers adopted in their classrooms mostly encourage intensive reading. Teachers who deal with ER in the classrooms often did not follow the best teaching practices. Accordingly, it was suggested that coordinated efforts were required from all the stakeholders in the secondary education system if ER was to be promoted in the Bangladeshi schools.

Macalister's (2010) study investigated ER in a higher education context. Interviews were conducted with 36 teachers involved in preparation courses at language teaching centres in New Zealand. The results showed that teachers generally held positive beliefs about the language learning benefits of ER, but their beliefs generally did not lead to an inclination of including ER in the classroom English curriculum. The realities of the wider educational context were regarded as the vital reason why ER was not more widespread. Macalister (2010) asserted that teacher education, new research, changes in course design, awareness raising among administrators and managers, as well as improved resource provision were crucial in the promotion of ER in higher educational contexts.

More reasons were reported as to why the strong and widely disseminated evidence that supports ER does not lead to its frequent or completely successful implementation. As Jacobs and Gallo (2002) asserted, teachers are often under great pressure from administrators, community members and others to finish the syllabus. Besides, Bamford and Day (1997) pointed out that the key impediment to successful implementation of ER lies in a teacher-centred view of reading instruction, which is prevalent in many Asian countries. In Taiwan, for instance, ER has not gained widespread acceptance in high schools, just like the situation in Japan (Powell, 2005; Tanaka & Stapleton, 2007). High school teachers are usually expected to boost students' academic performance, which can be more easily observed than other aspects of improvement.

The reviewed literature shows that a wealth of research has reported on the positive effects that ER has on a range of L2 skills and abilities. In fact, these reported benefits are not contradictory to the goal that high school students are pursuing in learning English in Taiwan. It would therefore be significant to investigate whether ER could play a role in Taiwanese high school English teaching, in which ER is sparsely practiced. With an understanding of how English learners and teachers perceive ER, the possibilities and challenges of including ER in the school English curriculum can be further examined.

On the basis of the reviewed literature and current situation, the following research questions are addressed:

- (1) How have students' attitudes towards reading in English changed since joining the ER activity?
- (2) What are the six high school English teachers' perceptions of the ER activity?
- (3) What are the challenges in implementing an English ER activity in Taiwanese senior high schools?

### **3. Research method**

To answer the proposed research questions, an ER activity was set up and carried out for 12 weeks, from October to December 2014. A total of 258 senior high school students were invited to take part in the ER activity. Focus group interviews with some of the student participants were conducted to explore how they perceived the activity and whether there were changes in their attitudes towards reading in English after 12 weeks of participation.

Another aim of this study was to reveal the challenges that the participating teachers and schools had encountered while assisting the progress of the ER activity. It further intended to explore the potential difficulties schools may have if the English ER activity was incorporated into the regular English curriculum. To obtain the desired data, six English teachers from the participating schools were invited to join an individual interview and respond to a set of semi-structured questions. The in-depth interviews were designed to gather English teachers' viewpoints and suggestions on a more successful implementation of ER in high school.

It is worth noting that apart from the earlier-mentioned factors that impede the implementation of ER, Maley (2009) proposed other reasons why ER was not used more often. Among the reasons, the unavailability of reading materials, lack of understanding of its benefits, the pressure on and resistance from teachers were the key factors. Accordingly, the present study tries to reduce the influence of these impeding factors by first providing appropriate English reading materials to the participating schools. Secondly, the researcher endeavoured to win cooperation of the school principals and teachers by introducing to them ER and its benefits at the beginning stage of the reading activity.

#### **3.1. Recruitment of participants**

The participants of the ER activity were all 11th-grade EFL learners from 6 different classes of 4 senior high schools located in Southern Taiwan. These students were 16 or 17 years of age and had learned English for at least 7 years since they were in elementary school. Their level of English proficiency ranged from pre-intermediate to intermediate. The students' first language, Mandarin Chinese, was used as the main language for daily communication.

Prior to the study being carried out, efforts were made to recruit the participating schools. To begin with, it was a challenging task to convince the school principals and teachers that the ER activity had potential benefits to the students. Fortunately, the researcher was acquainted with the principals of two of the schools, who not only agreed to persuade their English teachers to provide assistance but also helped pave the way for successful recruitment of another two participating schools. The activity required the participation of the students, so the next step was to obtain their consents before it could be formally carried out. The English teachers who agreed to participate helped persuade their own classes to join, that is, the selection of the student participants was through convenience sampling.

Teachers play a guiding role in students' learning at school, particularly in a context like Taiwan, where teacher-centred reading instruction remains prevalent. Therefore, the English teachers of the six participating classes were invited to get involved in the activity by providing considerable help in assisting the students when they came across difficulties in reading. To validate the collected data through data source triangulation, the researcher also obtained the teachers' agreement to participate in an in-depth interview towards the end of the activity.

#### **3.2. Research procedures**

In Taiwan, senior high school students normally have about six to eight hours of English class each week. The rigid schedule could not make extra time for an in-class ER activity. For this reason, the ER activity was designed for students to complete the reading mostly after school. As for the amount of

reading, there have been debates regarding how much reading needs to be done to qualify as “extensive.” Susser and Robb (1990) suggested that the amount of reading should range from an hour per evening to at least two books a week. Similar to the situation of Japan (Powell, 2005), a degree of flexibility seems necessary when considering the availability of students’ time that can be devoted to ER in the context of Taiwan. With the concern, the researcher planned to complete the ER activity within 12 weeks, during which the students were required to finish 6 English readers that matched their English level or proficiency.

The ER activity started from mid-October and ended in December 2014. It began by introducing ER to the students, who were further guided about what to do in the following weeks. The six English teachers from the participating schools first offered useful advice during the preparation of the readers to ensure that the readers cover a wide range of topics and would appeal to senior high school students in general. Based on their suggestions, the researcher selected and provided 80 appropriate English readers to each of the participating classes. The reading materials were carefully chosen in order to be within the participants’ linguistic ability and to fit their personal interest. The selection of the readers was based on Day and Bamford’s (2002) principles regarding how teachers could teach ER.

In addition, the teachers of the six classes provided students with around 90–120 different English graded readers available at the school library. A graded reader is “a story that has been adapted for people learning to read or learning a foreign language” (Collins Cobuild Advanced Dictionary of American English, 2007). These teachers gave advice to the students with regard to which level of readers were suitable for them to read. Every other week, the participants had to choose one reader they had interest in from all the provided English readers. The students then took the reader home to read whenever they wanted to for at least 30 min per day. The teacher and researcher kept reminding the students that they could stop at any time when they thought the content did not appeal to them anymore or when they found it too difficult to continue reading. When this happened, they were free to return the reader to exchange for another to read.

Before the ER activity, the researcher spent one class session, which was around 45 min, introducing not only the benefits of ER but some reading skills to all of the participating students. The researcher tried to work in collaboration with the high school English teachers to encourage the students to read extensively and as much as they could during the 12 weeks. They were discouraged from using the dictionary when they encountered new vocabulary. Instead, they were encouraged to read at a fast pace for general understanding by guessing the meaning of the words from the context, the previous or following sentences. Making predictions was another useful skill introduced to help the students make use of their previous knowledge while reading. The students were suggested to find out whether their prediction was correct or not from the subsequent development of the plots.

An enjoyable and harmonious classroom environment is viewed as an important factor in fostering enjoyable reading experience and developing positive attitude to English reading (Day & Bamford, 2009). To create such an atmosphere and to assist students’ ER after class, the researcher visited each of the classes every week. The students were asked to work in groups and share with group members their reading experiences and the plots of the readers they were reading at that time. The researcher also tried to deal with the difficulties students encountered during both the group discussion and their individual reading at home.

Regular monitoring is recommended by Renandya and Jacobs (2008), especially when the ER activity is carried out with reluctant readers. Therefore, on each visit, the researcher took the opportunity to read the students’ weekly reading log designed to keep track of their progress. The visit and check helped to not only learn more about the participants’ reading process but also ensure that the students finished reading one book in two weeks. At the end of each visit, the researcher would introduce and recommend the variety of readers available for the participants to choose from next time.

### **3.3. The interviews and data analysis**

When the reading activity ended in December, the research conducted two focus group interviews in each of the six participating classes. Since each of the 12 interviews had 6 student participants, there were a total of 72 students invited to join. Some of the interviewees were volunteers and some were recommended by their teachers. They all agreed to be interviewed and recorded throughout the interviews. The student interviewees were asked a total of 12 interview questions which were divided into two sections, each exploring students' attitudes towards and suggestions regarding the ER activity. Each participant in the focus group was asked to respond to every question, whether they had a lot to say or not.

Upon the completion of students' interviews, the six English teachers of the six participating classes were invited to join the following individual interview. A total of eight semi-structured interview questions were asked to reveal the teachers' perceptions of the ER activity as well as the difficulties they encountered while assisting the implementation of the activity. The interviews with the teachers also aimed to clarify some findings of the students' focus group interviews.

In order to obtain richer and more insightful data for analysis, the interviewees' first language, Mandarin Chinese, was used as the medium during the interviews so that the interviewees were able to express themselves more thoroughly. The process of data analysis was mainly based on the audio recording, from which an abridged transcript of the relevant and useful part of the discussion was developed. The researchers invited two colleagues to help ensure that the transcription and translation were close to the original recordings. To present the findings and discussions, only the key ideas and main themes arising through the discussions were picked out and categorized.

## **4. Findings and implications**

### **4.1. Students' interviews**

The interviews with students showed that the ER activity did have positive effects on their attitudes towards reading in English. The majority of participants thought ER was beneficial in promoting their English reading ability. Moreover, many students agreed that this activity more or less expanded their vocabulary, if not their interest or autonomy in English reading. The student participants had perceived or heard about the advantages of ER; however, they were generally not keen on making it a habit. As one of the interviewees, Alice, expressed, "The extensive reading activity may be helpful, but I think it takes effect very slowly. What matters to me most now is performing well on tests and exams." Another interviewee, Jeff, mentioned, "Most of my time after school is occupied by school assignment or attending a cram school. When I have a little time for myself, I prefer doing something more relaxing, such as playing on-line games or surfing on the Internet."

Some participants expressed that they got so used to the intensive way of reading in English that they found it hard to adopt the particular skills for ER. As interviewee Jessie recalled, "When I read, I can't help figuring out the meaning of every word and each sentence. I rely much on the English-Chinese dictionary and cannot go on reading by skipping the vocabulary I don't know." Another interviewee, Darren, shared similar viewpoint by saying, "I think I am more used to reading in English in the way I learn from school or cram school, where our teachers always make sure we know the meaning of every word and sentence."

The participants' comments indicate that the ER activity does successfully develop their positive attitudes towards reading in English and expand their vocabulary. On the other hand, the participants have not adjusted themselves to a more extensive way of reading, and this experience does not help develop a new habit of reading in English among the participants.

In general, the participating students can be categorized into two types. The first type was active and hard-working readers. They found ER to be helpful in expanding vocabulary and enhancing both reading skills and proficiency. However, the biggest challenge they encountered was that ER was too



time-consuming. As participant Ann stated, “Although this activity was useful in expanding my vocabulary and English reading ability, it took away too much of my time regularly spent on preparing for my schoolwork.”

When asked if the ER activity motivated them to actively pick up English readers to read at their leisure time, the intrinsically motivated students tend to answer in a positive way. As participant Dave remarked, “I have the habit of reading and consistently read for my own interest. From this activity I learned more about the advantages of ER, so it will just make me a more active reader.” Another interviewee, Norah, answered, “I am glad to learn about all the benefits of reading from the researcher and my English teacher. I think my motivation in English reading will remain the same because it is one of my favorite pastimes.” Other similar accounts conclude that the ER activity can help to not only sustain but strengthen students’ interest in reading when their motivation to read is intrinsic.

The second type of readers was more passive. They tended to skim through the English readers too quickly so as to finish the “assigned task” with fewer efforts. For example, a passive reader Eric confessed, “I am not very interested in reading, and my reading rate is incredibly slow; to be honest, I don’t think this activity has changed my attitude toward or motivation in reading.” One discouraging finding from among this type of learners is that some of them chose an easy way out by picking out English readers with stories they were already familiar with to read. The students admitted that towards the later period of the activity, more and more of them chose familiar stories to read after finding out this good way to save their reading time. Another common solution they adopted was to search on the Internet for the Chinese version of the reader to boost not only their speed of finishing assignment, but also comprehension of the English reader.

#### **4.2. Teachers’ interviews**

The interviews with the six English teachers from the four schools revealed that all of them believed ER would be an effective way to develop reading habits and enhance English proficiency. As teacher Sophie commented, “I think the ER activity provides students with the opportunity to develop reading habits.” Similarly, teacher Alice expressed, “Students’ English proficiency can be best promoted through reading extensively, rather than from simply studying the English textbooks.”

On the other hand, most teachers also reported that their students were mostly passive readers. In spite of the efforts made by the researcher and teachers to advocate the advantages of ER before the activity, the majority of students still regarded ER as an extra task or assignment instead of something done for pleasure. From the 12 weeks, the teachers observed that reading, particularly in English, was not a habit that could be built within a short period of time. For example, teacher Mike commented, “I think this activity particularly strengthens the motivation of my students who already have the habit of reading. However, extra reading seems to become a burden to those who do not read on a regular basis.”

The teacher participants generally agreed that the ER activity was beneficial and had enhanced some, although not all, of the students’ English reading comprehension to a certain extent. Results of the English teachers’ interviews were consistent with Macalister’s (2010) research findings reported earlier in Section 2.2. On the other hand, all of the six teachers also observed the difficulties in the implementation of ER due to both the rigid English curriculum and exam-oriented education system.

As teacher Ivy reported, “My students complained that preparing for the weekly tests and monthly exams on various subjects left them little time for free reading.” Another teacher, James, stated that a considerable number of his students failed to finish the assigned reading as scheduled due to lack of either time or interest in reading. Similarly, teacher Sophie shared her perception, “I think my

students need more incentives and time to read more.” Observing these challenges, the interviewed teachers generally did not think it would be efficacious to incorporate ER into the regular English curriculum.

To sum up, the contradictory phenomenon revealed is that the positive attitudes held by the English teachers towards ER cannot overcome the obstacles they perceive in its implementation in the current English learning environment of senior high school. It can be observed from the teacher participants’ interview accounts that the pressure on and resistance from teachers are still not uncommon when it comes to ER.

### **5. Discussion and pedagogical implications**

One of the important aims of ER is to allow the readers to read joyfully. Nevertheless, more than half of the student participants in the study were found to be unmotivated readers. This preliminary study thus could not achieve optimal benefits when students were mostly not “hooked” on reading, as claimed by Renandya and Jacobs (2008). Most students also complained about the insufficient time that could be allocated to the assigned ER at home. Under the time and exam pressure at the students’ current English learning stage, it becomes doubtful whether the participants could find real pleasure in the process of ER.

Another challenge was that even when the researcher and teachers worked collaboratively to select appropriate English readers to match the participants’ proficiency level, the interviewed students still reported that not all of the readers were interesting or motivating enough for them. The limited choices of readers available for the students might be a limitation of the present study. Particularly with less motivated students, it is not an easy task to find a variety of materials that suit their reading tastes and to get them interested or even hooked on reading.

Williams (1986) had once claimed that “in the absence of interesting text, very little is possible.” A suggestion for future studies is that different types of reading materials, such as magazines, newspaper articles, pop songs’ lyrics or even online novels, can be incorporated into the ER activity, as long as they are attractive to the readers. In situation where budget is limited, sufficient funding is necessary to provide a wide range of books of different levels to meet students’ needs. More varieties of choices may provide readers with higher chances of finding the reading materials of their interest, enhancing the likelihood of “joyful reading.”

The teachers, on the other hand, have practical reasons to not to consider including ER in the regular English curriculum. Their pressure of finishing the syllabus in time and enhancing students’ grades comes from the parents, school administrators or even the community members. ER may help in promoting students’ English proficiency in the long run; however, its effect cannot be easily assessed. In an exam-oriented environment like Taiwan, preparing students for exams by having them do large numbers of exercises that mirror exam questions may be a short-sighted, but much more practical instruction. This reflects Green’s (2005) argument that the benefits of ER activities in fostering second language acquisition over the long term could not guarantee satisfaction of learners’ short-term purposes.

Given the fact that the ER activity for this study was conducted for 12 weeks only, it may not have a thorough impact on the learners yet. Although the findings cannot be generalized to a wider population, the preliminary study has revealed a number of challenges that educational reformers may consider when trying to promote students’ lifelong learning in English. Teachers of English may be inclined to assume that students must like reading in English as much as they do. However, it is undeniable that the students nowadays are more easily attracted by other more exciting distractions, such as getting on the Internet, Facebooking or playing online games. Technological development and the influence brought by the electronic media make it even more challenging to develop and sustain students’ reading habits.

To overcome the new challenge, it is getting important that language teachers be responsible for guiding learners to discover the pleasure and benefits in English reading by themselves (Powell, 2005). Teachers play decisive roles in promoting students' active participation in reading and further encouraging them to move away from being passive readers. Professional training for teachers can be helpful in raising teachers' awareness. The ultimate aim of implementing ER, after all, should be to develop autonomous and lifelong readers rather than readers whose only aim is to pass exams. Teachers need to be aware that if they want to be more successful in encouraging students to read, they may need to practice what they preach (Renandya & Jacobs, 2008) to send students the message that reading is truly valuable.

Research studies on ER at high school levels rarely emphasize on the role of parents in its implementation process. Since ER is often extended from school to home, parents play important roles in supporting and sustaining children's habit of reading. Unfortunately, a considerable number of Taiwanese parents lack the skill or habit of reading themselves. In fact, the promotion of ER requires more than just the teachers' emphasis on its importance; rather, it would be more successful if parents can pay more attention to the importance of reading or practice what they preach. The success of ER could be more achievable if parents change their attitudes of viewing extra reading as a waste of time. Coordinated efforts of all the stakeholders, including school teachers, policy-makers, parents, and most importantly students themselves, are indispensable to promote good practice of ER in English among high school English learners. For parents and related stakeholders who fail to see the benefits and value of ER, workshops in any forms can be provided for them on a regular basis to raise their awareness of its value.

Findings of the present study are consistent with those reported in earlier studies, that the realities of the wider educational context may impede the prevalence of ER. However, the potential obstacles are not insurmountable. Although the time, energy and resources required for successful implementation of ER might seem significant, the benefits it can bring to ESL or EFL learners can outweigh the efforts made (Bell, 1998). The ultimate aim of teaching reading should be to develop lifelong readers, rather than just to prepare learners to get good grades on any reading tests. Positive attitudes are essential in sustaining EFL learners' habit of reading, and it is through ER that teachers and educators can develop more positive attitudes towards reading among learners.

## 6. Conclusion

A suggestion derived from the research findings is that if the English ER activity is to be incorporated in the current high school curriculum in the context of Taiwan, it has to be promoted through raising awareness among teachers, education administrators, parents and students themselves. Changes in the course design, ways of evaluating and examining the students and improved resource provision are all essential in the promotion of ER. Although lifelong learning seems easier said than done, this ultimate goal of ER is worth pursuing. After all, learning should not be temporary but a self-motivated and continuing process.

In the relevant literature, little has been mentioned regarding parents' roles, which the researcher believes are decisive in the promotion of ER, particularly in the context of Asia. Achieving high scores may not be the chief goal of ER, but if it is really inevitable in some particular contexts such as Asia, then parents are advised to become acquainted with researchers' suggestion that ER is precisely the prescription for attaining high scores on reading exams (Jacobs & Gallo, 2002). Building up the habit of reading is a more significant long-term goal of ER, which takes time and requires interest and would not be easy for students to achieve without the support and encouragement of parents. Encouraging and sustaining children's habit of reading extensively should therefore be parents' ongoing task.

Due to the limited number of participating students and teachers, this small-scale study is a preliminary one and cannot expect to provide conclusive evidence regarding how high school students and English teachers view ER in general. Nevertheless, the obtained results may reflect the realities

of the wider educational context beyond the local setting. Findings of the study may also provide useful references to high school English teachers or educational reformers in other language teaching communities, where similar challenges exist in the implementation of ER in English.

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## Appendix A

### Interview Questions

#### (1) Questions for Students

- (i) How do you like the extensive reading (ER) activity?
- (ii) How have your attitudes towards reading in English changed after participating in the ER activity?
- (iii) How helpful is the ER activity in improving your English?
- (iv) Have you encountered any difficulties when doing ER? If yes, what are they?
- (v) Does the ER activity motivate you to actively pick up English readers to read at your leisure time?

#### (2) Questions for Teachers

- (i) What do you think of the ER activity?
- (ii) To what extent does the ER activity benefit your students?
- (iii) Do you perceive any difficulties in its implementation? If yes, what is the biggest challenge?
- (iv) Do you agree with including ER in the regular English curriculum? Why or why not?
- (v) What suggestions would you give to teachers who consider implementing the ER activity at school?



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