Attributes of Student Success in the Extensive Reading Program at Feng Chia University: Initial Analysis of an Initial Implementation

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We report on the first year of the Extensive Reading (ER) Program now required of all entering students at Feng Chia University (Taichung, Taiwan). This initial investigation of the implementation of the program in 2018-2019 focuses on what seems to cause students to buy into or to opt out of the program, in order to provide feedback to teachers of Freshman English. Our discussion presents how we have begun to identify characteristics of both the best and the worst readers, keyed to a bilingual survey of all freshman students supplemented by a small sample of interviews with volunteers classified as readers and non-readers.

All entering students at Feng Chia University (Taichung, Taiwan), unless they are already-declared English majors, are required to take a Freshman English course for two credits, comprising 36 contact hours each semester. The class meets weekly and has midterms and final exams. All course materials are unified across student levels. For several years, a number of individual courses incorporated Extensive Reading (ER) in various ways and according to the *Freshman English Student Manual* (Lambert et al., 2015, p. 3), ER has been available to selected students as "independent self-study through the extensive reading program, vocabulary acquisition, the FCU *iLearn* System, and online multimedia language-learning sites." Starting in September 2018, Feng Chia increased

its English-language learning requirements for first year students. The Foreign Language Center, sponsored by the Center for General Education, implemented a new campus-wide Extensive Reading (ER) program, the goal of which is to increase students' literacy, fluency and exposure to authentic input.

Robb and Kano (2013, p. 245) sum up their findings about large-scale ER program implementation with the following four requirements for success:

> *1. The administration requires ER from all students in a specific range of classes.*
>
> *2. There is an effective way to hold students accountable for their reading that does not increase the instructors' workloads.*
>
> *3. Likewise, final assessment is performed in a manner that is relatively trouble-free for the instructors.*

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4. Book management is handled in a centralized, efficient manner, through the school library or a self-access center

Their work, like Koby's (2017) discussion of the development of a two-year program at Miyagi Gakuin Women's University, guided our initial implementation. Like Robb and Kano, Koby saw these as essential: (1) selection of book options; (2) targets for reading volume; (3) orientation to ER; (4) monitoring student progress, and (5) criteria for assessment. While the two universities are dissimilar in size and focus, the issues for beginning university students and the protocols for implementing an ER program are similar.

Students who can develop more positive attitudes toward reading are likely also to reap the benefits of increased language skills in several areas, as is discussed below. An increasing number of researchers have moved to investigate why and how students as well as instructors might be attracted to an ER program. Some highlights of their findings over the previous decade can be seen in the following brief descriptions. Brierley, Ruzicka, Sato, and Wakasugi (2010) used surveys of 73 students in three classes to elicit their attitudes about individual reading practices, such as using dictionaries or (much more popular) guessing at word meanings. Yamashita (2013) drew on an iconic model by Day and Bamford (1998) to explore changes in reading attitudes, reminding instructors that giving students freedom to choose reading materials will enhance their engagement with reading and with learning English. Beglar and Hunt (2014) suggested that extensive or pleasure reading, particularly of graded readers, can be shown to increase reading rate with lower and intermediate students. Tien (2015) conducted a study at a private university in Southern Taiwan, surveying 5,711 students across eight colleges. She found that the College of Management was probably the most positively disposed toward ER; she reports that 1,583 students responded, with nearly half offering comments about the program.

Program Qualifications: Placement and Targets

Feng Chia is a private, accredited university in the center of Taiwan that emphasizes business, technology and engineering in its 33 academic departments, and enrolls approximately 20,000 undergraduate and graduate students. For placement in university-mandated first-year English courses, students (approx. 4,000) in the entering or freshman class are separated into four levels based on their scores on the General Scholastic Ability Test taken in the third year of senior high school. For some, who for a variety of reasons may not possess a GSAT score, scores on other standardized exams may be used.

In the second week of the fall semester, we sent a bilingual (Mandarin-English) survey to the 3,800 students who were scheduled for Freshman English and participation in the ER program. We received 2,454 responses to this survey, which included two questions about origin and level into which the student had been placed, based on their college entrance exam score. 2319 of the respondents were from Taiwan, or 94.5%, and the remaining 135, or about 5.5%, were from other countries. Freshman English is taught to four levels. The number of respondents placed in Level 1 was 451, or 18.4%; nearly half (1195, or 48.7%) were placed into Level 2. Level 3 was the next largest grouping, with 730 students, or 29.7% and Level 4, the smallest group responding had 78 students, or 3.2%.

In 2018-2019, Level one students were those with the lowest score levels, typically

ranging between 200-250, which placed them as having beginner/elementary facility (or A1) on the Common European Framework (CEFR) scale. Level two students presented scores hovering around 300-400, or CEFR A2; Level three attained scores around 500, which placed them between CEFR A2 and B1; Level four students scored above 550, or CEFR B1, moving toward B2. Interestingly, Carlsen (2018) reports that B2 is the required criterion for foreign-language students seeking admission to European universities as it is the level most associated with academic success.

Each level was assigned to read different amounts per semester, with the first and second semester being of equal weights. After reviewing studies of Japanese, Hong Kong, and Vietnamese student readers, Beglar and Hunt (2014, p. 42) propose a minimum yearly target of 200,000 words for the top students in their study, which shows sensitivity to the wide range of fluency in second language learners. We reviewed the studies they discussed, and consulted the 'How Much Reading' section at Extensive Reading Central (https://www.er-central.com/). Our concern was for the two lower levels, and we were encouraged by the section conclusion: "As a low-level graded reader has about 3000-4000 words they only need to read a book a week before forgetting takes hold." Setting the targets for both the semester and the year would ask Level 1 students to read 10 to 12 books in a semester, and would ask Level 2 students to read probably a book a week. We continue to discuss these expectations with faculty in the Freshman English program.

Table 1: Annual target by semester for First-year students at each level

Level	Semester one target	Semester two target	Total for year target
Level 1	40,000	40,000	80,000
Level 2	80,000	80,000	160,000
Level 3	100,000	100,000	200,000
Level 4	100,000	100,000	200,000

How we – and they – know what they read

Students select books held in the Feng Chia library from roughly 8,000 graded level texts organized by the Extensive Reader Foundation; the books represent major world publishers such as Pearson, Macmillan, Penguin, and Cambridge University Press. These books have been bought over the last ten to twelve years and place in a special open section of the Library. Students can browse the collection, which is arranged by 9 levels of difficulty, and leaf through a book to see if it looks both interesting and not too difficult. Once they complete a book, students access brief quizzes to check their comprehension, using the *MReader* website. If they answer successfully, they are awarded the number of words associated with that book. The program keeps a running tabulation for individual students.

Methodology

The research was primarily conducted in two phases, with the first phase being a bilingual (English and Mandarin) survey, and the second being a small set of targeted interviews. The bilingual survey presented 12 questions on a Google form that was sent online to all Freshman English teachers (approximately 50) who were teaching students at any of the four levels. It requested them to ask their freshmen students to complete the survey on their own time. Results were collected by the Center's ER

Committee. Of the 3,800 students who participated in the ER program, we received 2,454 responses to this survey, for a 64.6% rate of return.

Our overarching purpose was to elicit what might cause a student to buy into the Extensive Reading Program, and what might cause the student to opt out. Accordingly, all questions were written both in English and in Chinese to avoid any issues with language ability. The first two questions were minimal demographics: question 1 established country of origin, while question 2 requested the level of their current English class (on a four-level scale). Ten questions were designed to elicit participant perceptions, presented as a Likert scale (McLeod, 2019). Responses of One represented Strongly Disagree and Five indicated Strongly Agree.

Results

Discussion of Bilingual Survey

On average, respondents "Agree" to the statements, "The required amount of reading was manageable", "I found the reading program to be a useful complement to the classroom portion of the course" and "Being able to select my own reading material was important and made the reading more enjoyable" with weighted means of 3.59 (SD=1.267), 3.69 (SD=1.181) and 3.40 (SD=1.244) respectively. Also, respondents "Strongly Agree" on average to the statement, "My instructor provided ongoing encouragement about the reading program" with a weighted mean of 4.33.

On the other hand, respondents selected "Neither Disagree nor Agree" to the statements "*MReader* offers an accurate assessment of my reading in the reading program", "I enjoyed the extensive reading program", "My reading ability has increased because of the reading program", "The extensive reading program improved my overall English skills" and "My feelings towards reading have changed, regardless of the language" with weighted means respectively of 3.29 (SD=1.192), 2.99(SD=1.129), 3.24 (SD=1.196), 3.22 (SD=1.177), and 3.34 (SD=1.182). Appendix A presents tables showing the analysis of means by the four levels.

Table 2: Replies by percentages to the 10 survey questions

Key words in questions	Likert scale score 5	Likert scale score 4	Likert scale score 3	Likert scale score 2	Likert scale score 1
1. manageable amount	31.10%	25.20%	24.20%	10.60%	8.80%
2. encouraging instructor	53.40%	30.70%	13.20%	1.80%	1.00%
3. enough books	31.70%	27.00%	26.60%	8.40%	6.40%
4. assessment correct	18.20%	25.10%	34.20%	12.60%	10.00%
5. useful for class	22.80%	29.30%	30.10%	8.90%	9.00%
6. enjoyed program	15.90%	18.10%	33.00%	15.80%	17.30%
7. improved reading	17.00%	24.20%	35.50%	12.30%	11.10%
8. improved skills	15.90%	24.50%	36.20%	12.60%	10.70%
9. liked selecting	22.70%	26.90%	28.90%	11.00%	10.50%
10. new attitude	19.40%	24.90%	35.90%	10.20%	9.70%

When combining scale scores 4 and 5 (Agree and Agree strongly), it is seen that students valued encouragement from the instructor the most highly (86.10%), and more than half thought the ER program had a manageable amount of reading (56.30%), that there were enough books available to sustain individual choices (58.70%), and that ER was useful for class (52.10). All the other scores were between 40 and 50%, except for one: "enjoyed the program", where the highest response was 'neutral'. This will, of course, be a major focus over the next several years.

Discussion

The second phase of the research was a set of interviews with a total of 16 students from classes taught by each of the four authors, selected from classes they taught at different levels, to represent the range of potential perceptions. The authors asked for four student volunteers from their classes, specifically soliciting two students who read well beyond the required minimum number of words and two who read well below this minimum, if they read any books at all. Two authors conducted the interview in Chinese to ensure that there was no confusion. Authors conducted the interviews in their offices, in the students' free time. Students were offered extra credit on a homework assignment of their choice as encouragement and incentivization. Both high-level and low-level students were offered the same amount of credit. Students have been given pseudonyms to maintain their anonymity.

Each person to be interviewed was asked the same four questions, with short follow-up prompts as needed to encourage the student to continue. The questions were:

1. Why did you read so much/ so little?

2. What, if anything, would you change about the ER program?

3. How has the program affected your reading for school and/or for pleasure?

Table 3: Achievements of opt-outs

Level	Student	Gender	First semester		Second semester		Major
			Word Count	Number of Books	Word Count	Number of Books	
1	Young	M	2,143	1	0	0	Fiber and composites
1	Joseph	M	14,279	2	7,856	2	Electronic Engineering
2	Stone	M	9,658	1	0	0	Public Finance
2	Tom	M	23,524	2	0	0	Accounting
3	Tim	M	72,032	7	0	0	Fiber and composites
3	Hung	M	105,348	12	7,731	2	Material science
4	Ray	M	100,600	11	34,606	3	Architecture
4	Tung	M	54,264	6	39,731	3	Communications Engineering

4. What would motivate you or others, to read more?

Opt-outs' learner beliefs affected their choice of actions. For opt-outs from both low- and high- levels, their beliefs towards the extensive program seemed to have affected their reading behaviors. Table 3 summarizes their extensive reading.

Beliefs held by these opt-outs were related to the following two aspects: first, whether they considered extensive reading benefits their own English learning, and second, whether they felt extensive reading is something worth spending time on. For example, high-level opt-outs indicated in the interviews that they did not see this program as a helpful English learning activity. When Ray (Level 4, Opt-out) was asked about why he failed to achieve the desired word amount, he replied:

> *The good thing about this program is that it may be beneficial to those intermediate learners of English, but if you administered this on high-level students, when there are other factors affecting me, this (program) could become a burden. (Level 4, Ray, Opt-out)*

> 這個體制好的點就是他對於那些可能英文程度是普普的人是好的…可是如果你對高級的學生這樣子的話…當我有其他因素去克制的時候,這樣子反而變成一個累贅。*(Level 4, Ray, Opt-out)*

Similarly, low level opt-outs were also affected by their beliefs about reading. Their choice, nonetheless, was not related to the benefits of this activity, but the value of the time learners spent on reading. Specifically speaking, they chose not to invest time in reading because this was not believed to be a cost-effective activity for them, considering the total amount of time they would have to spend, and the percentage assigned to the total grade of the Freshman English program. Stone (Level 2, Opt-out) from

the lower level explained why he did not even read a word in the second semester:

> *I did not learn English well in senior high school, and only got 6 in the scaled score in the General Scholastic Ability Test (for high school students to be admitted to a university in Taiwan). So, I don't think I can read 80,000 words in one semester. I think for me, to complete those 80,000 words is not really cost-effective. (Stone, Level 2, Opt-out)*

> 我在高中的時候英文就不太好…學測的時候也只有六級分…所以一學期要我讀八萬字的話, 是看不太完的…就我覺得我要把這八萬多看完的話, 我的收益是不太對稱的 (Stone, Level 2, Opt-out)

Stone's statement showed that he saw this activity from the perspective of cost-effectiveness, but a closer examination of his words reveals that he seemed to have a low self-efficacy belief in the face of this language task, believing that he lacked the ability to meet the requirement. In other words, his self-efficacy might have persuaded him out of trying to read.

A wealth of research has confirmed important sources of self-efficacy, with mastery experience being the most powerful one (Butz & Usher, 2015). That is, learners tend to interpret the results of their learning experiences and form conceptions about their ability to carry out subsequent learning tasks. In Stone's case, although his earlier English reading experience prior to university was unknown, it is likely that his reading experience (with only one book) in the first semester might have played a role and continued to influence his self-efficacy belief in the second semester.

Buy-ins' personal goals and sense of achievement were their most prominent motivators. Unlike opt-outs, whose reading behaviors were greatly influenced by their belief system, buy-ins frequently mentioned

Table 4: Reading achievement of buy-ins

Level	Student	Gender	First semester		Second semester		Major
			Word Count	Number of Books	Word Count	Number of Books	
1	Paul	M	24,783	5	34,988	4	Mechanical engineering
1	Bryan	M	166,585	23	46,539	8	Electronic engineering
2	Kate	F	158,673	14	184,377	13	Business
2	Belle	F	526,605	37	43,632	6	Precision system design
3	Lee	F	104,610	8	87,472	7	Environmental engineering
3	Hui	F	121,946	12	104,834	10	Land management
4	Pei	F	106,970	8	207,946	10	International Business
4	Huang	F	103,022	9	218,627	17	Civil Engineering

certain motivational factors during the interviews. For one thing, both low- and high- level learners were clear about their personal goals in learning English and saw Extensive Reading as a means of achieving the goal. For another, the sense of achievement gained during reading had motivated them to continue this task.

When asked about why she was able to surpass the required word count, Lee (Level 3, Buy-in) initially expressed her concerns about obtaining a good grade. However, later in the interview she shared her long-term goal – studying in a graduate institute. Kate (Level 2, Buy-in) also managed to stay at a desirable English level through engaging in reading, hoping that she would be able to work with foreigners and communicate effectively as an international volunteer during the winter break.

Another factor mentioned by both groups of buy-ins was their sense of achievement after completing reading. Gaining a higher word count either made them feel that they were "more capable than others" (Kate, Level 2, Buy-in) or gave them a positive feeling "upon seeing the word count

(shown on the individual *MReader* page) every time a quiz is completed" (Huang, Level 4, Buy-in).

In Dörnyei's (2005) L2 Motivational Self System, he highlights the importance of two future self-guides adapted from Markus and Nurius' (1986) and Higgins's (1987) theories: ideal L2 self and ought-to L2 self. The concept of ideal L2 self has been greatly investigated and was believed to be the strongest motivator as learners strive to reduce the discrepancy between his/her actual and ideal selves (Kim & Kim, 2014; Xie, 2014). The concept of ideal L2 self is manifested in the buy-ins' statements about why they were willing to (and motivated to) invest time in extensive reading program. As these learners were clear about their future selves as an English learner/user, such clear personal goals might have prompted their buy-in to the program and their viewing reading as an approach to future success.

Pedagogical Implications

Teachers thinking about incorporating extensive reading into the curriculum are

encouraged to take the following three aspects into consideration. First, while teachers may spend a great amount of class time explaining to their students about how to choose and how to read a book at the outset, our research underscores the necessity of understanding student beliefs, and why they might consider presenting students with proof of potential benefits of reading extensively. Second, students' very first experience of Extensive Reading will likely be a decisive factor affecting their subsequent reading behaviors. Therefore, scaffolding activities designed to help students achieve a successful initial extensive reading experience are more than desirable, they are necessary. Finally, goal-setting activities, especially those involving students envisioning their ideal L2 selves, may be able to motivate them to continue reading during the course of the semester.

We seek as part of our next steps to investigate the summative comment by Chien (2018), who cautions that an ER program "must offer incentives to teachers, because their support and professional guidance is crucial to the program's success." We need to look at the variation by levels across colleges: for example, the lowest scoring, with 60% at Level 1, was Humanities and Social Sciences, and probably the two highest were Architecture (54% at levels 3 and 4) and Finance, with 49% at those levels. We need to compare scores for reading speed with scores from previous years, prior to implementing ER, as well as measures of vocabulary level, such as moving from an ability to use the 1000 most common words in English to 2000 words. Finally, we will need to further explore the responses to our bilingual survey to better understand how we can increase student engagement and enjoyment of the program.

Acknowledgment

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Appendix A: Weighted Means by Levels for 10-Question Student Surveys

Level 1

Questions	Weighted Mean	SD	Descriptive Meaning
1. The required amount of reading was manageable.	3.69	1.264	Agree
2. My instructor provided ongoing encouragement about the reading program.	4.43	0.806	Strongly Agree
3. The library offered enough books at my reading level.	3.75	1.185	Agree
4. MReader offers an accurate assessment of my reading in the reading program.	3.42	1.153	Agree
5. I found the reading program to be a useful complement to the classroom portion of the course.	3.65	1.142	Agree
6. I enjoyed the extensive reading program.	3.177	1.258	Neither Disagree nor Agree
7. My reading ability has increased because of the reading program.	3.40	1.162	Agree
8. The extensive reading program improved my overall English skills.	3.37	1.127	Neither Disagree nor Agree
9. Being able to select my own reading material was important and made the reading more enjoyable.	3.55	1.207	Agree
10. My feelings towards reading have changed, regardless of the language.	3.53	1.178	Agree

Level 2

Questions	Weighted Mean	SD	Descriptive Meaning
1. The required amount of reading was manageable.	3.52	1.274	Agree
2. My instructor provided ongoing encouragement about the reading program.	4.27	0.875	Strongly Agree
3. The library offered enough books at my reading level.	3.608	1.198	Agree
4. MReader offers an accurate assessment of my reading in the reading program.	3.28	1.194	Neither Disagree nor Agree

5. I found the reading program to be a useful complement to the classroom portion of the course.	3.46	1.195	Agree
6. I enjoyed the extensive reading program.	3.00	1.306	Neither Disagree nor Agree
7. My reading ability has increased because of the reading program.	3.22	1.189	Neither Disagree nor Agree
8. The extensive reading program improved my overall English skills.	3.20	1.172	Neither Disagree nor Agree
9. Being able to select my own reading material was important and made the reading more enjoyable.	3.42	1.231	Agree
10. My feelings towards reading have changed, regardless of the language.	3.33	1.174	Neither Disagree nor Agree

Level 3

Questions	Weighted Mean	SD	Descriptive Meaning
1. The required amount of reading was manageable.	3.62	1.251	Agree
2. My instructor provided ongoing encouragement about the reading program.	4.41	0.771	Strongly Agree
3. The library offered enough books at my reading level.	3.82	1.133	Agree
4. MReader offers an accurate assessment of my reading in the reading program.	3.23	1.12	Neither Disagree nor Agree
5. I found the reading program to be a useful complement to the classroom portion of the course.	3.43	1.218	Agree
6. I enjoyed the extensive reading program.	2.86	1.274	Neither Disagree nor Agree
7. My reading ability has increased because of the reading program.	3.18	1.219	Neither Disagree nor Agree
8. The extensive reading program improved my overall English skills.	3.19	1.210	Neither Disagree nor Agree
9. Being able to select my own reading material was important and made the reading more enjoyable.	3.29	1.283	Neither Disagree nor Agree
10. My feelings towards reading have changed, regardless of the language.	3.26	1.185	Neither Disagree nor Agree

Level 4

Questions	Weighted Mean	SD	Descriptive Meaning
1. The required amount of reading was manageable.	3.99	1.211	Agree
2. My instructor provided ongoing encouragement about the reading program.	4.12	1.061	Agree
3. The library offered enough books at my reading level.	3.47	1.245	Agree
4. MReader offers an accurate assessment of my reading in the reading program.	3.17	1.102	Neither Disagree nor Agree
5. I found the reading program to be a useful complement to the classroom portion of the course.	3.24	1.141	Neither Disagree nor Agree
6. I enjoyed the extensive reading program.	2.99	1.264	Neither Disagree nor Agree
7. My reading ability has increased because of the reading program.	3.23	1.227	Neither Disagree nor Agree
8. The extensive reading program improved my overall English skills.	3.167	1.177	Neither Disagree nor Agree
9. Being able to select my own reading material was important and made the reading more enjoyable.	3.35	1.195	Neither Disagree nor Agree
10. My feelings towards reading have changed, regardless of the language.	3.08	1.164	Neither Disagree nor Agree