



# Integration of Collaborative Activities in Extensive Reading: A Case Study of Taiwanese Freshman English Classes

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Extensive reading (ER) has been viewed as a useful approach in language education to improve L2 students' vocabulary, grammar, and reading comprehension (Beglar, Hunt, & Kite, 2012). Despite its benefits, ER has not been widely implemented in Taiwan due to time constraints and overemphasis on intensive reading activities (Renandya & Jacobs, 2002). Starting from the academic year of 2018, the researchers' institution has implemented an ER program into the Freshman English course. The present study analyzed students' perspectives on the ER program and collaborative activities in two Taiwanese Freshman English classes. Data resources included a student questionnaire, researchers'/instructors' class observations, and interviews with student focus groups. Findings showed that the students perceived ER as a helpful learning tool. In addition, data indicated that collaborative learning brought a positive impact on students' reading comprehension and motivation to communicate. Some students revealed that their reading motivation and confidence about reading were enhanced. However, the implementation of ER did not lend itself to reducing students' anxiety about English reading. Pedagogical implications are suggested.

In Taiwan, Freshman English is a compulsory English course at universities. In the language education field, engaging learners in collaborative activities in order to foster learning has become one of the main goals (Nunan, 2004; Pan & Wu, 2013; Oxford, 1990). Interactive reading activities help improve students' motivation to read (Day & Bamford, 1998; Grabe, 2009). Since 2018, the university where the researchers work has implemented an extensive reading (ER) program in which all freshman students are required to reach a word count based on their reading of graded readers. In addition to the ER program, the school has also indicated that 10% of student grades are based on in-class communicative activities. The

researchers of this study, therefore, aimed to integrate some collaborative activities along with reading in their Freshman English sections. Since the above requirements were relatively new at this university, the goals of this study were to understand the two research questions below:

1. What are student perceptions of the ER program in the Freshman English course?
2. What are student perceptions of the integration of collaborative activities in the Freshman English course?

The next section reviews relevant literature on extensive reading in several EFL and ESL contexts.

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## Literature Review

Hedge (2000) stated that the process of reading can be seen as a crucial input-enabling activity which requires readers to activate cognitive and affective ability to comprehend the texts. A wealth of studies have shown that ER is beneficial to both first and second language acquisition (Beglar, Hunt, & Kite, 2012; Day & Bamford, 1998; Grabe, 2009). Exposing language learners to a large amount of print helps enhance their reading proficiency, comprehension (e.g. Day & Bamford, 1998; Krashen, 1982), and vocabulary gains (Wang, 2013). However, reading in English might be a daunting task for L2 learners because of the limited learning time in class. Also, the assigned reading materials for L2 students in class often include too much unknown vocabulary, which may lead to students' reluctance towards reading in English (Nation, 2013; Schmitt, Jiang, & Grabe, 2011). Thus, providing simplified texts for L2 learners to read outside of class can be beneficial for establishing their confidence in reading and for gaining reading speed (Beglar, Hunt, & Kite, 2012). In addition, reading for pleasure and the freedom to choose books on their own offers opportunities for students to create positive reading experiences (Day & Bamford, 1998).

In addition to linguistic and cognitive development, it has been maintained that learners' reading experiences and perspectives toward the target culture contribute to their reading and learning attitudes. Yamashita (2004, 2013) examined the influence of ER on Japanese students' affective domain and found that there was a positive correlation between the amounts of reading and learners' reading attitude and motivation. The studies suggested that establishing a positive reading environment is crucial to create comfortable learning experiences for second language learners. Yamashita (2013) also indicated that the

positive attitude developed through ER may foster learners' intrinsic motivation to reading in English. Crawford Camiciottoli (2001) studied Italian EFL students' reading frequency and attitude toward extensive reading. She found a strong relationship between learners' L1 reading experiences and their L2 reading performance. In addition, learners' perceptions toward learning the target language and culture affected their reading motivation. However, Crawford Camiciottoli (2001) claimed that having a higher reading attitude did not always guarantee high reading frequency.

Collaborative language activities promote learners to negotiate and experiment with language, which are critical processes of second language learning (Lai & Li, 2011; Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Although reading is often an individual activity, some research has shown that integrating collaborative activities into the ER program helped enhance L2 learners' reading attitudes. Huang (2015) investigated collaborative activities in an ER program in EFL high school classrooms; findings illustrated that integrating ER-related activities into language classrooms helped promote positive learning motivation and reduce learner anxiety on reading. Dickinson (2017) conducted similar research with a different group of students. He examined implementation of a series of ER-related activities in a communicative-focused course at a Japanese university, such as written and spoken tasks, and he found that the ER activities had a positive impact on students' affective domain on reading. Additionally, although not all students enjoyed all the ER activities, the students perceived the interactive activities as helpful tasks to improve their language development. The above studies highlighted the crucial roles of investigating affective factors that influence L2 learners' motivation and reading engagement. More research is needed in

the second and foreign language learning fields to gain a better understanding of students' motivation to read (Grabe, 2009).

In spite of the advantages, several challenges of implementing ER have been addressed in previous literature on ESL and EFL research. The test-oriented learning culture has garnered criticism toward the implementation of ER in many Asian settings. In Taiwan, due to time constraints and overemphasis on intensive reading activities, ER has not been widely implemented (Huang, 2015; Renandya & Jacobs, 2002). Also, teachers' lack of knowledge of both ER and needed guidance on how best to establish students' reading habits in the beginning stage of the ER program has often led to inefficient learning results (Green, 2005). Chang and Renandya (2017) suggested that incorporating ER in the language curriculum in EFL settings seems to be effective and acceptable for both teachers and students. Accordingly, we hope to bring insight into the pedagogical practices of ER and ER-related collaborative activities in an EFL setting at postsecondary level.

## **Methods**

This study employed multiple data resources including a student questionnaire, researchers'/instructors' class observations, and interviews with student focus groups. The student questionnaire was designed to elicit the students' perspectives on the ER program and the class activities. Interviewing students helped the researchers to have a better understanding of the students' ideas and concerns.

### ***Participants***

There were 130 students in this study; their English proficiency was at intermediate level (A2-B1 Common European Framework of Reference). Each student

had completed at least six years of English study prior to entering the university. The average age of the students was 18 years old. The freshman students were placed into different proficiency levels according to their English exam scores from the college entrance exam.

### ***Setting and Activity Procedures***

The Freshman English course in the researchers' institution aims at providing a broad foundation of English learning which focuses on developing freshman students' four skills. However, the Freshman English course only meets for 2 hours each week; thus, offering opportunities for reading and writing in class is often challenging for instructors. As mentioned earlier, due to the school's new ER requirement and its implementation, integration of the collaborative activities provided an opportunity to foster students' learning, centering on reading and speaking in particular. The ER program required students to choose a set of graded readers from the university collection. In addition, students are responsible for setting up their reading schedules on their own to achieve the 80,000-word goal per semester for intermediate level students for two semesters.

The following are the procedures for the collaborative activities: group discussion, group poster presentations, and peer evaluation. The group discussion included finding a reader that a group of students could all read and, in that group, they could discuss the book and share their reading responses. After the group discussion, the members of each group co-created a poster related to the book. Then, each group took turns presenting their poster as well as evaluating other groups. The collaborative activities were integrated into the language lessons. The instructors/researchers helped facilitate the collaborative activities by

demonstrating language examples and providing feedback.

### **Data Collection**

A class questionnaire was distributed after the students had completed the group poster presentation. The questionnaire mainly asked the students to rate the statements from 1 to 5 where 5 meant they agreed with the statement the most and 1 meant they agreed with the statement the least. There were two sections in the questionnaire. The first section related to their perspectives on the ER program and the second section asked students for their perspectives on the collaborative activities.

Class observations of this study were gained through teachers' observations of student participation in whole-class and small-group activities. During all observations, the researchers kept field notes in order to record impressions and questions.

Semi-structured interviews were also conducted with student focus groups. These groups of students were selected from the result of their poster presentation activity. According to peer evaluation, these groups of students received the highest scores. Due to the time constraints of this project, the researchers only had the chance to conduct interviews with these students. Each group was interviewed individually, and each interview lasted around 20 minutes. Interviews were conducted in Mandarin and later translated and transcribed in English.

### **Data Analysis**

Regarding the questionnaire, the mean of each statement was calculated. As for the interviews, first, the researchers read all the interview transcripts line-by-line and engaged in the process of open coding (Merriam, 2009). While aiming to identify

some possible themes, the researchers also noticed several emerging ideas or key phrases. Then the researchers looked for connections between codes. In the transcripts, the researchers also paid particular attention to the students' wordings in terms of their feelings related to the ER program and class activities which reflected the research questions of this study.

## **Findings and Discussion**

1. What are the university students' perceptions of the ER program?

### ***Students' Perceptions toward the ER Program***

Regarding students' perceptions toward the ER program, the survey showed that 41.9% of the students agreed that the ER program was helpful for their overall English learning (Mean=3.26). In addition, roughly 45% of the students reported that the ER program was helpful for enhancing their reading comprehension (M=3.52) and vocabulary gains (M=3.41). Regarding students' attitudes toward English learning, only 33.3% of students reported feeling less afraid of English after the ER program. This indicated that the ER program did not significantly reduce students' anxiety of reading English texts, which was inconsistent with the findings in Huang's (2015) study mentioned above.

### ***Students' Interview Responses***

While the questionnaire showed the students' general attitudes toward the ER program and the collaborative activity, the interviews revealed more detailed perspectives. For instance, one student indicated that she gained more self-confidence about her reading ability. *"When I was in high school, I saw my friend reading an English novel. I did not think I could do that. But now I am happy*

to know that I can actually do the same thing...I can read English books, and [I] read not just one but many [books]," the student noted. Furthermore, another student stated:

*In high school, I read English mostly for my reading tests...Sometimes the reading paragraphs were very hard and I had to use the dictionary all the time in order to understand those words and paragraphs. It frustrated me...But when I read the graded readers, the books were easier and I did not need to look up words that often and I could also try to guess the meanings of words based on the story plots.*

The above two students' responses revealed that they went through stages from self-doubt (i.e. "I did not think I could do that") to feeling a sense of accomplishment. The second student further read her books more strategically. The students' statements are also in line with the findings by Day and Bamford (1998) and Krashen (1982) that the ER program helped enhance the students' reading proficiency and comprehension.

The ER program also promoted some students' intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Although the finding in the student questionnaire revealed that not many students agreed that ER helped reduce their anxiety in language learning, some students recommended continuing the ER program in the curriculum. One student stated that "although I don't like to read in my free time and I had to spend time visiting the library and finishing the books, it was good motivation for me to keep learning English outside the class time." The student's response indicated that the ER program could be viewed as a helpful tool to improve students' extrinsic learning motivation. On the other hand, one student reported that exchanging books, sharing books with roommates, and competing with peers was interesting and

motivated her to read more. She stated that "I don't think I am a good reader and I don't read very often. However, I think it was helpful to exchange books with my roommates and I also like the part that we set up a reading goal together and achieved it. I have gained a sense of achievement." The student's reply showed that exchanging ideas and negotiating meaning with peers created positive social interactions, which also echoed Yamashita's (2013) idea that establishing a positive learning environment is crucial and contributes to reading motivation.

2. How do the university students perceive the integration of the collaborative tasks in the ER program?

### ***Students' Perceptions toward the Collaborative ER Activities***

When asked to comment on students' overall satisfaction of their poster presentations, responses to the questionnaire showed that about 75% of the students reported a positive attitude toward their performance (M=4.41). In terms of students' responses toward the improvement of their language skills in the poster presentation, more than 70% of the students reported improvement of their English-speaking skills (M=3.91), followed by listening skills (55%, M=3.57). Moreover, the findings illustrated that writing improvement received the lowest mean among the other skills (M=3.44). Regarding the social aspect of learning, about 70% of the students showed a preference for collaboration with their peers to accomplish a task (M=3.95). In addition, about 60% of the students perceived the poster presentation assignment as a meaningful learning activity (M=3.64). The findings from the questionnaire were in line with the previous literature that incorporating collaborative activities helped enhance students' learning motivation and language

skills (Dickinson, 2017; Yamashita, 2004). In addition, the activities helped create a community for students to share and exchange reading experiences. However, there was no direct relationship to show that listening to other group's presentation about the book might lead to improvement of reading motivation ( $M=3.46$ ). More details of students' perspectives toward the collaborative activities are discussed in student interviews.

### *Student's Interview Responses*

More than 50% of the students responding to the questionnaire agreed that the poster presentation activity was a meaningful task and produced a positive attitude toward the collaborative work. Benefits of collaborative work were found frequently in students' interview data, such as *"I like to interact with other people"*; *"I think it is interesting to brainstorm ideas with my classmates"*; *"My teammates helped me a lot when I didn't know the words"*; and *"It's less stressful if we shared the working load."* These responses may indicate that offering an avenue for student interactions contributed to learner engagement and lowered students' learning anxiety. Several students pointed out that collaborative activities allowed them to appreciate their peers' strengths and opinions. For instance, one student replied: *"It was interesting to hear different ideas about the same book from other classmates. I got different perspectives."* Another student noted, *"I have learned that my teammates are good at designing the poster and brainstorming some good ideas."*

Student responses also supported previous literature that incorporating ER programs into classroom teaching helped enhance language acquisition (e.g. Day & Bamford, 1998; Krashen, 1982). Some students reported improvement of their speaking skills through practicing the poster

presentation. One student said *"I was more aware of my speaking when I had a chance to listen to other group's presentations. I think I need to speak out loud and don't be afraid of opening my mouth."* The response suggested that collaborative activities helped raise students' awareness of their language proficiency and further reflect on their own learning. Moreover, the researchers found from the student interviews that teacher demonstration helped scaffold students' knowledge of writing a story summary and responses, such as identifying key words, themes and providing phrases and sentence patterns. Despite the fact that ER is often being seen as a solitary activity, the findings from students' interview responses echoed Dickinson's (2017) study that providing opportunities for ER-related activities, such as collaborative learning tasks, enabled learners to create more positive learning experiences.

Although the findings showed that students held positive attitudes toward the collaborative activities, there was no direct relationship to show the improvement of students' reading motivation. One student responded to the collaborative work: *"I like the collaborative activities, but I am not sure if it helps me find a new book, because everyone has their own reading preference. For example, I only like to read biographies."* The students' responses reflected Green's (2005) argument that the benefits of ER activities in fostering second language acquisition over the long term could not guarantee the satisfaction of learners' short-term purposes. Also, finding time to discuss with their peers outside of class time was another challenge for group cooperation. In addition, students reported that their different language proficiency levels resulted in unequal workload for the group members. One student replied *"I felt exhausted prior to our group presentation. Since my group members thought my English*

is better, I was assigned to finish the writing part by myself." The students' interview responses suggested that student language proficiency, the design of the collaborative ER activities, and individual students' reading interests all can contribute to reading motivation.

The purpose of this study aimed to gain a better understanding of Taiwanese students' perceptions of the ER program and of the integration of collaborative learning activities in Freshman English classes. The findings suggest that integrating collaborative activities in the ER program has been beneficial to learning motivation and attitude. However, challenges from the implementation of the ER program and from students' affective domain in learning need to be considered if we want to establish students' long-term reading goals.

## Implications

Although there is much that remains to be done to explore possible teaching approaches to enhance L2 students' reading comprehension and motivation, based on this study, there are several implications. First of all, the findings from the first research question indicates that although students have perceived ER as a helpful learning tool to improve their reading motivation, students remain anxious about reading in English. Teachers may need to provide more guidance in class before launching the ER program. Helping students to become more familiar with the ER program in order to reduce learner anxiety and enhance student confidence in reading can include activities such as these: spending some time introducing readers, helping to find or suggest books appropriate to students' reading levels, demonstrating in-class guided reading, and so forth. In this way, students, particularly those with lower proficiency, would not feel quite as

overwhelmed towards reading and the ER program.

Secondly, it is suggested that in order to promote the ER program, graded readers might not be sufficient. In the future, multiple reading resources, such as news articles or game or movie reviews, could be included. We hope the multiple resources can stimulate learners' interests so that students may become more motivated to read. In addition, exploring and brainstorming possible collaborative activities in the ER program could also help enhance learners' reading motivation, such as inviting students to exchange reading responses, leading literature circles, and incorporating writing activities in the post-reading activities.

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