

## A PRACTICAL APPROACH TO IMPLEMENTING AN EXTENSIVE READING PROGRAM

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**ABSTRACT:** *Extensive Reading (ER) plays an important role not only in developing general reading skills and improving reading comprehension, but also in raising learning motivation levels. Although part of all English proficiency tests, reading remains challenging for many Taiwanese students because they lack sound reading habits and have little recourse to practical reading programs that support ER. For this reason, the Extensive Reading Program includes two component projects to use at the university level: “The Unified Reader” and “Reading Passport.” The purpose of this study is to illustrate how to use this plan and how to compare teacher and student perspectives by taking classic reading activities as a practical approach to support teaching reading. The participants for this research were first- and second-year students in two- and four-year programs, either in English or non-English disciplines. A survey was conducted of the perspectives of teachers and students and data was gathered from more than 1000 respondents. To measure internal consistency, the study used SPSS statistical software. Moreover, various attitudes toward the Classic Reading Program among teachers and students were found. Results show that most participants were classic readers, and most teachers and first-year students prefer to include the reading passport as part of their regular reading classes. While non-English major seniors often lack confidence in extensive reading because of limited fluency and busy schedules, different ways to overcome these problems have been suggested. However, we recommend mixing reading activities with regular curricula, which bolsters confidence since many students feel they are learning something practical. By such means students cultivate sound reading habits and a lifelong love of reading.*

**KEYWORDS:** Extensive Reading, Classic Reading Program, Reading Passport, Perspectives

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### INTRODUCTION

Among the four language skills (listening, reading, writing, and speaking), English reading has long been a priority for most students to master (Taso, 1991). As far as EFL/EFL students are concerned, English reading is not only an important resource for obtaining knowledge, but also a necessary requirement for any kind of English Proficiency Test (Carrell, 1988). English reading remains a major problem for many students, even though it is the principal area of English proficiency testing. Most experts believe that students do not cultivate sound reading habits and a flexible attitude toward reading material with long paragraphs, which results in their being unable to read long articles that occur under test conditions (Lu, Yu, & Chou, 2003; Lemmer, 2010; Johnson, 2012). The essential point of Taiwan’s English education lies in leading students to cultivate the right reading habit and attitude. It not only encourages students to see English reading as a routine part of daily life but also as a way to expand their knowledge (Tien, 2015). Taso also believes that by enhancing knowledge, one can increase reading comprehension, lower student frustration and fear, and improve reading and writing abilities.

This study is aimed at investigating a new approach to teaching English reading, by implementing classic reading program to cultivate the student’s fluency skills and his or her

attitude to reading and active learning. Classical reading books are stories written in simplified form from classic literature, ancient Greece or ancient Rome, or other art, and published by well-known publishers, which are considered models for students to read. To enhance overall English skills, classes of adaptive instruction were set to cooperate with the Classic Reading Program, which was designed to be student-centered, turning students into self-directed, life-long learners.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

It is taken for granted that extensive reading can help language learners improve their reading skills. Besides, teachers almost believe the best way to assist students to read and master reading strategies is through reading itself (Stoller, 2015). It is found teachers and students usually hold opposite views in teaching scene (Morgado, 2009). However, many students struggle against ER programs verbally, though they still agree that extensive reading is a good way to learn English on survey (Tien, 2015; Johnson, 2012). In the past, we examined two groups, one of which was asked to read and memorize vocabulary from brochures, and the other was asked to read short readers. The latter increased their vocabulary due to the fact that the context of the short readers helped the learner understand the meaning and use of vocabulary. Similarly, an experimental study by Cheng (2003) and Horst (2005) showed that extensive reading can benefit vocabulary acquisition and reading proficiency. Most experts in Asia believe that enlarging vocabulary is a key to effective English reading (Herman & Anderson, 1985; Hafix & Tudor, 1990; Cho & Krashen, 1994; Kuo, 2001; Nagy; Modirghamene & Gowrki, 2011). For example, Kuo (2001) separated participants into L2 learners, and found that extensive reading is often the best way to enhance vocabulary. Besides, a wide range of learning not only benefits a variety of language uses and various areas of language knowledge, but accelerates reading speed of learners. Although we know that different reading speeds serve different reading purposes, the value of fast reading has been discussed and developed obviously (Modirghamene & Gowrki, 2011; He, 2014).

However, some experts complained that silent reading, free reading, and instruction in class did not receive enough attention in school (Grabe, 2002). Wiesendanger and Birlem (1984) also wondered whether sustained silent reading (SSR) was the decisive influence for enhancing reading ability. Their study shows that students who had participated in a reading program that incorporated SSR improved their reading abilities considerably in the following summer rather than during the SSR program. Therefore, SSR and attitude toward reading seems to be a crucial factor in determining the success of the reading program.

Current English education in Taiwan faces a similar problem. Teachers are encouraged to help students explore a variety of readers inside or outside the classroom (Chang, 2004; Robb & Kano, 2013) but because vocabulary and grammar do not always translate easily from Chinese to English, or vice versa, traditional reading lectures often contribute to passive reading attitudes without forming positive reading habits (Juan & Cheng, 2008; Yamashita, 2013). As a result, it was recommended that by applying reading activities to regular lectures an awareness of self-directed progress would increase (Aebbersold & Field, 1997). In other words, L2 learners should be encouraged to make extended, strategic, and independent reading studies to improve motivation before, during, and after reading.

## **The Study**

### **The participants:**

Students who participated in this study were in the two- and four-year program in general English classes at the university level. There were 44 classes in total, and 1487 students and 24 teachers were surveyed.

### **Classic reading activities:**

1. The unified reader: teachers in general English classes chose a book from 159 English classic readers from the Language Center. How to guide the students to read depended on the teachers, who chose either to share ideas, set up group discussions, or read silently. Their assessment comprised 10% of the student's final grade.
2. Reading passport: In addition to the unified reader, teachers were encouraged to take the outcome of reading passport into consideration, and include it as 10% of the student's final grade. This activity allowed students to 'win a proof', which was stamped on the learning passport as proof of reading after passing the quizzes from the Language Center (Stoeckel & Hann, 2012). Those books selected by the students themselves for the reading passport depended on their English level and reading ability. (The following is a reference for teachers: beginning level students usually read one to two books per semester; intermediate level students read three to four books per semester, and intermediate-high level students read five books or more per semester.)

### **The procedure of implementation:**

1. Before the reading:

One of the best ways to inspire students to read and keep their reading interests is for teachers to lead by example (Stoller, 2015). The Classic Reading Program offers a platform in the school network with information and resources for teachers and students on how to improve reading fluency in English. It also includes all edited summaries made by all the teachers to give brief introduction for students to know what books to choose. The webpage includes icons of 159 classic readers with links to introductions to the narratives in simple English, and questions to spur the student's imagination and curiosity. English instruction allows students to connect their background knowledge and interests to the stories, encouraging a step-by-step approach to sustained reading.

2. During the reading:

The Classic Reading Program also lists teacher office hours for consultation. During their spare-time reading, some students seek help by consulting teachers, which often helps improve reading comprehension, understanding paragraph construction, and story recall. The sharing of reading strategies from consulting teachers can make reading more effective and improve the student's comprehension.

3. After the reading:

The Classic Reading Program asked students to write a short summary about the story

they read before coming to the Language Center, which was followed by a simple multiple-choice quiz. After a student passes the quiz, the consulting teacher asks additional questions, such as “Can you summarize the main points of this story?”, “Do you remember the illustration in the reader?”, “What is the conflict in the story?” “What did you learn from the story?” and “Any ideas on how to settle the conflict?” The purpose of such questions is to raise the student’s awareness of the comprehension process. In addition, student performance is listed, including their reading summaries and what they learned from the books.

We have known for some time about the importance of extensive reading, but reading with care – that is, not sacrificing quality for quantity – must not be neglected. In this study, the unified reader supports and encourages students to read carefully by paying attention to detail. With strategic teaching, students learn how to self-direct their learning and how to use the classic reading passport. In addition, self-selected readings are keys to successful extensive reading (Renandya & Jacobs, 2002; Paulson, 2006). This is why the Classic Reading Program has sufficient resources for teachers and students to choose what books to read and how many, according to their reading aptitudes and abilities. We believe giving students choices in what they read can benefit student’s interests, and this would lead to have even more student engagement in this activity (Paulson, 2006; Stoller, 2015). Different reading skills serve different ends, but they can act as complementary functions for teaching.

### **The Method: Survey of teacher and student perspectives**

1. For students, the survey included background information, the perspective on reading the unified reader in class, the perspective of using the Reading Passport in the Language Center, the function on improving reading, and the student’s attitude toward the two activities.
2. For teachers, the survey included background information, the perspective on reading the unified reader in class, the perspective of using the Reading Passport in the Language Center, the function on improving teaching, and the teacher’s attitude toward the two activities.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Although a number of interesting results emerged from this study, this report focuses on two themes concerning the perspectives of teachers and students for implementing the Classic Reading Program: (1) their perspectives about using unified reader, and (2) their perspectives about the Reading Passport.

Before discussing the results, the surveys’ reliability (ICR) for both teachers and students was assessed. Statistically, the student survey’s reliability was 0.61~0.67, and the teacher survey’s reliability was 0.68~0.95 (see Table 1). The results indicate that the surveys used in this study are reliable testing tools.

**Table of abbreviations**

URB	Unified Reading Book
CRP	Classic Reading Passport
RF	Survey for Reading Function
ICR	Internal Consistency Reliability

**Table 1 Internal Consistency Reliability to Classic Reading Passport**

ICR	NO. OF CASES	URB	CRP	RFs
Students	1487	0.67	0.61	0.70
Teachers	24	0.95	0.69	0.68

**1. Perspectives on unified reader**

Can unified reader stimulate interest in reading? Students in the four-year program interested in unified reader yielded a value of 0.71 (1167/1642), and students in the two-year program yielded 0.44 (237/542). When interviewed, students in the two-year program complained that their schoolwork and time schedule is more demanding (busier) than the four-year program and that, in addition, they have more professional courses than the other students. For their part, most teachers were interested in integrating unified reader into their courses. We found that the perspectives of seniors were significantly different from juniors and teachers, but freshmen and teachers were much closer.

Furthermore, the ways in which teachers apply unified reader in class are as follow: reading by students (6 classes, 26.1%), teaching when there is spare time (4 classes, 17.4%), in-class discussion (12 classes, 52.2%), no time to take it (1 class, 4.37%). As for the ways in which teachers test unified reader, both students and teachers want to use more quizzes (multiple choice: 0.35), short paragraphs for students to learn from (0.42) than other types (ex: open questions). According to the level of difficulty, it was found that both students and teachers agree that the difficulty of the books ranked between “intermediate” and “a little difficult”, which most students found acceptable (0.81). We learned that graded readers have been highly recommended, especially for the use of beginning learners. Graded readers can help students make linguistic gains, critical thinking, and improve their comprehension effectively (Maruyama, 2009; Cetin, Y., & Brooks-Lewis, K. A., 2011).

**2. Perspectives about the reading passport**

When it comes to ideas for implementing the reading passport, freshmen (0.49) have positive perspectives and are closer to those of teachers (0.57), compared with sophomore's no ideas (0.53). We found that seniors (0.15) have less interest in taking part in the activity than freshmen and that, unsurprisingly, most freshmen paid closer attention than seniors to the activity. In other words, freshmen's learning motivation are higher than the seniors, and teachers cannot help thinking “It seems to be time to do something for them,” and flexible ways should be adopted to ensure seniors can follow the progress of the project.

With consulting teachers about the activity, it was found that this was welcomed by freshmen



(0.91) whose perspectives were closer to those of the teachers (0.78).

When the score of this activity was included in the final score, freshmen had a value of 0.50, and teachers 0.75. One quarter of teachers, however, were not sure if it was appropriate to include those values in the final score because some students chose easier readers than others, rendering scoring unfair.

As for the perspective of writing a short summary before taking a quiz to win a proof, the number of 'agree' and 'disagree' for seniors yielded 0.59 and 0.41, respectively, while the values for freshmen and teacher perspectives are very close.

The number of classic books stored in the Language Center satisfied most teachers and students – although more books would improve circulation and running the classic reading passport, which plays an important role in increasing book choice for students.

When asking teachers about how classic reading activities affect student learning, we found that some teachers still wonder about the effectiveness of extensive reading in reading strategy, vocabulary, and grammar (see Table 2). However, enhancing reading ability is highly recognized or accepted. Research also showed, despite of teacher's skepticism prior to the implementation, the impact of extensive reading on linguistic advantages was obvious (Tien, 2015). Part of the reason was that some teachers thought it was difficult for students (especially the beginning level) to self-study or write an English summary. Another reason was that many students who came from technical schools did not think they were able to do extensive reading because English was not their major. It is important to note that further discussion and training with teachers and students would be necessary. Truly speaking, students with low motivation on English need teachers to be more patient drawing their attention by adopting diverse ways into their curriculums in addition to regular classes. Watching movies which are based on the classic novels, acting up as if they are just the casts in the novels, and rearranging the plot into a brand-new version with their creativities and combining them as a simplified new literature work would be good ideas for students to try. Teachers can only adopt one way for each semester, or different classes take different ways to present their creativities according to the will in each class. Trying best to inspire students from their imagination into the real world would make them happy and more satisfied with the reading program. They will not feel anymore that they have an extra homework with the project. This project shows that only give them chances to use their talent can they feel that they are learning something worthwhile.

In spite of those difficulties, the center had communicated with all the class teachers to encourage students to develop their English reading habits by taking extensive reading as well as regular classes. From the survey, students believe that the advantage of the Reading Passport is to be clearer about reading strategy (0.64), and teachers believe that the main advantage is to enhance the student's reading ability (0.83). We understand that both have a positive perspective for enhancing student reading comprehension by means of this activity.

**Table 2: Foundations for Practicing Reading Passport**

BENEFITS OF THE SYSTEM	STUDENTS	TEACHERS
1. Be clearer about reading strategy	64%	30%
2. Recognize higher vocabulary	31%	26%
3. Improve my grammar	5%	7%
4. Read different editions of books	2%	39%
5. Enhance my reading ability	45%	83%
6. Strengthen reading motivation	29%	50%
7. Take into account in final grade	26%	54%

### 3. The investigation of learning attitude to the Reading Passport

Taking students in the four-year program as an example, reading habits with unified reader (UR) and the habit for passing the Reading passport (RP) are listed as follows:

**Table 3 The Comparison of Reading Habits in Both Activities**

Habits	Reading Habit of UR			Reading Habit of RP			
	In week days	Before the quiz	Never	In week days	Visits when consultants are available	Before hand-in to teachers	Never
No. of people	201	210	132	47	37	279	180
Percent age	37%	39%	24%	8.7%	6.8%	51.4%	33%

Our data shows that the number of students who finished reading their unified reader are 411(76%), and the students who visited the Language Center and finished winning proofs are 363 (67%). We also found that more than 800 students (in two- and four-year programs) visited the Language Center for teacher consultations, although some did not pass a quiz to win a proof in their passports. After interviewing the students who won proofs, we realized that teacher encouragement and class competition would increase student motivation for passing the reading passport. There is no doubt that not only the reading attitude of students is important, but so, too, is the teacher's attitude, which plays an important part in the program's success. Therefore, rewarding students is not enough; the program must offer incentives to teachers, because their support and professional guidance is crucial to the program's success.

## CONCLUSION

Since the program was implemented, more than 800 students have visited the Language Center, consulting teachers, and taking quizzes. On average, 3-4 classic reading books were taken for intermediate level and high-intermediate level students. For seniors, 17 students won 5 proofs and vouchers in a semester, 4 students won 10 proofs, and 2 students won more than 20 proofs. As for the beginning level, students usually complete 1-2 books.

As Wei (2004) noted, successful English reading instruction lies not only in intensive reading

but with extensive reading, to enhance learning effectiveness. Two persistent problems cause trouble for many teachers and students: (1) students tend to rely on teacher's explanation, but teachers cannot spare the time for individual instruction, (2) student's learning motivation need to be further improved. The Classic Reading Program was designed specifically to address above problems. For students who are poorly motivated, they could still read one more unified reading book in the class except the reading textbook. Moreover, based on the result of this study, we also found seniors who were non-English majors especially have even more problems on extensive reading. They are not confident about doing extensive readings because of their lower English ability and busy time schedule. Thus, diverse ways have been suggested to mix into regular curriculums, such as watching movies, acting up based on the novels, and rearranging the plot into a brand-new one. Trying best to inspire students presenting their stories in the real world would make them happy and more satisfied with the classical program. For those who are highly motivated, these students can enjoy and cultivate their reading habits by having support from the story itself and from consulting teachers. These students were satisfied to win a reward after passing the classic reading quizzes. For those who make the greatest progress compared between pre-test and post-test, though they acquire average or lower score, they can also win a reward to be inspired for learning interests. As to seniors who are in tight schedule, doing extensive reading online with App or cyber reading, such as Paul's Xreading (Paul Goldberg) is a flexible way to continue their learning and balance their life and schoolwork. Besides, the teacher's attitude for supporting this program should be to create a conducive English learning environment and to cultivate a lifelong reading for students.

### Suggestion

This study lasted for one year, and further data of the final score in the adaptive instruction program should be included. It is suggested that another study investigate how many books should be covered according to the different levels of English proficiency and student achievement, and to see if additional books led to higher grades in the final. This would be useful information and remains for further study to prove the effectiveness of the Classic Reading Program.

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