

The Effects of Journaling on Taiwanese EFL Students' Extensive Reading Habits and Attitudes

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ABSTRACT

This research study examines the effects of journaling on the extensive reading habits and attitudes of Taiwanese English as a foreign language (EFL) students. The study was conducted with eleven eighth grade students enrolled in a private junior high school in northern Taiwan. Students were asked to submit weekly journal letters online to their teacher about English novels read outside of class. The teacher responded with comments and questions. Data from the study show that using journaling as an activity increased the amount of extensive reading done in English as well as improved many students' attitudes toward extensive reading.

INTRODUCTION

Extensive reading has become an important component of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms due to increasing evidence of its benefits for language acquisition (Krashen, 2004, Grabe 2009). Although many extensive reading programs occur within school hours, this is not always possible for many teachers with limited instructional time and mandated curriculums. This can be a huge obstacle given that extensive reading's benefits can only occur when reading is done in high quantity (Nation, 2009.) Therefore, it is important for teachers in these situations to implement activities that can successfully promote extensive reading outside of school. One activity suggested by researchers is journaling.

This study, conducted with eleven Taiwanese junior high school EFL students, explores two research questions in regards to journaling with extensive reading. First, this study explores what effect weekly journaling had on the amount of extensive reading done by junior high school EFL students. Second, this study examines the students' attitudes toward extensive reading in English before and after journaling was introduced.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Defining Extensive Reading

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Extensive reading, which is also sometimes referred to as independent reading, “is the part of a comprehensive literacy curriculum when students have time to read books of their choosing, whether in or out of school” (Kasten & Wilfong 2007, p. 1). Extensive reading is often done with “minimal accountability, writing brief summaries or comments on what they read” (Mason & Krashen 1997, p. 91). It is “designed to help students increase the time they spend reading and give them continued opportunities to expand and practice reading strategies” (Fountas & Pinnell 2001, p. 116).

Benefits of Extensive Reading

The benefits of extensive reading have been documented in countless research studies. Reported benefits include increased rate of second language acquisition (Elley 1991; Mason & Krashen 1997), vocabulary growth (Lao & Krashen 2001), and an increase in student motivation (Elley 1991; Mason & Krashen 1997; Kasten & Wilfong 2007; Yamashita 2013). Although a thorough review of extensive reading literature is beyond the scope of this paper and has been done comprehensively by other authors (Krashen 2004, Grabe 2009), below are a few studies that illustrate the benefits of extensive reading.

Language Acquisition as a Result of Extended Reading

In the study “Acquiring literacy in a second language: The effect of book-based programs,” Elley (1991) documented the effects of extensive reading, or as termed in the paper, “book floods.” Elley found “children who are exposed to an extensive range of high-interest illustrated story books, and encouraged to read and share them, are consistently found to learn the target language more quickly” (p. 375).

At a time when extensive reading was receiving criticism as a technique that would only be effective with “good” students, Mason and Krashen (1997) studied its effects on a group of Japanese college students who were retaking an English course after failing in a previous term. The researchers compared test results between a control group of second year students in a class comprising a traditional curriculum of reading; comprehension questions; and vocabulary, grammar, and translation exercises” (Mason & Krashen, 1997, p. 92) with an experimental group which was given extensive reading opportunities, both in class and for homework, with graded readers. Although the pre-test revealed a significant gap between these two groups, the extensive reading group achieved far greater gains and nearly closed the achievement gap between the two groups.

Vocabulary Growth as a Result of Extended Reading

In another study conducted at the university level comparing traditional instruction versus extensive reading, Lao and Krashen (2000) found that extensive reading once again proved successful. The study reports that students in the extensive reading group “made superior gains on measures of vocabulary and reading rate, when compared to students enrolled in a traditional academic skills class” (Lao & Krashen 2000, p. 261).

Motivation as a Result of Extensive Reading

There have been many studies that have shown that extensive reading has helped increase learner motivation. Elley (1991) reported that “children appear to...develop positive attitudes toward books” (p. 375). In their study of Japanese students retaking an EFL class, Mason and Krashen (2007) were most impressed to find that extensive reading changed the learning attitudes of the participants from reluctant readers of English to eager ones.

Finally, Yamashita (2013) sought out to focus exclusively on the affective domain of extensive reading, rather than the cognitive domain like many of the previously reported studies. The study looked at the effect of extensive reading on EFL reading attitude in terms of five categories: comfort, anxiety, intellectual value, practical value, and linguistic value. The data showed positive effects on many aspects of EFL reading attitude as a result of extensive reading. Yamashita reported that extensive reading helped increase the comfort students felt with EFL reading, helped reduce feelings of anxiety with EFL reading, and raised the intellectual value students attached to EFL reading.

One reason motivation may increase is due to student choice. Kasten and Wilfong (2007) surveyed 1000 students in Ohio about their attitudes and habits toward independent reading and the factors that encouraged or discouraged reading. Kasten and Wilfong found, “student choice is a critical factor in independent reading because it has been shown to motivate reading” (p. 2). Giving students the option to choose their learning through extensive reading causes them to have more intrinsic motivation.

Journaling as an Extensive Reading Activity

Kasten and Wilfong (2007) define journaling as “free choice uncorrected writing in response to reading books” (p. 4). Kaiser (2003) furthers this definition by stating, “the purpose of these journals is to stimulate authentic discussion about literature between teachers and students” (p. 2).

Fountas and Pinnell (2001) recommend using a reader's notebook to journal with extensive reading by having students write in letterform. The authors state that, “writing letters in a reader's notebook is one way to increase the depth of reader's response” (Fountas & Pinnell 2001, p. 163). They believe the writing of letters is far superior to writing book reports because “the book report doesn't necessarily help students become better readers” (Fountas & Pinnell 2001, p. 165). They recommend that students and teachers write thoughtful responses about the books back and forth once per week.

Journaling has been found to be effective with students, particularly in terms of motivation. In their study of student preferences of extensive reading activities, Kasten and Wilfong (2007) found in their survey of native speaking students that “journaling showed to be a popular strategy, especially with younger students in the elementary schools” (p. 4). In a study with her own students, Kaiser (2003) found that her students “were generally eager to write their response journals” (p. 22) and that “intrinsic motivation often increases because children share with teachers in the inquiry process” (p. 6). These studies show that journaling may be a good choice of an activity to pair with extensive reading.

METHOD

Participants and Research Questions

This study was conducted with eleven eighth-grade Taiwanese students enrolled in a private school in northern Taiwan. The school offers an extended English curriculum beyond the country's requirements with students taking additional reading classes, music, art, PE, and computer science all in English. Although there was a variation in the students' language abilities, the group as a whole would be classified as intermediate level English learners. A few students may have been considered approaching an advanced level as a result of either living abroad for a period of time or being enrolled in dual-immersion programs during elementary school.

This study hopes to answer two questions. First, how does the use of journaling affect the amount of extensive reading done by the students when compared to a previous semester? Second, how does the use of journaling affect the students' attitudes toward extensive reading in English?

Data Collection

To set a base for comparison, students were asked to fill out a survey in regards to their attitudes toward extensive reading in English and their extensive reading habits (Appendix 1). This survey asked students to focus on the previous semester where no extensive reading activities occurred.

Following the survey, students were asked to journal about their extensive reading books once per week. Students used Edmodo.com, a social learning community for teachers, students, and parents, to record their weekly journals. I, acting as both researcher and teacher, responded to their weekly journals with comments and thought-provoking questions to help them think outside of the text.

To prep them for the journaling activity, a lesson was given where I showed an example letter (Appendix 3). This letter has been slightly adapted from one of Fountas and Pinnell's (2001) example letters (Fountas & Pinnell 2001, p. 166). I explained that the letter should include a brief summary of what they read that week, their feelings or reactions to what happened in the story, and a response to my questions from the previous week's letter. Each week, an assignment was posted on Edmodo with the prompt, "Tell me what you've been reading. Don't forget to respond to my last letter."

After a period of three months, students were asked to fill out a follow-up survey (Appendix 2) that was nearly identical to the one filled out at the beginning of the study. This survey focused on the 3-month period of the study, and its purpose was to identify changes, if any, in the amount of extensive reading done and the students' attitudes toward extensive reading in English.

The data from the two surveys were compared, with a focus on changes from the two periods of time. Since the surveys were in English, the students' second language, group interviews were conducted to ensure students were clear on what was being asked on the survey and that the data they provided were accurate. Surveys were marked with the names of the students so that they could be compared between the two time periods and so follow up interviews could be conducted if needed.

FINDINGS

Amount of Books Read

In the semester prior to the study, participants had read an average of 1 book. The most books read by a student was 3, while the least was 0. A total of four students had read 0 books in the previous semester for extensive reading.

Following implementing journaling as an activity for extensive reading, the average rose to 3.3 books. The most books read by a student was 9, while the least was 1. Two students read 1 book, while all others had read more than 1.

Attitude Toward English Reading

In the first survey prior to the study, seven students reported not enjoying English extensive reading, and four students reported enjoying English extensive reading. Those reporting that they do not enjoy English extensive reading cited two primary reasons: "boring" or "too difficult to understand." In the first survey, the term "boring" occurred in four responses, while the term "too difficult", or variations with similar meaning, occurred in three responses. For those reporting that they enjoy English extensive reading, the most common reason was "interesting." The word "interesting" was found in two responses.

Following implementing journaling, the number of students who reported they enjoyed English extensive reading rose to nine, whereas those reporting not enjoying English extensive reading declined to two. As in the first survey, reasoning for both enjoying and not enjoying English extensive reading included "interesting" and "can improve my English." For those who reported enjoying English extensive reading, three used the word "interesting," and three used the phrase "can improve my English." For those who reported not enjoying English extensive reading, the terms "boring" and "too difficult to understand" both appeared in one response respectively.

DISCUSSION

After implementing journaling as an extensive reading activity outside of class, the amount of extensive reading done by the students rose by a little over two books. Although the number rose, one question that must be asked is did it rise enough? According to Nation (2009), for extensive reading to be effective "the quantity of input needs to be close to 500,000 running words per year, which is equivalent to...six unsimplified novels" (p. 50). With Nation's suggestion as the standard, students would have to read 1.5 novels in a three-month period. Two of the eleven students lagged behind this standard by only completing 1 novel in the three-month period. Although this is a clear improvement from eight out of eleven students not meeting the standard in the previous semester, the question remains on how to push those final two students to read a little more without forcing them to achieve a certain number through extrinsic motivation.

As both the researcher and the teacher, the most exciting finding for me from this study is the change in attitudes toward English extensive reading. Five out of the eleven students changed their attitude toward English extensive reading from not enjoying it to enjoying it. Two students' responses to why are very encouraging. Student E initially reported that "[English extensive reading] is boring," but after journaling said, "[English books] are interesting and my English skills are getting better and better." This student discovered that English extensive reading and journaling helped to improve English skills, and therefore, has begun to enjoy English extensive reading for these rewards.

Another student, Student L, also offered interesting commentary. Student L states, "I enjoy reading English novels because I found out it's interesting." Prior to implementing this activity, Student L felt English extensive reading was not enjoyable because of the difficulty of reading English books. However, after journaling, this attitude changed. One could speculate that the written dialogue between the teacher and the student in the journal helped this student overcome past difficulty, as well as making the experience more interesting.

A Note About Journaling's Practicality as a Teacher

Although the focus of this study is not on the experience of the teacher, it is worth noting the struggles a teacher may face in terms of their own time when implementing the activity of journaling. Fountas and Pinnell (2001) state that journaling is "practical and easy to use" (p. 163). However, my experience does not seem to be inline with this. As a teacher, I found writing letters back and forth weekly incredibly time consuming. I could not imagine doing this with a large class, and certainly not with multiple classes. Kasier (2003) confirms my experience. "[Journaling] did consume a great deal of time each evening when it was time for me to respond" (Kasier 2003, p. 27).

Although this study's results suggest journaling has a positive effect on students' extensive reading attitudes and habits, teachers need to look at their own teaching situation in terms of their time commitments before committing to this time intensive activity. If journaling is one of the only homework assignments during a week, I think it is feasible a teacher could set aside time each day to complete a few letters per day. However, if the teaching situation involves multiple classes, all with daily homework assignments and regular testing, the teacher may not have the time to respond adequately.

CONCLUSION

With the amount of evidence that exists in regards to the language acquisition benefits of extensive reading, it is vital for teachers to find activities that will promote good extensive reading habits in their students. In this study, it was found that the activity of journaling with English extensive reading had positive effects on both the amount of books students read outside of class and their attitudes toward extensive reading. However, the practicality of journaling in terms of a teacher's time may not make it feasible in many teaching situations. Future research should look into the effectiveness of other activities that are both practical and promote good extensive reading habits and attitudes for EFL students.

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APPENDIX 1

Pre-Study Survey on Extensive Reading Habits and Attitudes

1. How many English novels did you read last semester?

2. Do you enjoy reading English novels?

Yes No

3. Why or why not?

APPENDIX 2

Post-Study Survey on Extensive Reading Habits and Attitudes

1. How many English novels did you read this semester (September-December)?

2. Do you enjoy reading English novels?

Yes No

3. Why or why not?

APPENDIX 3

Sample Journal Letter For Teaching Purposes (Fountas & Pinnell 2001, p. 166)

August 8, 2014

Dear Mr. Graham,

I am reading *The Helen Keller Story*, by Catherine Owen Peare. In Helen's second winter she gets a horrible fever and she becomes blind and deaf. And because she is so young, she couldn't speak either. Soon she becomes out of control. They go to Boston, then Washington, D.C. They get in touch with Mr. Anagnos and eventually he sends them a twenty-year-old Anne Sullivan.

I think it is horrible what happened to Helen. Helen is extremely lucky that she is getting her wish. She is learning how to talk! I think her mom and dad shouldn't have given in every time she did something. She is getting spoiled. She is lucky she has a great teacher who helps her learn.

Sincerely,
Emily

APPENDIX 4

Collected Survey Data on Extensive Reading Habits and Attitudes

| Student | 1.1 | 2.1 | 1.2 | 2.2 | 1.3 | 2.3 |
|---------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| A | 2 | 4 | No | Yes | I can't stay on my chairs with out moving. It feels bad when I am reading books I don't like. | I always choose the books I would like to read. |
| B | 1 | 2 | No | Yes | Because it is boring | It's interesting |
| C | 1 | 2 | No | Yes | Because there are usually too many words I don't understand, I can't get the fun. | Because it is more clear than the Chinese books that are translated. |
| D | 1 | 1 | Yes | Yes | I enjoy reading English novels sometimes but I'm really not interested in English. | I like to read novels. |
| E | 0 | 2 | No | Yes | It is boring. | They are interesting and my English skills are getting better and better. |
| F | 1 | 5 | Yes | Yes | Because it is interesting, and it can improve my English. | It can improve my English. |
| G | 3 | 4 | Yes | Yes | I like to read English novels I like, but I don't like to read the English novels I don't like. Novels I like are always really awesome and interesting, so I really enjoy reading English novels I like. | I love to read some English novels but not all of them. If the novel is too difficult for me, then I won't read it. I can read difficult magazines but not novels. I'll lose interest when I'm reading difficult novels. |
| H | 0 | 2 | No | No | I don't like to read English novels because they are too difficult to read. | Too hard to read. |
| I | 0 | 1 | No | No | Because it's boring. | It's boring |
| J | 2 | 9 | Yes | Yes | I say yes but honestly I feel so so about reading English books. I like to read all novels except science fiction. | I like reading English novels because it can improve my writing skills and help me know more vocabulary. |
| K | 0 | 5 | No | Yes | I don't enjoy it because when I open the novel it's full of words and I can't continue reading it even though it's an interesting book. | I enjoy reading English novels because I found out it's interesting. |

Note: The numbers at the top of each column are {Survey#}. {Question#}. See Appendix 1 and Appendix 2 for the survey questions.