Promoting English Reading Ability through the Therapeutic Benefits of Extensive Reading

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Abstract

Generally, therapeutic reading is directly applied in the medical field as an alternative treatment for both physical and mental illness (Billington, J., Dowrick, C., Robinson, J., Hamer, A., Williams, C.; 2011) while extensive reading is implemented in the language field for reading improvement ((Krashen, 2005), Yamashita, J (2004), Carrell, and Carson, (1997)). However, this research study combined the two together. A mixed ability group of graduate students with different disciplines struggling with their study at Khon Kaen University were empowered to enjoy reading within a learner-centered approach through freely choosing their extensive reading materials based on their needs and interests and reading ability from easy to more difficult levels. At the beginning, a teacher provided some extensive reading as a model, and encouraged them to share their own among themselves followed by group discussion. The findings revealed that the therapeutic benefits of extensive reading positively affected both their reading ability and their pleasure through mediating experiences and models of human thinking and feeling which were applicable for their problem solving as adult learners. Though the findings in terms of quantitative data related to reading improvement were not conclusive, the results in the forms of qualitative data using self-assessment reports elicited from a focus group discussion and an informal semi-structured conversational interview, self-assessment in respects to their anxiety related to their study, futures and their work showed positive effects. The participants reported that they felt more confident, more motivated to learn how to read in English. Moreover, they valued selected extensive reading as a stimulating, meaningful, challenging and uplifting activity which fostered relaxation and calmness. It also encouraged focused concentration enabling them to put personal thoughts aside so they were more determined to pursue their study and personal and career life. This directly entailed their improved reading ability derived from the therapeutic benefits of extensive reading.

Keywords: English Reading Ability, Therapeutic Benefits, Extensive Reading

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Introduction

Admission requirements for Master degree students (Thai or international) at Khon Kaen University include a level of English proficiency with minimum scores of TOEFL (paper, Computer and Internet Based) of 470, 150, 52, IELTS (Academic Based) score of 5.0 and TU – GET or CU- TEP score of 500 and 60 accordingly. The score must have been achieved within 2 years of their application to the university. Without the result of one of these international tests, they must pass the English Proficiency Test of Khon Kaen University held by Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences with a minimum score of 50%; otherwise, they are required to register a Reading in English for Graduate Students or Intensive English Course held by the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences. Students need to pass the course to be entitled to complete their graduate study. Thus, all of the target students in this study were those who were not able to satisfy the English criteria required by the university. This was the reason why they were taking this course, a compulsory English course for all graduate students.

As this course focuses on reading, it is necessary to know the root cause of their reading problems. It is clear that they could not understand what they read and as a result could not read quickly. This made them feel bored with reading or they did not enjoy it. All of these students represented the vicious circle of the weak reader which Nutall (1996) describes. He states that the weak reader doesn't understand what they have read so they read slowly which stops them from enjoying reading causing them not to read anything at all (p.127). This problem still exists and seems to continue because there has been no active steps to officially measure, understand and manage to solve this problem effectively. This gives rise to this present research based on the problem mentioned above which directly leads to the objective of the study.

Objectives

Based on the root cause of the problem mentioned earlier causing low reading proficiency of the target learners, this research study attempted to break the vicious circle by creating a successful one. The aim was to enable students to understand what they read and increase their reading speed to enjoy reading so they would read with more pleasure. Therefore, to achieve this goal, this study set an aim to promote English reading ability through therapeutic benefits of extensive reading among the adult learners whose reading proficiency was low based on the results of the admission test. This would be fulfilled depending on this conceptual framework.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework to achieve the research objective was based on the notions of needs analysis, a learner-centered approach, extensive reading and the principles of language acquisition.

The needs analysis in this study covers the analysis of the target learners with different aspects of their needs not only what to learn but how to learn it at the present time and in the future (Hutchinson and Waters, 1987; Robinson 1991; Richterich and Chancerel, 1978). It also discusses how to integrate this iterative concept of needs into a course structure advocated by Nunan (1988). In addition, in order to identify the changing needs of the learners, needs analysis was conducted throughout the course. It was done not only by the teacher as a researcher but also by the learners themselves (Holme and Chalauisaeng, 2006) cooperating through an on-going lesson evaluation and self-assessment. This aimed to directly cater to their specific needs effectively.

In relation to needs analysis, learner-centeredness was also implemented to facilitate extensive reading through learner empowerment as one of the four components of the learner-centered approach. Those components being: the interrelationships amongst language education, learner empowerment, learner training and learner involvement. These components are interdependent of each other and interacting. This was proposed by Tudor (1996, p.27-28) who stated the relationships between each component as follows:

> *Language education involves the acquisition by learners of an understanding of language, language use and language learning, and of their own subjective interaction with the process of language study. This needs not be an academic understanding, but something that is living and personalized which learners can use to direct their language -related behavior in an informed manner. Learner empowerment is the result and practical realization of language education. It relates to the learner's ability to assume an active and informed role in their language study and, ultimately, to pursue of their life goals which pertain to language use and learning in a self-directive manner"*

These relationships are closely related to therapeutic benefits of extensive reading or reading for pleasure advocated in this present study.

The quotation also directly reflects the prime concept of this study in terms of language acquisition through the implementation of extensive reading which is based on different principles of language acquisition. For example, Krashen (2004) advocated extensive reading or reading for pleasure based on the comprehension hypothesis focusing on comprehensible input which assumes that we learn to read by reading. In addition, extensive reading is also believed to enhance incidental vocabulary acquisition resulting in improved reading ability (Cho & Krashen, 1994; Day, Omura and Hiramatsu, 1991; Grabe & Stoller, 1997; Horst, 2005; Lao & Krashen, 2000; Liu & Wu, 2011; Mason and Krashen 1997; Pigada & Schmitt, 2006; Rodrigo, Krashen, and Gribbons, 2004; Wang, 2013)**.**

In sum, this clearly represents the close relations among the main concepts underlying the design of this current study which were closely related to the following research methods.

Research Methodology

1. Population and Samples design

The population of the study was 600 graduate students from 28 sections of the university with a range between 15 to 35 students for each section who were taking the target English course i.e. *Reading in English for Graduate Students* in the first semester of academic year 2013. The samples of the study were 63 graduate students from three sections taught by the researcher. The rest were taught by different teachers in the department with a different teaching approach and materials depending on their preference. In particular for this study, these target groups of learners were from three faculties. Firstly, 15 samples were the faculty of nursing majoring in family nursing (n=1) and nursing administration (n=14). Secondly, 22 samples were from the faculty of medicines majoring in medical biochemistry/ molecular biology (n=6), parasitology (n=5), pharmacology (n=4) and medical physiology (n=7). Thirdly, 16 of them were from the faculty of humanities and social sciences majoring in sociology (n=7), Mekong studies (n=8) and philosophy (n=1). The coursed lasted 45 hours. They studied English 3 hours per week within four consecutive months.

Although course objectives generally focus on practice reading for skills such as finding specific information, main ideas, and conclusions to develop comprehension, the real needs (their lacks, actually) required by their faculties were to be able to effectively read an academic writing such as journal articles and professional texts in their specific disciplines. In reality, their level of English reading proficiency was far below that level needed. In order to bridge the gap between their level of reading proficiency (at the start of the course) and their expectation at the end, as well as those skills needed for them to understand the subject matter

lectures in their own faculties, the materials used in the course as an intensive reading were selected and graded from easy to difficult and from general to technical by the teacher. More importantly, the learners were empowered to select their own reading materials for extensive reading based on their needs and level of their English proficiency while the teacher had selected some as a model. The learning activity after the extensive reading was mainly a small group discussion for sharing their information among the learners themselves and the teacher. This facilitated them to learn and use not only the language but the meaningful content through their chosen reading materials.

2. Measurement and Data collection design

The research was employed both quantitative and qualitative designs. The learners' reading improvement was measured through a pre/post reading test adapted from the standardized IELTS test (academic based reading test) conducted at the beginning and the end of the course. The results were analyzed and presented in terms of percentage and means. On the other hand, the qualitative data were collected throughout the course. For example, a small group discussion and a class observation were conducted during the lesson every week with video recordings. While an on-going self-assessment report was done right after the lesson, an informal semi-structured conversational interview with a small group was undertaken at the end of each month. Each type of the qualitative data was collated, they were classified, analyzed and then presented in terms of a narrative description.

3. Analytical design

The analytical design of this study was based on the six principles of the analytical design by Tufte (1997) but focused on comparisons and contrasts. It was reflected through these two diagrams in an attempt to break a vicious circle of a weak reader (Nutall, 1996, p.127) as a cause of their reading problem and to replace it with a cycle of success of a proficient reader as a solution to their reading problem. These are illustrated in Figures 1 and 2.

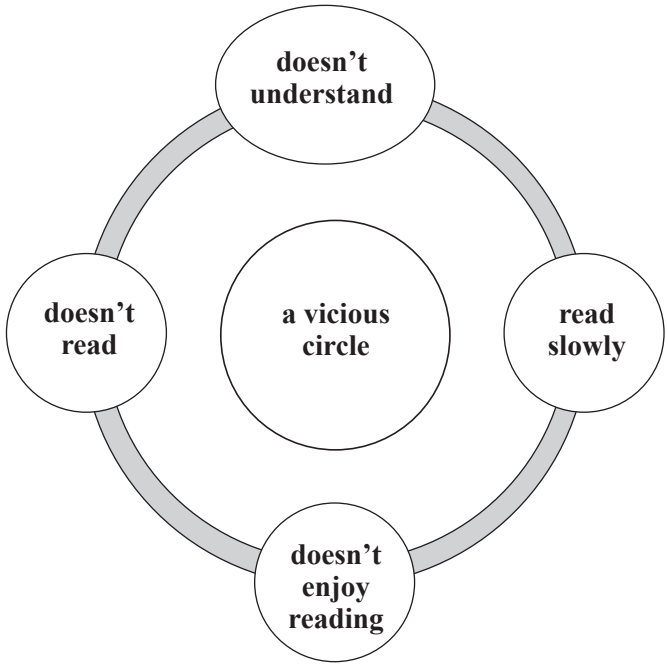

Figure 1: A vicious circle of a weak reader adapted from "Teaching Reading Skill in a Foreign Language" by Nutall, 1996, p.127.

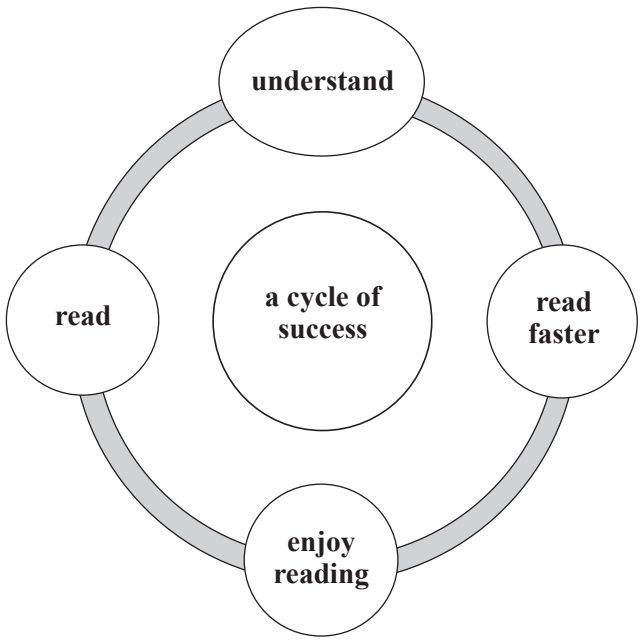

Figure 2 : A cycle of success of a proficient reader adapted from "Teaching Reading Skill in a Foreign Language" by Nutall, 1996, p.127.

A variety of factors were involved in every step of implementing the cycle of success of the proficient readers. To begin with the stage of *"*Understanding*",* the implementation of needs analysis both about what the learners lack, need and want in order to read effectively for the present and the future had to be identified within the learner-centered approach. An emphasis on learner empowerment was required which allowed the learners to actively participate in the decision making process of the free choice of reading materials and reading activities based on their interests and reading ability. It also comprised assessment which included a self-assessment. Then, at the stage of *"*Read Faster*"*, extensive reading was integrated with intensive reading in order to facilitate learners to freely read what they can and like to read. This directly linked to the stage of *"*Enjoy reading*"* through the extensive reading which focused on reading for pleasure. Even in academic reading, they could enjoy reading it if it was their own choice. The pleasure of reading resulted in incidental vocabulary acquisition which directly improved reading ability which would facilitate them to *"*Read*"* more and more with better understanding as well as reading speed and reading enjoyment. Then, the cycle of success of a proficient reader recreates itself continuously.

Results

Quantitative and qualitative appraisals

The results of the mean scores increased 10 % between pretest and posttest, from 45 to 50 which does not represent a significant improvement. Nevertheless, the findings in terms of the qualitative data were drawn from different sources i.e. the on-going self-assessment report, the informal semi-structured conversational interviews, the small group discussions and class observations. These qualitative appraisals resulted in two main reflections that were grouped into two main aspects of what they had gained out of the lessons i.e. in terms of the language and other benefits. The main gains in forms of language from their small group discussion were improved reading strategies. For example, at a word and a sentence level, they all agreed that they could better understand how to guess meaning from contexts with prefixes, suffixes and roots and reference identification especially how to read complicated sentences or complex sentences with different kinds of subordinate clauses such as noun, adjectival and adverbial clauses. Also, at a paragraph and a passage level, they claimed that they could better understand how to find a main idea and supporting details including how to identify paragraph organizations patterns such as listing, comparison and contrast, sequence or time order, cause and effect as well as problem and solution. In addition, they accepted that they understand how to better summarize a sentence, a paragraph and a short and longer passage. This indirectly facilitated reading for comprehension and also integrated reading skills with writing skills focusing on summarizing. Almost all of them said that this made

them feel more confident about how to avoid plagiarism as they said that they had gained experience on how to summarize and paraphrase other peoples' work.

Furthermore, all of them stated that the final part of the reading lessons near the end of the course focusing on how to read a journal article was very useful for them to apply to their own studies and reading of journal articles. In other words, they all said it was very helpful to know how to deal with a journal article more effectively. To be able to read with better comprehension allowed using their increased incidental vocabulary acquired through extensive reading with reading strategies practiced during the course.

More interestingly, although this course is a reading one, English pronunciation was also integrated in order to help the target learners who had never studied English phonetics. Many students were not sure or did not know how to pronounce many English words. Even simple words in their disciplines such as medicine /ˈmed.ɪ.sən/ /ˈmed.sən/, disease /dɪˈziːz/, sustainable /səˈsteɪ.nə.bl□/ were sometimes problematic. The teacher/researcher integrated in the reading lessons through an on-line dictionary for specific words which the learners pronounced incorrectly. It yielded good results as they all expressed that they had gained more knowledge and skill on how to pronounce English words better. This language knowledge and skill strongly satisfied their needs as it made them feel more confident in pronouncing English words and speaking English. This improvement could be observed through the class observations. As the students gradually showed confidence in pronouncing English words and increasingly enjoyed reading English little by little, their improved reading ability and comprehension showed in their questions and responses during discussions.

The other main qualitative appraisal came in the form of a non-language benefit. The major gain was a therapeutic benefit which was reflected through all of the research instruments i.e. the on -going self- assessment report, the informal semi-structured conversational interviews, the small group discussion and class observation. All of the learners agreed that they had not only learnt English reading but also life skills in this English reading course. While the former was essential for their graduate study, the latter kept them pursuing their studies which at times caused extreme stress. They enjoyed reading more and more especially if the contents of the reading materials were directly relevant to their lives. For example, when the passage entitled "Character Buildings: Are you carrots, eggs or coffee?" (See appendix) was introduced as one of the models for extensive reading, this, according to their feedback, inspired them to put more effort to improve them to become stronger in solving their life problems. This kind of extensive reading had stimulated their thoughts and motivated them to read more. This was learner empowerment to freely select what they wanted to read, choosing their extensive reading materials based on their interests and reading ability.

This was all based on the learner-centered approach allowing the students to actively take part in the decision-making process; from designing the lessons to the assessment tests including the self-assessment. The more they were empowered and able to share what they had read with others, the more they enjoyed reading. Their reading outcome could be applied to their real-life experience immediately. Thus, they all approved that therapeutic benefits of extensive reading were stimulating, meaningful, challenging and uplifting which fostered relaxation and calmness. It also encouraged focused concentration on a subject which enabled them to put personal thoughts aside so they could focus on pursuing their studies, personal and career life which significantly broadened their life perspectives. For instance, some of them stated that they had never expected to directly gain such a valuable and memorable experience in an English course.

In summary, the therapeutic benefits of extensive reading facilitated their reading for pleasure through mediating experiences and models of human thinking and feeling which were applicable for their problem solving skills as adult learners. This helped their improvement not only in their reading ability but also personal experiences. That is the therapeutic benefits helped them gain more courage and determination to overcome their problems both in their graduate studies and their personal lives.

Conclusion and Discussion

Although there has been some improvement in reading ability, its significant level could not be demonstrated. This might be from these main factors. Firstly, the target learners were not familiarized with the IELTS test whose specific features of tests need some special training. Secondly, the time constraint of the course which lasted only 45 hours for the whole semester could be too short of a time frame. This directly affected the improvement of the target learners whose level of English proficiency was not high enough to be developed within a short period of time. Lastly, this group of learners was a mixed ability group whose reading abilities varied widely. Therefore, the test results may not truly reflect the real reading improvements as the results were not classified into different levels of reading ability. In addition, the IELTS test measuring general academic based reading proficiency may not be able to assess other language aspects of the target language improvement such as increased general vocabulary which they all claimed the study had greatly helped them build.

The findings from the qualitative appraisals appeared to reflect that all of the learners claimed to gain more confidence in reading English with more enjoyment as well. This included a higher level of courage and determination to put more efforts into improving their own reading ability. The implementation of extensive reading with learner empowerment within the learner-centered teaching approach, helped raise their awareness of self-responsibility for their own learning.

More importantly, the therapeutic benefits of extensive reading played an important role to facilitate improved attitudes to and motivation for pursuing English and reading for pleasure, relaxation and focused concentration.

It is believed that this improvement alone while not tangibly measureable has increased their ability to improve their own reading ability through self-directed study with a raised awareness to learn to read by reading. In short, the effect of the study helps them to become a more autonomous learner which is one of the ultimate goals of education.

Suggestions

The findings of the research study evidently show that the first step to deal with promoting learners' reading ability is to focus on meeting learner needs effectively with a learner-centered approach which includes learner empowerment and other components in the learning process. Also, they should be encouraged to read extensively for pleasure according to their own needs, interests and level of reading ability to become proficient readers. This also directly enables English learners to become more independent and responsible for their own learning and learning improvement.

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