# EFL COLLEGE LEARNERS' PERCEPTIONS OF SELF-SELECTED MATERIALS FOR EXTENSIVE READING

**Hsin-Yi Lien**
*Ming Chuan University, Taiwan*

## ABSTRACT

The present study investigated EFL college learners' perceptions of self-selection of extensive reading materials after five months of supplementary extensive reading for a college reading course. The participants were free to choose either graded readers or authentic fiction or non-fiction books for their extensive reading. The results indicated that the majority of EFL college learners actually enjoy extensive reading and found it helpful. The adult EFL learners seemed to prefer authentic books to graded readers although graded readers provided a great variety of books for them to choose from. In addition, the participants stated that too many uninteresting graded readers caused difficulty in choosing suitable books to read.

## Introduction

Extensive reading (ER) has been discussed and used as a popular method to improve EFL or ESL learners' reading in language classrooms for decades. In extensive reading, language learners read a large number of books on a constant basis to develop their general reading skills, to become fluent in reading, to notice language patterns, and to expand their vocabulary. Extensive reading is beneficial to language learners. Nuttall (1996) proposes that "the best way to improve your knowledge of a foreign language is to go and live among its speakers. The next best way is to read extensively in it" (p.128). Numerous scholars (Day & Bamford, 1998; Elley & Mangubhai, 1981; Grabe, 1995; Hitosugi & Day, 2004; Mason & Krashen, 1997) discuss the benefits of implementing extensive reading. Day and Bamford (1998) state that "Students increased their reading ability in the target language, developed positive attitudes toward reading, had increased motivation to read, and made gains in various aspects of proficiency in the target language, including vocabulary and writing" (p. 33). Some researchers have also claimed that extensive reading is indeed essential in improving L2 learners' fluency because learners it leads to learners acquiring vocabulary, and increasing their reading speed automatically (Blevins, 2005; Iwahori, 2008; Samuels 2006).

Based on the research on extensive reading and the experiences of language teachers, Day and Bamford (2002) propose 10 principles of extensive reading:

The reading material is easy; a variety of reading material on a wide range of topics must be available; learners choose what they want to read; learners read as much as possible; the purpose of reading is usually related to pleasure, information, and general understanding; reading is its own reward; reading speed is usually faster rather than slower; reading is individual and silent; teachers orient and guide their students; and the teacher is a role model of a reader (pp.137–140).

The ten principles provide language instructors with guidelines for conducting successful extensive reading. The principles say that the teachers need to provide easy materials on a variety of topics at different levels; learners are independent readers free to choose reading texts to read for pleasure at their own learning pace; and teachers play the role of facilitator and are role models. To satisfy these guidelines graded readers of diverse topics and levels are suggested and usually used in most extensive reading.

## Graded Readers

Graded readers or "Language learner literature" are simplified texts specially written for L2 learners at various levels of language proficiency (Day & Bamford, 1998) and carefully divided into reading proficiency levels to improve language learners' reading competency (Waring, 2005). Graded readers are "extended texts, mostly fiction, written in language reduced in terms of structures and vocabulary" (Hill, 1997, p. 57). By restricting the number of words and simplified grammar structures, graded readers provide comfort and confidence for L2 learners reading in foreign language. Graded readers are commonly of two types: the rewrite and the simplified original.

The purpose of graded readers is to assist learners in developing adequate fluency at one level so that they can move on to the next level. This use of graded readers is widely accepted as a means of improving reading proficiency. An increasing number of studies have also revealed the necessity and benefits of using graded readers in extensive reading, and they maintain that the simplified texts are as important and useful as authentic materials for language learning. Alderson and Urquhart (1984) declare that "we are committed to believing that simplified texts can be authentic" (p. 198), while Shizuoka (2000) asserts that authentic reading and listening are normally more difficult. The gains for incorporating graded readers in language classroom, as Shizuoka points out, include increasing comprehensible input, making L2 literature accessible and enjoyable, encouraging learners to take responsibility for their learning, accommodating almost any level of learners, and developing good English reading habits.

A good number of studies on extensive reading emphasize that reading materials should be enjoyable and easy to understand. Nuttall (1982) indicates that the enjoyment of reading has a far greater influence than any other kind of motivation in language learning. The aim of graded readers is to provide an appropriate level of language, length of story, and theme. Satisfying these requirements is crucial at any level of language learning, from beginning to advanced.

However, graded readers do not seem to be able to motivate post-intermediate level learners or college students and they might not enjoy reading graded readers. Several scholars state that replacing graded readers with authentic materials or incorporating authentic texts in extensive reading programme is better for language learners in enhancing their language proficiency. Widdowson (1990) asserts that "the language presented to learners should be simplified in some way for easy access and acquisition. Nowadays, there are recommendations that the language presented should be authentic." (p. 67).

## Authentic materials

Authentic texts are materials written for native speakers, not for language learners. Jordan (1997) says that authentic texts are materials not written for language teaching purposes. However, authentic texts are important for language learning, because they increase students' motivation for learning, and expose them to 'real' language (Guariento & Morley, 2001). Research studies have investigated the benefits of using authentic materials in language classrooms. As Richard (2001) indicates the primary advantages of implementing authentic materials are to have a positive effect on learner motivation, to provide authentic cultural information and exposure to real language, to relate more closely to learners' needs, and to support a more creative approach to teaching.

Carbery and Yoshida (2003) conducted a study using two authentic fiction texts for extensive reading at post-intermediate college level, and the results revealed that students were motivated to not only finish the books but also enjoyed discussing the themes, language and characters. Wu (2005) explored the effects of using popular fiction as reading materials in extensive reading on EFL learners' reading and writing ability. The subjects were fifteen junior students majoring in English and the results showed that the use of popular fiction aroused various reactions from the participants. The students reported positive feedback on the use of a popular fiction, and their attitudes toward authentic materials became affirmative after they gained confidence on completion of the assigned fiction texts.

A large number of studies on extensive reading focus on the effectiveness of extensive reading in EFL or ESL settings and the benefits of using graded readers, However, no studies have investigated EFL learners' perceptions of book selection—graded readers or authentic books in ER. Therefore, in the present study the following research questions are addressed:

1   What are EFL college learners' perceptions of extensive reading?
2   What are EFL college learners' preferences and opinions on extensive reading materials with regard to graded readers and authentic books?

## Methodology

### *Participants*

A total of 108 EFL freshmen majoring in English participated in the study for five months. They had passed the College Entrance Exam and were enrolled in an Applied English Department in northern Taiwan. The majority of them had studied English for at least nine years and their English proficiency was at intermediate level. In their first-year of college study the participants took some basic courses, such as reading, writing, and grammar as required courses in the department. In the basic reading course, in addition to intensive reading in class, extensive reading was part of the course requirements and students had to read as many books as possible outside the classroom. They could choose whatever English books they liked, either graded readers, authentic fiction or other types of authentic material, and were asked to complete a written report for each book they read. The purpose of the written reports, with different questions in various report sheets, was to provide evidence of reading and check on the participants' understanding of the books. The questions in the written reports included "Write a letter to one of the characters in the book," "Top 10 List - list ten things you learned from this book," or "As a literary agent, write a letter to a publishing company designed to persuade them to publish this book." Meanwhile, they also recorded each book they read, listing the date they finished reading, the total number of pages, the level of each graded reader or authentic book, type of the book such as romance, or mystery, the difficulty level of the book in their opinion, the percentage of unknown words they encountered, and the degree of enjoyment for the book. The book record allowed the participants to check their efforts in extensive reading.

### *Research Design*

Unlike the usual extensive reading in foreign language learning, the materials used for extensive reading in the present study included graded readers from various publishers (for example, Oxford, Heinemann, Longman, Cambridge, and Penguin),

ranging from level 1 to level 6, with 300 to 3,000 headwords respectively, and popular fiction such as *The Twilight series*, *Harry Potter series*, *Kite Runner*, or any other type of authentic book (fiction or non-fiction) the students enjoyed reading. Enjoyment was the primary concern for them in choosing English materials, and reading for pleasure was emphasized. The participants were free to decide on the level suitable for their reading, and the type of books. Forepart from implementing extensive reading outside the classroom, intensive reading activities to improve participants' reading comprehension, reading strategies, and reading speed were also carried out in class.

*Procedure*

The participants were asked to record what they read and provide details about the book's title, the publisher, the level of graded reader or authentic material, and the type of book. They were also required to give their opinions about their level of enjoyment of the book, and the percentage of comprehension of the book based on their own judgment. After implementing extensive reading for five months, a questionnaire to investigate the participants' choice of books, opinions and attitudes toward extensive reading was administered. The purpose of the questionnaire was to investigate the background of the participants, their reading habits in either their native language or English, hours spent in reading outside the classroom, the reasons of choosing suitable books, and their preferences for graded readers or authentic materials.

## Results

### Research Question 1: What are EFL college learners' perceptions of extensive reading?

Table 1 shows the participants' opinions about ER. The results show that the majority of the participants indeed enjoyed ER (n=86). Comparing the participants who loved reading English with those who did not, most of the participants who enjoyed reading thought ER was ok (n=69), and more than half of the participants who did not like reading English stated that ER was ok (n=17). That is, even the participants who did not like reading English still enjoyed ER. To further study the participants' book selection with regard to their enjoyment of reading English, the results in Table 2 indicate that the number of the participants who enjoyed reading English and chose graded readers (n=44) was close to the number of the participants who selected authentic books (n=37). In addition, most of the participants who did not enjoy reading English chose graded readers (n=22), but only five participants chose to read authentic books.

Table 1: The Participants' Opinions on Extensive Reading

| Opinions on ER | Enjoy reading English | Not enjoy reading English | Total |
|---|---|---|---|
| Very much | 12 | 0 | 12 (11%) |
| Ok | 57 | 17 | 74 (69%) |
| No opinions | 4 | 5 | 9 (8%) |
| A little | 7 | 5 | 12 (11%) |
| Not at all | 1 | 0 | 1 (1%) |
| Total | 81 | 27 | 108 (100%) |

Table 2: Comparison of Participants' Book Selection Based on Enjoyment of Reading in English

| | Enjoy reading English | Not enjoy reading English | Total |
|---|---|---|---|
| Reading graded readers | 44 | 22 | 66 |
| Reading authentic books | 37 | 5 | 42 |
| Total | 81 | 27 | 108 |

### Research Question 2: What are EFL college learners' preferences and opinions on extensive reading materials with regard to graded readers or authentic books?

A questionnaire was administered to investigate the participants' preferences and opinions on extensive reading materials. Table 3 reveals the results of the comparison between the participants' current and future selection of reading materials. More participants selected graded readers (n=66) as extensive reading materials; however, when asked about their future selection of reading materials, more participants indicated that would choose authentic books (n=60) as their future extensive reading materials. The results demonstrate that an increased number of participants would choose authentic materials rather than graded readers. That is, more participants would like to try reading authentic books, and some of them might indeed enjoy reading authentic books and desire to keep on reading authentic books in the future. Regarding the differences between participants' current and probable future selection, the results in Table 4 show that 38 out of 66 participants who currently chose graded readers will continue to read graded readers, but 28 of them will try to read authentic books in the future. On the other hand, 32 out of 42 participants will keep reading authentic books while only ten participants may try to read graded readers for their future extensive reading.

Table 3: Comparison of the Participants' Current and Future Selection for
Extensive Reading Materials

| Selection<br><br>Materials | Current | Future |
|---|---|---|
| Graded readers | 66 | 48 |
| Authentic books | 42 | 60 |
| Total | 108 | 108 |

Table 4: Cross-tabulation of the Participants' Current and Future Selection of
Extensive Reading Materials

| | | Future selection | | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | **Graded Readers** | **Authentic Books** | |
| Current | Graded Readers | 38 | 28 | 66 |
| selection | Authentic Books | 10 | 32 | 42 |
| Total | | 48 | 60 | 108 |

It was surprising that some students indeed loved reading authentic books, which are probably more difficult and challenging for freshmen. The participants' perception with regard to graded readers and authentic books is displayed in Table 5. The number of students who thought authentic books (n=30) were helpful was slightly more than the students who considered graded readers helpful; however, more participants (n=8) considered graded readers unhelpful, while only two participants considered authentic books unhelpful. Concerning the responses about the difficulty level of extensive reading materials, the majority of the students had neutral opinions. However, the number of students (n=23) who thought graded readers difficult was smaller than those who thought them not difficult (n=46). Moreover, more students (n=27) thought that graded readers were suitable to their reading level than those who chose authentic books (n=6).The results may explain the variety of graded readers produced by different publishers. This allows students to select books suitable to their level. Compared to authentic materials written for native speakers, the books seemed to have a similar difficulty level for the EFL readers.

Table 5: Comparison of Participants' Opinions on Graded Readers and Authentic Books

| Opinions | Participants choosing graded readers | Participants choosing authentic books | Total |
|---|---|---|---|
| Helpful | 28 | 30 | 58 |
| Unhelpful | 8 | 2 | 10 |
| Easy | 23 | 1 | 24 |
| Ok | 54 | 47 | 101 |
| Difficult | 0 | 46 | 46 |
| Suitable to my reading level | 27 | 6 | 33 |

In addition to the investigation of the participants' opinions about graded readers and authentic books, the present study also investigated whether students had difficulties in choosing suitable books to read. The results revealed that more than half of the participants pointed out that they indeed had difficulty in choosing a book to read (n=60), and among them more participants were those who chose to read graded readers (n=36) (see Table 6). Table 7 reveals that among the reasons they had difficulty in book selection were because there was "nothing interesting" (n=25), "too many choices" (n=20), and that they were "unsure about the level" (n=18). For those who chose graded readers, "nothing interesting" and "too many choices" caused difficulty in choosing a book, while for those who selected authentic books, "unsure about the level" caused them some problems in choosing a book to read. The graded readers, which are simplified texts, did not not interest these EFL readers. As Nuttall (1982) says, no matter how good the simplification is, something is always lost. Many features such as similes, metaphors and elaborations seem to be excluded in graded readers. As a result, students may are note exposed to the authentic language which allows non-native speakers to experience real expressions and the use of the target language.

Table 6 Comparison of Participants' Opinions about Difficulty in Choosing Suitable Books to Read

| Response | Participants choosing graded readers | Authentic books | Total |
|---|---|---|---|
| Difficulty | 36 | 24 | 60 |
| No difficulty | 30 | 18 | 48 |
| Total | 66 | 42 | 108 |

Table 7: Comparison of Reasons for Difficulty in Selecting Suitable Books to Read

| Reasons | Participants choosing graded readers | Participants choosing authentic books | Total |
|---|---|---|---|
| Nothing interesting | 20 | 5 | 25 |
| Too few choices | 2 | 6 | 8 |
| Too many choices | 14 | 6 | 20 |
| Unsure about the level | 6 | 12 | 18 |
| All books are difficult | 3 | 0 | 3 |
| Others | 0 | 2 | 2 |
| Total | 45 | 31 | 76 |

## Discussion

The present study investigated EFL college learners' perceptions of ER and their preferences and opinions on extensive reading materials with regard to graded readers or authentic books. The results indicate that 80% of the participants (N=108) indeed enjoyed ER including those who did not like reading in English. The participants who did not enjoy reading in English tended to choose graded readers. This probably is because graded readers offered a variety of books at different levels from beginning to advanced for the learners to choose. As Nuttall (1982) points out, graded readers provide an appropriate level of language, length of story and theme, and thus readers at any level could enjoy reading them. It was surprising to find out that after experiencing extensive reading for five months, more participants seemed to be more interested in reading authentic books. Although Alderson and Urquhart (1984) state that "we are committed to believing that simplified texts can be authentic;" graded readers do not seem to be enough for EFL college students at high-intermediate level. According to Carbery and Yoshida (2003), for post-intermediate students, graded readers seem insufficient to maintain interest and motivation, and native fiction indeed motivates these high-intermediate students (Wu, 2005).

With regard to the participants' opinions on extensive reading materials, more participants considered reading authentic books helpful, and they are comfortable with either graded readers or authentic books.

## Conclusion, Pedagogical Implication and Limitations

The present study explored EFL college learners' perceptions of ER and their opinions on self-selection materials with regard to graded readers or authentic books. The majority of the participants indeed enjoyed ER and asserted that ER was helpful, and they were comfortable with reading materials either graded readers

or authentic books. However, the participants seemed to prefer authentic books to graded readers although graded readers provide a great variety of books for them to choose from. However, the participants also pointed out that too many choices of graded readers had inconvenienced them when choosing books, and some of them thought graded readers were not interesting. On the other hand, although reading authentic books was more difficult and challenging, the participants prefer to select authentic texts in ER. It seems that graded readers may not be able to interest and motivate adult learners at high-intermediate level. Reading texts are actually a key to motivating students to keep on reading. The instructor who is willing to implement ER in reading may need to be careful about the selection of reading materials and try to find reading materials suitable for students' level and meet students' needs. The alternative way to only using graded readers is to introduce authentic materials or fiction for students to choose from. Adult EFL learners might be more captivated by authentic fiction or non-fiction with complicated plots or concepts. Authentic books also provide EFL learners more freedom in book selection and this enables them to engage in ER more extensively. Although the scope of the present study is not sufficiently enough, the findings certainly provide some suggestions about the use of reading materials in ER. Future studies may need to incorporate qualitative methods to find out what adult EFL learners need in terms of reading materials in ER.

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