

## Supporting Extensive Reading in a University where English is Used as a Second Language and a Medium of Instruction

Hazel Chiu

The Hong Kong Polytechnic University

### ABSTRACT

*Extensive reading has long been considered as a potent means for facilitating language acquisition for second language learners, especially in the contexts of primary and secondary schools where students are elementary or intermediate learners. In one of the universities in Hong Kong where English is used as a medium of instruction, the development of reading and writing skills has been designated as one of the major objectives of the curriculum reform. This paper reports a small-scale action research study on implementing guided reading sessions in an independent language learning centre of the university, which aims at helping university students who are second language learners of English develop interest and ability to access extensive reading materials targeted at general first language readers. Students were guided to read a short extract from popular fiction or non-fiction materials and responded to comprehension questions. They then had a short discussion to make use of ideas they gained, and reflected about their learning experience. Results seemed to indicate potential for these reading sessions to develop students' ability and interest in extensive reading, according to the data collected from both student and teacher participants.*

### INTRODUCTION

Extensive reading has long been considered as a potent means for facilitating language learning or acquisition, especially in the context of learning or teaching English as a second language (L2). A number of studies have been conducted in the past two decades on the effectiveness of extensive reading in enhancing reading skills and fluency, building vocabulary and developing writing skills. The idea that a reading flood of easy books helps L2 learners, especially elementary and intermediate learners has been widely supported.

Krashen (1985) is one of the early proponents of using extensive reading as a means to facilitate language learning/acquisition in a second language. According to his ideas on *Input Hypothesis*, humans acquire language in only one way—by receiving “comprehensible input” which contains structures that are a little beyond their current level of competence (Krashen, 1985). His concepts and ideas have been further developed subsequently. In recent years, researchers have generally agreed that extensive reading is an approach in which second language learners read large quantities of materials within their linguistic competence, usually for pleasure, with an emphasis on the meaning rather than the language of the text. This flood of easy reading will facilitate gradual language development (Day & Bamford, 1998; Nation, 2009)

Abundant research has shown that extensive reading is beneficial to language acquisition or learning, particularly in areas related to vocabulary learning, reading fluency and reading ability. Examples of more recent studies on vocabulary learning are those conducted by Gardner (2004), Shin (2004) and Kweon & Kim (2008), in which learners showed positive vocabulary

growth after engaging in reading extensively for a certain period of time.

There was also a body of research investigating whether extensive reading facilitates the improvement of reading fluency or reading ability. Bell's (2001) study, for example, was conducted in the Yemen Arab Republic on young adult students working in various government ministries. It measured both reading speeds and comprehension in two groups of learners exposed to "intensive" and "extensive" reading programs respectively. Results indicate that subjects exposed to "extensive" reading achieved both significantly faster reading speeds and significantly higher scores on measures of reading comprehension. The study by Iwahori (2008) examined the effectiveness of ER on reading rates of high school students in Japan. Pretests and posttests of reading rate and language proficiency were administered and a t-test was used to compare means of the rates and language proficiency within groups. Results indicate that ER is an effective approach to improve students' reading rate and general language proficiency.

There has also been research evidence that extensive reading contributes to writing improvement. The study by Lai (1993) was conducted on the use of graded readers and short passages in a 4-week summer reading programme for 226 junior secondary Hong Kong secondary students in Hong Kong. Results show that there was significant improvement in writing performance, aside from the other two major areas of reading comprehension and reading speed. The study by Wu (2000) to examine English as a Foreign language (EFL) Taiwanese university students' cognitive skill development also showed that the use of pleasure-reading activities could enhance students' intrinsic motivation and empowers them to accomplish successful creative writing.

A body of research also examines factors contributing to attitudes or motivations toward extensive reading. Camiciottoli's (2001) study on 182 Italian university EFL students' reading frequency and attitude. Results indicated that while students' reading frequency was quite low, their attitude towards reading was generally quite positive. A major factor for limited reading is no access to reading materials, which is a problem quite easily overcome in the learning environment as priority can be given to furnishing classrooms and libraries with a wide variety of books and other types of literature to encourage students to read in English.

Takase's (2004) study also reported that some of the most enthusiastic readers in the L2 were initially motivated by the novelty of the task, including interesting materials, freedom to choose books, and task independence, then, a sense of joy, accomplishment, and self-confidence followed that sustained their motivation throughout the year. Another study by Takase (2007) investigated factors that motivate 219 Japanese high school students to read English extensively. Results indicate that factors related to the reading environment and extrinsic motivation such as parents' involvement in and family attitudes toward reading, and entrance exam-related extrinsic motivation are not so influential as factors related to the intrinsic motivation for L1 and L2 reading.

### **Extensive Reading in the School Language Curriculum**

Most of the research from the previous section has shown that extensive reading is a useful tool to motivate language learning and facilitate language development, particularly at an elementary or intermediate level of learning English as a L2. In fact, in different parts of the world, extensive reading schemes have often been implemented in primary or secondary schools, where attempts were made to integrate it into the language curriculum.

In addition to the studies discussed in the previous section of this article on language

development and motivation, a number of studies have also explored the implementation of extensive reading schemes in the school curriculum in different parts of the world, most notably in South East Asia, Africa and the Middle East. Most of the findings show benefits of extensive reading, although problems and difficulties were also encountered (Asraf & Ahmad, 2003; Latha, 1999; Mok, 1994; Ng, 1994; Shlayer, 1996; Takase, 2007; Williams, 2007; Wolf & Bokhorst-Heng, 2008; Wolkinson & Burchfield, 1998).

Similarly in Hong Kong, attempts have been made to implement extensive reading in schools, from secondary to primary. The Hong Kong Extensive Reading Scheme (for English) (HKERS) was first introduced to secondary 1 to secondary 3 (year/grade 7-9 according to the western system) of secondary schools in September 1991 and was extended to the primary schools in the 1995-96 school year (Wong, 2001). Schools were supported with lists of suitable reading materials for students at different levels and funding to purchase reading materials were also allocated. Two to three class periods were also set aside for extensive reading per week.

Some of the studies conducted on the scheme have reported positive results concerning the implementation of the scheme in the past two decades. Lai (1993), for example, reports the beneficial effects of a 4-week summer reading programme on junior secondary students' reading comprehension, reading speed and writing development. She found that there was improvement in all three areas tested for those subjects who had reached a certain level of proficiency.

Similarly, Tsang (1996) conducted a study investigating the effects of an enriched syllabus which included extensive reading and frequent writing assignments on English descriptive writing performance for junior secondary level classes. Her results indicated that the syllabus including an extensive reading program was significantly more effective than the one which included frequent writing practice.

Yu (1999) conducted another experimental study to evaluate the effectiveness of the scheme. The study investigated whether the scheme helped students acquire a reading habit in English and improve their English proficiency. She compared an experimental group of 492 students and a control group of 490 students, and collected views from 45 teachers by asking them to complete questionnaires. Results indicated that only 27% included extensive reading in English as a favourite pastime, showing that a reading habit takes a long time to develop and continual structural support is necessary. However, the experimental students were more confident of their reading ability; and evaluation of the scheme by the teachers and students both suggested that they perceived the programme as useful in developing such aspects of English as vocabulary, reading, and writing and in expanding students' knowledge of the world.

Wong's (2001) study presents more negative effects of the extensive reading programme. She suggests that motivating students to read more English is still a daunting job after a decade since the introduction of the scheme. The attitude toward English reading among the students of Hong Kong remains negative, and the motivation to read stays at the same low level. Concern about declining English proficiency among the students is still widespread. Her paper attempts to look into the reasons why the English proficiency level has not changed much since the introduction of the HKERS and makes suggestions about what can be done further to make HKERS work best for the students of Hong Kong. She suggested that general reading skills be strengthened, a favorable environment for reading be created, labeling be eliminated, the connection between reading and writing be more effectively understood, and a wide selection of authentic and relevant reading materials be made available.

Although extensive reading has been implemented in Hong Kong schools for over a decade, results collected from the research studies have often indicated positive attitudes towards

the scheme, although concrete findings concerning its success in improving students' language proficiency and developing their reading habit have been unclear or inconclusive. However, advocates about the continuous implementation of extensive programmes have never abated. Green (2005), for example, argues that extensive reading is an important medium for long-term second language acquisition. He pushes for a stronger integration of extensive reading into the task-based curriculum, instead of confining it within the hermetic bounds of a reading scheme. He believes that incorporating extensive reading into the purposeful and interactive framework of the task-based language curriculum is beneficial to language development. It also facilitates the acquisition of language structures.

Green's ideas have been gradually and partially realized in the senior form language curriculum in Hong Kong. The extensive reading scheme, initially implemented only at senior primary and junior secondary levels, was later extended to the senior forms in 1997 (Green, 2005). In 2007, it took a great stride forward by becoming a part of the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination (HKCEE), the public exit examination for secondary students. With the introduction of the school-based assessment (SBA), the public examination is no longer totally a one-off exam notorious for the pressure it created on the students and the lack of communicative value of some of the exam papers. SBA takes the form of an oral assessment based on students' extensive reading in their own schools. Starting from 2007, it has become a component of the HKCEE carrying 15% of the weighting. The proportion may be small, but it is a groundbreaking change for the Hong Kong examination system. It overhauls the long ingrained exam culture of the language curriculum and gives rise to heated debates in society concerning problems in its implementation (*SCMP*, May 7 2005; January 14 2006; April 29 2006).

### **Extensive Reading in the University Curriculum**

Although there have been arguments to support the need to integrate extensive reading into the university EAP curriculum (e.g., Carrell & Carson, 1997), relatively a smaller number of studies concern implementing extensive reading in a university curriculum. Outside Hong Kong, there have been piecemeal studies concerning extensive reading in the university preparation courses or university ESL or EFL programmes in recent years, such as the one conducted by Lee (2007) in Taiwan. Results are generally positive confirming similar findings from previous studies on the effectiveness of extensive reading on the development of reading and vocabulary.

To address the lack of extensive reading in higher educational and English for Academic Purposes settings, Macalister (2008) reports on the implementation of an extensive reading component in a pre-university study EAP programme in New Zealand. He believes that that extensive reading can have a place in an EAP programme. In another paper, Macalister (2010) further suggests that extensive reading can be used more widely in higher educational contexts, if it is promoted through teacher education, new research, changes in course design, raising awareness among administrators and managers, and improved resource provision.

In Hong Kong, extensive reading does not seem to have received much attention in the university curriculum, except perhaps when individual universities make considerations about the types of reading resources they need to include in their self-access centres, or occasional activities conducted in these centres, such as reading groups or conversation groups with a reading focus (Centre for Language in Education, 2005; English Language Centre, 2011).

In fact, reading is such a core and basic ability at university that it has never received much official attention, as most of the universities in Hong Kong use English as the medium of

instruction for most of the subjects. In order to fulfil the course requirements of university programmes, students are expected to complete a great deal of required readings. To develop into knowledgeable and educated persons, university students are also expected to read extensively, and often voluntarily. Yet, we have also heard educators complain that students do not read much/enough nowadays, and something needs to be done to make them read more.

With the change in the educational structure in Hong Kong when the existing 3-year university system will be changed into a 4-year university system by 2012, educators become more aware of the importance of enhancing students' basic skills in studying (such as literacy skills), as students enter university one year earlier than those from the former system. At least one of the universities has embarked on a number of reform initiatives which put emphasis on a variety of teaching and learning objectives and outcomes which often go beyond specific subjects to include wider and broader accomplishments. One of these emphasis is on the development of literacy skills, of which reading is a major issue. In order to help students improve their reading and writing skills, the university has made it a graduation requirement for students to pass a subject which requires the reading of (an) extensive text(s), and another subject which requires the completion of a substantial piece of writing in English. These are called reading and writing requirements (The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, 2011a).

The university library is also implementing a common book reading programme, for encouraging students to read extensively. For this programme, a common book is selected for the first year students to read for pleasure, facilitated by discussion sessions conducted by various members of the university to guide students in their reading. Activities related to the book will also be conducted to engage students in developing interest in extensive reading, such as photo exhibition, film show and writing competition (The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, 2011b).

It should be noted that English is not only a medium of instruction in Hong Kong universities, it is also a second language for most of the university students. The common reading programme offered in the university is different from those which are implemented in western universities where English is the first language for most students, such as the one in the University of South Carolina described by Laufgraben (2006), which aimed to orient new students towards their academic studies, and create a common social experience for students and teachers.

Clearly, the ultimate goal of the university common reading programme is not just to make students read a particular book, but to help develop a reading culture in the university by arousing the awareness of the importance of reading extensively. However, reading extensively in a second language is not really the type of easy pleasure reading we often associate with extensive reading in general. It is a great challenge for second language learners who try to access extensive reading materials intended for first language readers. To support interest in voluntary extensive reading for second language readers facing the challenge of accessing reading materials intended for first language readers, I conducted a small-scale action research study in implementing guided reading sessions in the independent language learning centre of the university.

## **THE STUDY**

This paper reports a small-scale action research pilot study on implementing small-group guided reading sessions to help students gain access to extensive reading materials not specifically targeted at second language readers. These sessions were conducted in the

independent language learning centre in one of the universities in Hong Kong. In this university, students can book small-group speaking sessions of 3 or 5 students led by a teacher for tackling various learning needs related to speaking, such as group discussion, oral presentation, social English and pronunciation. Students make their own decision of learning targets and ask the teacher to give them guidance or advice to fulfil them in the session.

One of the learning targets students often propose is group discussion, which is a useful means for developing general speaking ability. Students sometimes propose a topic themselves for discussion or they ask the teacher to suggest a topic. Very often the discussion is not supported by any reading input and the content of the discussion may be quite general or superficial. To substantiate the discussion content as well as arousing students' interest in reading, I designed some simple task sheets on reading extracts from books which may be suitable or meaningful for students as extensive reading materials. Students who came to these one-hour group discussion sessions first read the popular fiction or non-fiction extracts for 10 to 15 minutes. They then discussed answers to a few questions to enhance their understanding of the text and the context for the material. After that they had a 10-minute discussion on a given topic which related a theme from the text to some ideas or concepts which were familiar to them. At the end of the session, they reflected about their learning experience.

### **Subjects and Data Collection**

Student participants were three groups each of three students who book the teacher guided session to enhance their speaking skills and ability. Group A of these students attended these reading sessions five times, while the other two groups (Groups B and C) attended only once. Most of the students in Groups A and B were science students with a lower proficiency level compared to Group C, in which most students were from the business department.

Data from the student participants were collected from the field notes I took during and immediately after the reading sessions on their performance and reflections in the reading sessions. Analysis of data was basically qualitative, based on my perception and memory of what happened. Their performance was judged according to whether they showed enthusiasm and interest in participating in the discussion, and whether their ideas were relevant to what they read showed understanding of the reading extract. Their reflections were taken down in note form, to be reproduced in the analysis as close to the original comments as possible.

I also asked three colleagues as teacher participants to review the materials and comment on the design and suitability of the materials and the reading session in a one-to-one interview. All of the teacher reviewers had extensive experience in teaching English; they have also conducted slightly different guided reading sessions implemented in another activity offered by the language centre. Each teacher was interviewed for around half an hour to collect their views for the qualitative data analysis in the findings section.

### **Materials**

The materials used in these reading sessions included a reading extract from a fiction or non-fiction book for 10 to 15 minutes of reading. A task sheet was also designed which included a brief introduction of the author and a short summary of the book, followed by a few comprehension questions on the reading extract and a discussion task at the end. Teacher's notes were also provided to give additional help for teachers who may not be very familiar with the

book. However, teachers were also reminded that they do not need to follow the materials strictly if they are familiar with the book and have other ideas about conducting these reading sessions which better suit the needs and interests of themselves and the students.

Nine books from three categories were chosen for this study. The three categories were fiction classics, contemporary fiction and non-fiction. The books were selected according to whether they are suitable for the young educated persons of today, based on following principles:

- containing themes or ideas interesting or meaningful for university students;
- not too difficult in terms of both content and language for university undergraduates who are L2 learners of English;
- popular (e.g. best-sellers, or with film adaptations);
- well-written (e.g. award-winners).

For fiction classics mostly best-sellers and books with film adaptations were adopted. Non-fiction books are contemporary writing on current topics which may be of interest to university students; for example, relationships, communication, self-improvement and other general interest topics. The following are the books used in this study:

#### Fiction Classics

*Animal Farm* by George Orwell

*Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens

*Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen

#### Contemporary Fiction

*Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* by J. K. Rowling

*The Client* by John Grisham

*The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini

#### Non-fiction

*How to Win Friends and Influence People* by Dale Carnegie

*Rich Dad Poor Dad* by Robert T. Kiyosaki

*The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* by Steven R. Covey

Each of the three teachers reviewers reviewed three of the nine books, one from each category. However, only five of the nine books were used in the guided reading sessions, as only one group of students attended a maximum of five sessions. The book *The Kite Runner* were used for all the three groups of students. A copy of the sample material for the guided reading sessions designed for one of these books is included in Appendix A.

### **Research Questions**

The following are the three research questions that this study aimed to address:

- (1) Do these introductory reading sessions help to enhance students' access to extensive reading materials for general first language readers?
- (2) What kinds of books are suitable for students?
- (3) Can these reading sessions help to develop other non-language learning outcomes promoted in the new curriculum of the university (e.g. critical thinking skills, cultural appreciation, broad knowledge base, sense of ethical conduct and social responsibility)?

## FINDINGS

### Findings from Student Participants

Findings from student participants were collected from my observations of their performance and the views they gave at the end of the reading session for reflecting about what they have done. Field notes were taken during the sessions and shortly after the sessions to support my memory of what happened.

**Research Question 1:** *Do these introductory reading sessions help to enhance students' access to extensive reading materials for general first language readers?*

#### A. Reading Ability

Observations of students' performance in the reading sessions indicated that all the five books were quite difficult for them. The book, *The Kite Runner*, was read by all the three groups of students. From the ways the students responded to the comprehension questions and contributed to the discussions, the books seemed to be quite difficult for all the groups. Group C performed a little better compared to Groups A and B, giving more correct answers to the comprehension questions and participating more actively in the discussions; Group B is the weakest with quite limited participation and comprehension of the book.

Group A read five of the books in the reading sessions. Their performance indicated that *The Kite Runner* and *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* were comparatively less difficult for them; *Animal Farm* and *Pride and Prejudice* were more difficult. These were confirmed in their reflections at the end of each session. One of the students, for example, pointed out that the "narrative structure" of *Pride and Prejudice* was quite hard to follow. She explained that she meant the ways the dialogues were presented, sometimes without clear indications of who was talking to whom. The ways the characters talk to each other were also hard to follow, as they sometimes do not say directly what they really think [she probably meant the satirical communication style of characters like Mr. Bennet.]

#### B. Interest in Reading

Group A students were most involved in the discussion on *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*. In the reflections they suggested that the main attractions of the *Harry Potter* books were the connection with their life experience and the vivid characters they could identify with, both from the book and the film adaptations. For example, the Headmaster of the wizard school is like a grandfather with a long beard who is kind and warm-hearted; the main character Hermione is beautiful, smart, clever, brave, hardworking, sensible and sincere, perfect with all the qualities that a young school girl can hope to have.

Group B students could only give limited contribution for the comprehension questions and the discussion task for *The Kite Runner*. They were not too involved in the session, probably because they found the material unfamiliar, with language structures and expressions they found difficult to understand, as they reflected about their experience at the end of the session.

Two of the three students in Group C had a higher proficiency level than most of the other students. The group seemed to be interested and participated actively in the session on *The Kite Runner*. They were particularly involved in the discussion task when they compared the similarities and the differences between the society in the novel and the society they live in.

### C. Reading Habit

In the end-of session reflections, most of the students indicated that they had little time to read books on their own beyond what was required for their courses. Some read occasionally, but their effort was often put off because of the difficulty of reading on their own. One student said that he read most of the Chinese translated versions of the *Harry Potter* books, but only a few pages of one chapter of the seventh book which was particularly interesting to him.

More than one students have watched the films adapted from the *Harry Potter* books and were very much attracted by the impressive performance of the actors and actresses who acted out the stories and personalities of the characters vividly. Other students also expressed their intention or referred to their experience of watching films adapted from books like *The Kite Runner* and *Pride and Prejudice*.

**Research Question 2:** *What kinds of books are suitable for students?*

Group A students attended five sessions, they were asked to indicate their preferences for the books they read (ratings shown in Table 1). All the three students unanimously suggested that *Harry Potter* was the book they liked best, as the story was interesting and connected to their life and they were also attracted by the film adaptations. They also gave the same rating of 5 to the book *The Seven Habits*, which is a little surprising as their performance in the discussions was the best of all the books; the book is comparatively easier to read than the other fiction books. They gave the reason why the books was not too interesting: the content was so familiar to their everyday life that there was nothing really exciting.

**Table 1.** Group A Students' Preferences for the Books They Read

Book Title	Student 1	Student 2	Student 3
Pride and Prejudice	4	4	2
The Kite Runner	2	2	4
The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People	5	5	5
Animal Farm	3	3	2
Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone	1	1	1

Although Students A and B had identical rankings for all the five books, Student 3's rankings were a little different from them. While the other two students considered *The Kite Runner* as the second book they were most interested in, Student 3 gave the second place to *Animal Farm*, a comparatively more difficult book. Student 3 indicated that she liked the book because the content was more meaningful. This shows that students do not only enjoy easy reading, if there is a good reason for them to read, they may make an effort to try more challenging books. Interest and difficulty level may not always be positively correlated.

**Research Question 3:** *Can these reading sessions help to develop other non-language learning outcomes promoted in the new curriculum of the university (e.g. critical thinking skills, cultural appreciation, broad knowledge base, sense of ethical conduct and social responsibility)?*

Depending on how the discussions on the books are directed, these reading sessions can give teachers the opportunity to understand students' values and mentality, as they voice their

views on various themes and ideas arising from the books they discuss. For example, the discussion tasks in these reading sessions gave students the opportunities to express their ideas concerning money and family values in *Pride and Prejudice*; empathic listening in *The Seven Habits*; the stratified society in Afghanistan in *The Kite Runner*; human rights and revolutions in *Animal Farm*; student life and characters in *Harry Potter*.

### **Teacher Reviewers' Comments**

Three colleagues experienced in second language teaching and supporting extensive reading were asked to review the materials designed for three books and comment on the suitability and of the materials as well as the usefulness of these guided reading sessions. The list of questions used in my interview with them is attached in Appendix B.

**Research Question 1:** *Do these introductory reading sessions help to enhance students' access to extensive reading materials for general first language readers?*

#### **A. Usefulness of Reading Materials and Task Sheet**

All the teacher reviewers believed that it is helpful to follow a structure according to the task sheet for conducting the reading sessions; it is also useful to have the flexibility to make adjustments to the questions and the discussion tasks in response to contextual factors. The task sheets are designed in a way that it is possible to use them even if the teacher has not read particular books before (all teachers), although it would be better if the teacher is familiar with the book (Teachers A and C).

All of them believed that it is not difficult to develop a set of materials following a similar format on books familiar to them. They believed that the discussion topics are suitable and interesting as they are related to students' life experience. For example, *Great Expectations* includes themes which are universal and still relevant to the students, although it is a classic fiction written a long time ago (Teacher A). Comprehension questions like those in the task sheet on *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, such as the one which asks students whether the welcome ceremony of the magic school is similar to the ones they have in their schools is also interesting to them.

#### **B. Reading Input and Discussion**

All the teachers believed that it is useful to do some reading before a discussion, as a reading input can provide ideas and language which can facilitate a discussion, especially if the discussion topics are suitable and interesting to the students. However, Teacher B believed that free discussion without any reading input can also be interesting; it depends also whether teachers have good skills for eliciting ideas from students for in-depth discussion, and also on the language ability of the students. The teachers also believed that various other types of reading input may also facilitate discussion aside from the reading materials used in this study, such as newspaper articles, speeches, essays or even poems (Teacher A).

### C. Usefulness of Reading Sessions in Developing Students' Skills and Interests in Reading

Although the teacher reviewers believed that it is worth conducting these guided reading sessions to encourage students to read, whether they can really arouse students' interest in reading and contribute to the development of a reading habit is not something certain, but very much depends on the interest and ability of individual students. Taking part in just one or two sessions may not be that helpful, and students need to do this continuously (Teacher A).

There are difficulties that students need to overcome. For example, students who do not like to make too much effort may be deterred by the number of words they do not know in the reading extract (Teacher B). Selection of books is an important factor on whether these reading sessions are successful. Students may be attracted by books with an interesting title, content which is related to their life experience, and presented in language with suits their ability (Teacher A).

These reading sessions can provide another option to students who may be interested in reading; they can be complementary to other reading programmes like the Reading Group activity offered by the language centre and the Common Reading Programme offered by the library (all teachers).

#### **Research Question 2:** *What kinds of books are suitable for students?*

Table 2 shows the teacher reviewers' ratings of books suitable for students. Teachers A and B had similar views concerning the types of books suitable for students. They both considered the non-fiction book as most suitable to students as it was most familiar to their life experience. The contemporary fiction book was their second choice, while the fiction classic ranked third.

**Table 2.** Teacher Reviewers' Ratings of Books Suitable for Students

Book title	Ranking	Teacher
<b>Fiction Classics</b>		
<i>Animal Farm</i> by George Orwell	1	C
<i>Great Expectations</i> by Charles Dickens	3	A
<i>Pride and Prejudice</i> by Jane Austen	3	B
<b>Contemporary Fiction</b>		
<i>Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone</i> by J. K. Rowling	3	C
<i>The Client</i> by John Grisham	2	A
<i>The Kite Runner</i> by Khaled Hosseini	2	B
<b>Non-fiction</b>		
<i>How to Win Friends and Influence People</i> by Dale Carnegie	1	A
<i>Rich Dad Poor Dad</i> by Robert T. Kiyosaki	1	B
<i>The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People</i> by Steven R. Covey	2	C

Teacher C had a slightly different view and rated the fiction classic book as the most suitable one, as he believed that *Animal Farm* is a meaningful book with deeper meaning. However, the teachers generally believed that the choice of books can be quite flexible,

depending on the interest and ability of students and preferences of the teachers. Various types of reading materials can be used (especially Teacher A). When making a choice of reading materials for students, other considerations like gender preferences may also be taken into account. For example, Teacher A suggested that books like *Pride and Prejudice* may be favoured by girls rather than boys.

**Research Question 3:** *Can these reading sessions help to develop other non-language learning outcomes promoted in the new curriculum of the university (e.g., critical thinking skills, cultural appreciation, broad knowledge base, sense of ethical conduct and social responsibility)?*

All the teachers believe that there is scope for developing other non-language learning outcomes, particularly in the discussion following the reading if the topic is related to these learning outcomes. However, this learning outcome cannot be achieved easily and instantly and continuous effort is necessary. Some learning outcomes like cultural appreciation may require more prolonged commitment to attain (Teacher A).

## DISCUSSION

The findings from this study show that these introductory guided reading sessions provided beneficial support to help develop students' interest and ability in extensive reading. Although the books used in the study were slightly above the language level of most of the students who are L2 learners of English, there is evidence that students were able to be involved and contributed useful ideas in the discussions with teacher guidance. Students felt that they gained a better understanding of the book at the end of the reading sessions and some of them indicated that they would be interested in reading the book later or watching the film adapted from the book. Teachers also believed that these guided reading sessions enhanced interest and ability in reading. The tried-out sets of materials were easy to use and not hard to produce. They can be used to suit different student interests in these reading sessions, with suggestions for further self-reading, such as online resources. This can facilitate the development of language ability and attainment of other non-language learning outcomes promoted in the new curriculum of the university, such as critical thinking skills, cultural appreciation, broad knowledge base, sense of ethical conduct and social responsibility.

These reading sessions also show that the use of discussion can help students gain a better understanding of the book and transform reading into a more interactive and interesting activity. In fact, reading is not necessarily just a quiet solitary activity; it can be connected to other activities which can facilitate the development of interest and ability, integrating other language skills like listening, speaking and writing. Some students have indicated that they are motivated to read the book by watching or learning about films adapted from it. Aside from discussion, other activities like talks, film shows and competitions can also be organised to facilitate a reading culture in a university environment.

The findings from this study give evidence to some commonly believed ideas about the types of books suitable for students. Like what a number of previous studies have shown, books with content familiar to students' life are often favoured. Students also tend to develop an interest in books which are more publicized, such as those with film adaptations and have remained popular for a long time. However, it should be noted that some students like books which are

meaningful in terms of the intellectual content, even though the language may be a little difficult. One of the teacher reviewers also holds the same view. To suit different teaching and learning interest, similar sets of simple teaching materials like those used in these reading sessions can be produced on different books for use in independent learning centres. Access to these types of resources and teaching support is likely to facilitate the development of wide interests in reading.

Extensive reading requires continuous effort in order to achieve noticeable outcomes. Promoting extensive reading does not stop at making students read one or two particularly worth reading books. What is more important is the possibility of helping them to develop a reading habit and participate in a reading culture. The impromptu and flexible nature of these reading sessions suit the learning style of the present-day millennium students who have a busy learning schedule and are not readily prepared to commit to activities which are too demanding and time-consuming. They are also relatively easy and flexible to be conducted in independent learning centres. With initial support to making extensive reading in L2 a less intimidating task for students, there is a possibility that they can gradually develop into independent readers with interest and ability in reading extensively, which is the ultimate goal for encouraging extensive reading at university level.

### **Limitations**

This is a small-scale pilot study conducted on a small number of research participants. Data were collected mostly based on the perceptions of the researcher, and the views of student and teacher participants. The findings are not intended to be generalised in representing what actually happened in similar contexts. They are presented for stimulating more enduring research interest in this relevant and interesting topic.

## **CONCLUSION**

The development of extensive reading habit in English in a university using English as a second language and medium of instruction is both important and challenging for students. As English is the medium of instruction, students need to develop good reading ability in order to read for their courses and fulfil course requirements. Conversely, reading English publications intended for L1 reading is an intimidating task for students whose language proficiency level may be slightly below the level required for extensive or pleasure reading. The ability to read extensively in English by gaining access to L1 English publications is the passport for self-enrichment and acquisition of general knowledge for a generally educated person. This is especially relevant in the present educational context where the curriculum is increasingly inclusive to cover learning outcomes beyond subject and language requirements for the general development of students, such as all-round development, lifelong learning, critical thinking skills, cultural understanding, global outlook. These various ideals clearly go beyond the subject curriculum, and depend very much on students' motivation and voluntary effort, which can only be achieved through continuous self-learning, for which extensive reading is a useful tool.

Unlike in primary and secondary schools where extensive reading can be allocated lesson time and form part of the teaching and assessment curriculum, it is hard to incorporate it into the formal university curriculum. The ability to read extensively is something basic and voluntary to university students. It is also hard to assess and may be unnecessary to do so for advanced

learners. Extensive reading is naturally flexible and voluntary for individuals and it is better to maintain this special characteristic particularly at university level, by providing resources and support for continuous self-learning.

The interest and ability for independent voluntary reading need to be developed and supported especially for students who are L2 learners and need to use English as the medium for learning/studying. The introductory reading sessions examined in this study can provide choices, support and materials to help students start reading slightly challenging books on their own. This helps to facilitate the gradual development of independent reading ability, and a long-term reading habit.

*Hazel Chiu teaches language enhancement courses at the English Language Centre, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University. She received her PhD degree from the Institute of Education, University of London. Her professional/ research interests include reading and writing, grammar and task-based language teaching, language arts materials, and independent language learning.*

Email: [hchiu@ouhk.edu.hk](mailto:hchiu@ouhk.edu.hk)

## REFERENCES

- Asraf, R. M., & Ahmad, K. S. (2003). Promoting English language development and the reading habit among students in rural schools through the guided extensive reading program. *Reading in a Foreign Language, 15*(2).
- Bell, T. I. (2001). Extensive Reading: Speed and Comprehension. *Reading Matrix: An International Online Journal, 1*(1).
- Asraf, R. M., & Ahmad, K. S. (2003). Promoting English language development and the reading habit among students in rural schools through the guided extensive reading program. *Reading in a Foreign Language, 15*(2).
- Bell, T. I. (2001). Extensive Reading: Speed and Comprehension. *Reading Matrix: An International Online Journal, 1*(1).
- Camiciottoli, B. C. (2001). Extensive Reading in English: Habits and Attitudes of a Group of Italian University EFL Students. *Journal of Research in Reading, 24*(2), 135-153.
- Carrell, P. L., & Carson, J. G. (1997). Extensive and intensive reading in an EAP setting. *English for Specific Purposes, 16*(1), 47-60.
- Centre for Language in Education (2005). Centre for Language in Education: Lunch-time English Conversation Group. Retrieved January 15, 2005, from <http://humanum.arts.cuhk.edu.hk/~cmc/power-mag/misc/jimmy.html>.
- Day, R. R., & Bamford, J. (1998). *Extensive reading in the second language classroom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- English Language Centre (2011). ELC Reading Group. Retrieved 30, 2011, from <http://myweb.polyu.edu.hk/~ecreadgp/>.
- Gardner, D. (2004). Vocabulary input through extensive reading: A comparison of words found in children's narrative and expository reading materials. *Applied Linguistics, 25*(1), 1-37.

- Green, C. (2005). Integrating extensive reading in the task-based curriculum. *ELT Journal*, 59(4), 306-311.
- Iwahori, Y. (2008). Developing reading fluency: A study of extensive reading in EFL. *Reading in a Foreign Language*, 20(1), 70-19.
- Krashen, S. (1985). *The input hypothesis: Issues and implications*. London: Longman.
- Kweon, S.-O., & Kim, H.-R. (2008). Beyond raw frequency: Incidental vocabulary acquisition in extensive reading. *Reading in a Foreign Language*, 20(2), 191-215.
- Lai, F.-K. (1993). The effects of a summer reading course on reading and writing skills. *System*, 21(1), 87-100.
- Latha, R. H. (1999). A reading programme for elementary schools. *English Teaching Forum*, 37(4), 12-15, 20.
- Lee, S.-Y. (2007). Revelations from three consecutive studies on extensive reading. *RELC Journal*, 38(2), 150-170.
- Macalister, J. (2008). Implementing extensive reading in an EAP programme. *ELT Journal*, 62(3), 248-256.
- Macalister, J. (2010). Investigating teacher attitudes to extensive reading practices in higher education: Why isn't everyone doing it? *RELC Journal*, 41(1), 59-75.
- Mok, R. (1994). Reading and English acquisition programme (REAP). In M. L. Tickoo (Ed.), *Research in reading and writing: A Southeast Asian collection* (pp. 30-40). Singapore: SEAMEO Regional Language Centre.
- Nation, I. S. P. (2009). *Teaching ESL/EFL reading and writing*. New York and London: Routledge.
- Ng, S. M. (1994). Improving English language learning in the Upper Primary levels in Brunei Darussalam. In M. L. Tickoo (Ed.), *Research in reading and writing: A Southeast Asian collection* (pp. 41-54). Singapore: SEAMEO Regional Language Centre.
- SCMP (2005, May 7). Latest initiative adds to burden. Retrieved from the archive of SCMP at <http://archive.scmp.com>.
- SCMP (2006, January 14). School assessment plan under review. Retrieved from the archive of SCMP at <http://archive.scmp.com>.
- SCMP (2006, April 29). Political agenda behind hasty exam reforms. Retrieved from the archive of SCMP at <http://archive.scmp.com>.
- Shin, F. (2004). Books, not direct instruction, are the key to vocabulary development. *Library Media Connection*, 22(4), 20-21.
- Shlayer, J. (1996). Extensive reading. *English Teachers' Journal*, 49(32-33).
- Takase, A. (2004). Investigating students' reading motivation through interviews. *Forum of Foreign Language Education*, 3, 23-38.
- Takase, A. (2007). Japanese high school students' motivation for extensive L2 reading. *Reading in a Foreign Language*, 19(1), 1-18.
- The Hong Kong Polytechnic University. (2011a). New 4-year undergraduate curriculum structure. Retrieved September 30, 2011, from <http://4yc.polyu.edu.hk/curriculum.html>.
- The Hong Kong Polytechnic University. (2011b). READ@PolyU: Common Reading Programme. Retrieved September 30, 2011, from <http://www.lib.polyu.edu.hk/read/>.
- Tsang, W. K. (1996). Comparing the effects of reading and writing on writing performance. *Applied Linguistics*, 17(2), 210-233.
- Williams, E. (2007). Extensive reading in Malawi: Inadequate implementation or inappropriate innovation? *Journal of Research in Reading*, 30(1), 59-79.

- Wolf, J. M., & Bokhorst-Heng, W. (2008). Policies of promise and practices of limit: Singapore's literacy education policy landscape and its impact on one school programme. *Educational Research for Policy and Practice*, 7(3), 151-164.
- Wolkinson, D., & Burchfield, L. (1998). How one school made extensive reading work. *English Teachers' Journal (Israel)*, 52, 69-72.
- Wong, C. K. (2001). *What we know after a decade of Hong Kong Extensive Reading Scheme*: University of Connecticut.
- Wu, S. R. (2000). *Journal writing in university pleasure-reading activities*. Taiwan: Center for General Education, National Yang-Ming University.
- Yu, V. W. S. (1999). Promoting second language development and reading habits through an extensive reading scheme. In Y. M. Cheah & S. M. Ng (Eds.), *Language instructional issues* (pp. 59-74). Newark, DE: International Development in Asia Committee, International Reading Association.

**Appendix A. Sample Material Designed for Use in the Guided Reading Sessions*****The Kite Runner***  
by Khaled Hosseini**A. The Author**

Khaled Hosseini was born in Kabul, Afghanistan in 1965, and moved to the United States in 1980. *The Kite Runner*, his first novel, is an international bestseller published in thirty-eight countries. His second novel, the no. 1 national best-seller *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, was published in 2007. In 2006 he was named a U.S. goodwill envoy to the United Nations Refugee Agency. He lives in Northern California.

**B. Summary/Setting of the Book**

*The Kite Runner* tells the story of Amir, a young boy from a wealthy family in Kabul, and his intricate relationship with Hassan, the son of his father's servant. The story is set against a backdrop of tumultuous events during a period of political instability, from the fall of the Afghanistan monarchy through the Soviet invasion, the mass exodus of refugees to Pakistan and the United States, and the rise of the Taliban regime. It describes the individual's struggle in coming to terms with the social and political constraints, as well as their own weaknesses and aspirations during this turbulent period. The book has been one of the best-sellers and won several book prizes. It was also adapted into a film with the same title in 2007.

**C. The Context of the Reading Extract**

The novel has a total of around 400 pages. The reading extract is Chapter 2 of the book. It introduces the two main characters, the two boys Amir and Hassan, and presents a background of their life and relations.

**D. Questions for Discussion**

1. What does the title of the book mean?
2. Describe the relationship between the two boys?
3. What do you think Hassan feels about his mother?

**E. Discussion Task**

What do you think about the society described in the novel? Do you think it is similar to or different from the society of Hong Kong/China? What are the similarities and differences?

### Appendix B. Questions Asked in the Interviews with Teachers Reviewers

1. Do you think the following books are suitable for students to read? Please rank at least the three of them (for which you have reviewed the designed materials) in order of suitability. Then explain why these books are / are not suitable for the students.

Book Title	Ranking
<b>Fiction Classics</b>	
<i>Animal Farm</i> by George Orwell	
<i>Great Expectations</i> by Charles Dickens	
<i>Pride and Prejudice</i> by Jane Austen	
<b>Contemporary Fiction</b>	
<i>Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone</i> by J. K. Rowling	
<i>The Client</i> by John Grisham	
<i>The Kite Runner</i> by Khaled Hosseini	
<b>Non-fiction</b>	
<i>How to Win Friends and Influence People</i> by Dale Carnegie	
<i>Rich Dad Poor Dad</i> by Robert T. Kiyosaki	
<i>The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People</i> by Steven R. Covey	

2. The books represent three categories of books that student may read. Which type do you think may work better with the students?
3. Do you think the reading materials and the questions and activities designed on them can work well? What are the strengths and weaknesses?
4. Do you have any comments about the structure of these reading sessions?
5. If the teacher has not read the book before, is it easy to use the materials?
6. Would you like to use the materials (e.g. for the speaking support sessions) if they are put in CILL later? Why/why not?
7. Do you think it is easy to develop a set of materials following this format on some books you are familiar with and like to share with students?
8. Do you think it is useful to conduct these introductory reading sessions? Will it enhance students' interest in reading? Will they help to make it easier for students to read the books on their own?
9. How are these reading sessions different from the Reading Group activity offered in our language centre? Do you think the two types of activities can serve complementary purposes?
10. Do you think using a reading input can facilitate discussion?
11. Do you think the discussion topics are suitable and interesting for the students?
12. Besides reading/language skills, can this type of material/discussion help students develop other types of skills or knowledge promoted in the new curriculum, e.g., critical thinking skills, cultural appreciation, and broad knowledge base?