PERGAMON

System 28 (2000) 261–270

SYSTEM

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# The impact of popular literature study on literacy development in EFL: more evidence for the power of reading

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Received 4 June 1999; received in revised form 16 June 1999; accepted 20 August 1999

**Abstract**

University level EFL students in Hong Kong who participated in a popular literature class that emphasized reading for content and enjoyment, including some self-selected reading, made superior gains on measures of vocabulary and reading rate, when compared to students enrolled in a traditional academic skills class. Eighty-eight percent of the literature students felt that what they learned from the course would help them in other university courses, but only 12% of the traditional academic skills students had this opinion about their class. These results are consistent with previous studies showing that meaningful reading is an important source of literacy competence. © 2000 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

*Keywords:* Popular literature; Literacy development; Reading

There is compelling evidence that reading, especially free voluntary reading, has a strong positive impact on second language development. Studies done in the informal environment have shown that those who report more free reading achieve higher levels of competence in second languages (Janopoulos, 1986; Gradman and Hanania, 1991; Lee et al.,1996; Constantino et al., 1997; Kim and Krashen, 1998; Stokes et al., 1998). Studies in the formal environment have produced similar results: second language acquirers who participate in in-school sustained silent reading programs show gains superior to comparison students (Elley and Mangubhai, 1983;

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PII: S0346-251X(00)00011-7

Hafiz and Tudor, 1989; Elley, 1991, 1998; Tsang, 1996; Mason and Krashen, 1997). Cho's series of studies shows that adults who are encouraged to read books of interest make substantial gains in second language acquisition (Cho and Krashen, 1993, 1995a, b). In addition, a number of 'read and test' studies have shown that second language acquirers who read short passages containing unfamiliar vocabulary make reliable gains in vocabulary knowledge, confirming that second language acquirers, like first language acquirers, can acquire from reading for meaning (Pitts et al., 1989; Day et al., 1991; Dupuy and Krashen, 1993).

A few studies have examined the impact of combining assigned and self-selected reading in the form of teaching popular literature to second language acquirers. Tse (1996a) described a 10-week class for adult ESL students in which two novels were assigned, and students, as a group, decided on four other novels to be read. There was no direct language instruction and class time was devoted to book-related discussions and discussion of reading strategies. Student reaction was very positive; students reported gaining confidence in reading, and expressed enthusiasm about continuing to read in English. Tse (1996b) is a case history of an adult second language acquirer who participated in a 15-week adult ESL class in which students read four novels and were allowed to choose two additional novels to read. Class time was spent discussing the reading and students read 15–25 pages per evening. Tse reported that her subject's view of reading changed "dramatically" because of the course, and the subject believed that her English had improved significantly. Initially fearful of reading novels in English, she was confident about reading at the end of the semester. McQuillan and Rodrigo (1998) described two Spanish as a foreign language classes in which self-selected reading and assigned reading were combined, one lasting 15 weeks and one lasting 10 weeks. In the 15-week class, students were encouraged to read one assigned and one self-selected book each week, and were required to turn in a short report about each book they read; class time was spent in actual reading and occasional discussion of required readings. Texts included graded readers and 'light' or popular literature. Some students were able to read more complex texts. All assigned reading was in one genre: detective stories. The 10-week class included a survey of popular and classic literature, literature circles in which students discussed self-selected reading in small groups, and writing workshops. In both classes, students made substantial gains in vocabulary and reported increased interest in reading in Spanish.

This study evaluates the impact of popular literature study on English as a foreign language reading competence (vocabulary acquisition and reading rate) and reading attitudes, extending the research on literature study to the EFL situation and including different measures. If literature study entails a substantial amount of meaningful and interesting reading, results of the research cited earlier suggest that it should have a positive impact on language and literacy development. In this study, a popular literature/pleasure reading approach was attempted among university level students of English as a foreign language at Hong Kong Baptist University. The reading done was a combination of assigned and self-selected novel reading, with accountability required in the form of discussion and writing assignments.

## 1. Procedure

### 1.1. The experimental group

A total of six classes, 91 students, participated in the study as experimental group subjects, two classes in the spring semester of 1996, two in the fall of 1996 and two in the fall of 1997. All students were first year university students majoring in translation. Most students had studied English for 15 years and had graduated from high school where English was the medium of instruction. Nevertheless, most subjects reported that they had not done any book reading in English for pleasure, limiting their English reading to texts and newspapers.

#### 1.1.1. Treatment

Students were required to read six books in one semester (14 weeks). Five out of six were assigned (see Table 1 for titles) and one book was chosen by the students themselves based on their own interest. Self-selected books included *The Bridges of Madison County*, *The Gift*, *Circle of Friends*, *Jurassic Park*, and *Anne's House of Dreams*. Vocabulary size was estimated by counting the number of words on three pages, dividing by three, and multiplying by the number of print-filled pages in the book.

The course consisted of four major components:

1. Students did the assigned reading before coming to class and read one book every 2 weeks. Five appealing as well as challenging novels were selected and were provided for the students as assigned readings. The course began with the simplest book (*Charlotte's Web*). Towards the end of the semester, students had the opportunity to select a book of their own choice.
2. Films/videos: for four of the books (all except *The Catcher in the Rye*), films or videos were available. Students saw the film or video version after they had read approximately half of the book. Seeing the film or video version of the story did not appear to diminish students' interest or make them less curious to read the rest of the book; in fact, it appeared to have the opposite effect.

Table 1
Books used and their estimated number of words

| Book titles (author) | Estimated number of words |
|---|---|
| *Love Story* (Erich Segal) | 28,000 |
| *Charlotte's Web* (E.B. White) | 36,000 |
| *The Chocolate War* (Robert Cormier) | 59,000 |
| *The Catcher in the Rye* (J.D. Salinger) | 80,000 |
| *Anne of Green Gables* (L.M. Montgomery) | 105,000 |
| One book of students' own choice | 100,000 (average of subsample of five) |
| Total | 388,000 |

3. The majority of class time was spent discussing the reading. To aid in the weekly discussion, students were asked to jot down their thoughts or questions about language and/or content that arose while they were reading and bring them to class for discussion. Class time also included explicit instruction on reading strategies, all intended to encourage students to read for meaning. Students were told not to look up all unknown words in the dictionary, but to utilize context clues and to read for general gist and not for details; students were told that they would not be tested on the details of content and that they should not try to remember what they were reading as they were reading; rather, they were free to enjoy the story. They were, in other words, told to read English the way they would read for pleasure in Chinese. At the beginning of the semester, students in all of the experimental classes requested direct instruction on vocabulary, including a vocabulary list with definitions and some class time devoted to discussion of difficult words. This was provided, but proved to be unpopular among students, according to their written comments at the end of the semester.
4. Students were asked to do two short (one to two page) essays. They could either discuss how the assigned novel related to their lives or write a continuation of the story. The final project was to review the book they had selected.

### *1.2. The comparison group*

Comparison group students were 39 social science majors who were enrolled in a traditional academic skills development course that covered oral skills (e.g. delivering academic or technical data in an oral presentation), writing (e.g. organization of essays, editing, proof-reading), listening (e.g. note-taking during lectures), and reading (e.g. taking notes from academic texts). All students were required to do a research project which was graded on content, organization, and the quality of the abstract and bibliography. Comparison group subjects were enrolled in two separate classes (20 students in one, 19 in the other), both taught in Spring 1997. Similar to the experimental group, these students were also first year university students who had studied English for 15 years and had graduated from high schools in which English was the medium of instruction. Experimental and comparison classes were taught by the same instructor (C.L.), who attempted to teach all sections with the same dedication and enthusiasm.

### *1.3. Exposure to English outside of class*

To determine whether the experimental and comparison groups had different amounts of exposure to English outside of class, a survey was administered at the beginning of the semester probing time spent using English in different situations. There was no difference between the groups in listening to English radio or reading newspapers and magazines in English. The experimental group said that they spend more time reading in English for improvement, while the comparison group spend more time watching movies and TV in English, spent significantly more time in

academic study in English and tended to use English more in interpersonal communication (see Appendix A).

### *1.4. Evaluation*

To measure the acquisition of vocabulary, the Accuracy Level Test (ALT) developed by Carver (1987a) was administered as a pre- and post-test to both experimental and comparison groups. Scores on this test are reported in grade level equivalent units and estimates of number of words known, in addition to raw scores.

The Rate Level Test (RLT; Carver, 1987b) was also used to measure how fast individuals can read; results are expressed in words per minute and in grade equivalent (GE) units from 0.0 to 18.9. There are two equivalent forms of both tests (ALT and RLT), Form A and Form B. Form A was used as pre-test and Form B as post-test. The ALT has alternative-form reliability of 0.91, and concurrent reliability of 0.82 (Iowa Test of Basic Skills, Vocabulary section) and 0.77 (Nelson-Denny) when administered to college students (Carver, 1987a). The average alternate-form reliability of the RTL is 0.84, administered across several grade levels (Carver, 1987b).

In addition, to monitor student reactions to the course, a Reading Attitude Survey was used. The survey consisted of the following questions:

1. Are you more interested in pleasure reading after taking this course?
2. Will you use novels for future English study?
3. Do you think that what you learned in this course will help you in your university courses?
4. Is pleasure reading a better approach to acquiring English than formal instruction?

## 2. Results

Results are presented in Table 2. Experimental students made clear and significant gains in vocabulary growth and reading rate. For vocabulary, pre- and post-test scores were significantly different ($t=3.88$; $df=176$ $P<0.0001$) and students improved one grade level. It was estimated that students acquired about 3000 new words over the course of the semester, moving from an estimated vocabulary size of 17,000 words to 20,000 words. This is the same growth exhibited by fifth grade native speakers of English in one year (Nagy and Herman, 1987) who read about one million words per year, inside and outside of class (Anderson et al., 1988). Our subjects read about one-third that much in this course.

Comparison student gains in accuracy were not significant ($t=0.49$, $df=76$) and their estimated vocabulary grew only 500 words, from an estimated 11,500 words to 12,000.

Table 2
Results of measures of vocabulary and rate

| | Pre-test | *n* | Post-test | *n* |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Vocabulary: raw scores* | | | | |
| Experimental group | 45.2 (9.26) | 91 | 51.0 (10.5) | 87 |
| Comparison group | 33.59 (7.43) | 39 | 34.41 (7.24) | 39 |
| *Vocabulary: grade level equivalent* | | | | |
| Experimental group | 7.0 | | 8.0 | |
| Comparison group | 5.1 | | 5.2 | |
| *Reading rate: raw scores* | | | | |
| Experimental group | 52.6 (13.37) | 91 | 76.6 (14.5) | 89 |
| Comparison group | 40.08 (8.83) | 39 | 42.44 (8.05) | 39 |
| *Grade level equivalent* | | | | |
| Experimental group | 10.7 | | 17.3 | |
| Comparison group | 7.4 | | 7.9 | |

Experimental students also made clear and significant gains in reading speed ($t = 11.54$ ; df = 178 $P < 0.0001$), with startling gains in grade level equivalent, jumping more than six grades in one semester. Mean estimated reading rate moved from 235 words per minute to 327 words per minute.

Comparison students did not make significant growth in reading speed ($t = 1.23$, df = 76), and their estimated rate increased only eight words per minute, from 189 to 197 words per minute.

### 2.1. Gain scores

Results were also analyzed in terms of gain scores. The gains made by the experimental group were significantly greater than the gains made by the comparison group for both the accuracy and rate tests (for accuracy, $t = 2.18$, df = 69, $P = 0.033$; for rate, $t = 8.43$, df = 126, $P < 0.0001$). (Different degrees of freedom were due to the fact that standard deviations were similar for gain scores for accuracy, but not for rate; thus standard deviations were not pooled for the *t*-test done on rate gains.) The experimental group mean gain score for accuracy was 4.94 (S.D. = 9.46), while the comparison group mean gain was only 0.82 (S.D. = 9.96). The experimental group mean gain score for rate was 23.9 (S.D. = 14.5), while the comparison group mean gain was only 2.36 (S.D. = 9.87).

### 2.2. ANCOVA

In addition, analyses of covariance (ANCOVA) were performed in order to control for the differences in pre-test scores. Experimental post-test scores were significantly higher in both cases (for accuracy, $F = 111.87$, $P < 0.0001$; for rate, $F = 233.75$, $P < 0.0001$). Because experimental students were enrolled in six different

classes and comparison students were in two different classes, an additional ANCOVA was performed to determine whether this factor affected our results. Once again, experimental post-test scores were significantly higher in both cases (for accuracy, $F = 20.87$, $P < 0.0001$, for rate, $F = 57.52$, $P < 0.0001$), controlling for both the class factor and pre-test scores.

It can be argued that ANCOVA is not appropriate here; experimental and comparison groups were not randomly assigned, and the two groups may be very different; the experimental group consisted of translation majors, and the comparisons consisted of social science majors. While their exposure to English outside of class was similar, their level of English as revealed by their pre-test scores was quite different. Nevertheless, the differences in gains between the two groups is evident — it is clear that the social science students made little progress in the traditional course, and translation students made very good progress in the literature course.

Table 3 presents the results of the Reading Attitude Survey. The experimental group was far more positive about novel reading, which is understandable because comparison students had little exposure to reading for pleasure. But question 3 was neutral to the question of reading and simply asked whether students thought that the course they took would be of use to them. Again, experimental students were much more enthusiastic. All differences were highly significant according to chi square analysis, with levels far beyond the 0.001 level.

## 3. Summary and discussion

Students who participated in a popular literature class designed to interest them in pleasure reading increased their reading accuracy and reading rate substantially, far more than the comparison group. Experimental subjects also indicated that they

Table 3
Reading attitude survey

| | Yes | No | Don't know |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1. More interested in pleasure reading? | | | |
| Experimental | 87 | 4 | |
| Comparison | 0 | 32 | 7 |
| 2. Use novel for future English study? | | | |
| Experimental | 90 | 1 | |
| Comparison | 2 | 23 | 14 |
| 3. Help in university courses? | | | |
| Experimental | 88 | 3 | |
| Comparison | 12 | 22 | 5 |
| 4. Pleasure reading is a better approach to acquire English than formal instruction? | | | |
| Experimental | 85 | 6 | 1 |
| Comparison | 4 | 8 | 27 |

were more interested in pleasure reading as a means of improving their English than they were before taking the class, and felt that the literature class would help them in future study. Comparison students were not as enthusiastic about their class. These results are consistent with those of studies showing the positive impact of free reading (Krashen, 1993), as well as previous studies combining assigned and self-selected reading (Tse, 1996a, b; McQuillan and Rodrigo, 1998). The results of the Reading Attitude Survey are consistent with those of previous studies that show that reading is perceived to be very pleasant, more pleasant than direct grammar instruction (Krashen, 1994b, Tse and McQuillan, 1997).

As noted earlier, a potential weakness in the design of this study is that the comparison group was substantially less competent in English at the start of the experiment. Nevertheless, we have confidence that the differences between the groups were genuine, because the results were so robust. Where there were differences in the use of English outside of class, in most cases the comparison group reported more exposure, with the experimental group reporting only more reading for improvement outside of class. We can safely conclude, therefore, that reading for meaning is the factor that distinguishes the difference in gains between the two groups, either reading done in class, out of class, or both. In fact, the experimental group's greater outside reading may have also been responsible for their higher pre-test score, a result consistent with other studies reported relationships between reported free reading and second language proficiency (e.g. Lee et al., 1996; Constantino et al., 1997; Stokes et al., 1998).

## Appendix A. Reported use of English outside of class

| Time spent per week | Hours per week | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | <1 | 1–5 | 6–10 | 11–15 |
| 1. *Watching movies and TV in English* | | | | |
| Experimental ($n=91$) | 55 | 37 | 6 | 2 |
| Comparison ($n=39$) | 21 | 54 | 18 | 8 |
| Chi square = 15.733, df = 2, $P<0.001$; categories 6–10, 11–15 combined | | | | |
| 2. *Listening to English radio/stories* | | | | |
| Experimental | 74 | 20 | 7 | 0 |
| Comparison | 69 | 28 | 3 | 0 |
| Chi square = 0.263, ns, categories 1–5, 6–10, 11–15 combined | | | | |
| 3. *Reading English newspapers/magazines for improving English* | | | | |
| Experimental | 34 | 59 | 7 | 0 |
| Comparison | 64 | 36 | 0 | 0 |
| chi square = 10.045, df = 1, $P<0.001$, categories 1–5, 6–10, 11–15 combined | | | | |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 4. *Reading English newspapers/magazines for pleasure* | | | | |
| Experimental | 50 | 34 | 5 | 2 |
| Comparison | 64 | 36 | 0 | 0 |
| chi square = 0.938, ns, categories 1–5,6–10, 11–15 combined | | | | |
| 5. *Time spent on academic study in English* | | | | |
| Experimental | 47 | 40 | 13 | 0 |
| Comparison | 15 | 38 | 28 | 18 |
| chi square 20.22, df = 2, $P < 0.001$, categories 5–10, 11–15 combined | | | | |
| 6. *Time spent on interpersonal communication in English* | | | | |
| Experimental | 40 | 54 | 7 | 0 |
| Comparison | 23 | 62 | 15 | 0 |
| chi square = 3.27, df = 1, $.05 < p < 0.10$, categories 6–10, 11–15 combined | | | | |

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