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The Effects of Sustained Silent Reading and Storytelling
on Vocational College Students in Taiwan

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The Effects of Sustained Silent Reading and Storytelling on Vocational College Students in Taiwan

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Abstract

This study examined the effect of two interventions on EFL vocational students' development of reading and listening comprehension: in-class sustained silent reading and storytelling. The participants in the current study were freshman non-English majors at an institute of technology in northern Taiwan with 52 students in the experimental group (the reading group) and 49 in the control group (the non-reading group). The results showed that the readers made impressive and magnificent progress after only one semester of listening to stories read aloud and reading simplified readers in both reading and listening competence. These results further supported the partnership between sustained silent reading and storytelling in EFL vocational students' language acquisition and thus urged the necessity of integrating these two practices into regular curriculum.

Introduction

Most students in Taiwan have been exposed to intensive reading of short excerpts or passages in their General English courses. Teachers often focus on vocabulary explanation and grammar-translation in class, and they tend to believe that this kind of skill- and grammar-based instruction is more beneficial than reading itself. However, in the recent decades, more and more researchers have pointed out that reading, especially free voluntary reading enhances language acquisition for both L1 and L2 learners (Krashen 2004; Lee 2005, 2007; Mason 2003). On another track of research related to language learning is the abundant research evidence showing that storytelling benefits learners of all ages, various language backgrounds, and different proficiency levels (Elley, 1989, 1991; Elley & Mangubhai, 1983; Wang, 2007). According to Trelease (2006), an advocate of reading aloud to build children's background knowledge, storytelling and sustained silent reading are "natural partners" in helping children acquire language and literacy, which has been supported by research on children and college learning EFL (Cho & Choi, 2008; Mason, 2007; Wang & Lee, 2007). Therefore, this present study aimed to examine the effects of in-class sustained silent reading and storytelling on reading comprehension development with a group of vocational college students in Taiwan.

Literature Review

There has been a great amount of research supporting the effects of storytelling on children's language development in L1, including vocabulary and expressive ability. Senechal et al. (1996) conducted two experiments to probe one hundred and sixty-six 4-year-old children's vocabulary acquisition through stories. The result in experiment 1 showed that the frequency of storybook reading (print exposures) and children's vocabulary scores were positively correlated. Experiment 2 indicated that the more children were read to, the better they performed in vocabulary measures, both receptive and expressive word knowledge. Ewers & Brownson (1999) investigated the effect of active versus passive storybook reading conditions on vocabulary acquisition of sixty 6-year-old children and found that children with higher prior vocabulary knowledge acquired significantly more words than lower vocabulary peers. Moreover, children who actively participated in the reading sessions, providing either verbal or nonverbal responses toward the stories, gained significantly larger in vocabulary measures than those in the passive reading condition. Besides, in the study conducted by Senechal, et al. (1997), the results also revealed that children with a larger vocabulary produced more novel words than did children with a smaller vocabulary. Children who actively participated in the reading by either labeling or pointing (finger reading) comprehended and produced more words than those who passively listened to the story. These above studies point out one important thread of language acquisition via storytelling: reading aloud to children helps build children's prior knowledge in language, which in turn becomes the base for them to acquire language more efficiently, better and faster, than those who do not have the chance for storytelling.

Storytelling has been found beneficial to children not only in L1 but also in EFL/ESL situations. Lee (2005) studied one hundred and seventeen 3rd graders in New Taipei City and results revealed that all the children made significant progress in total vocabulary, school vocabulary, and storybook vocabulary. Besides, children favored being read to and hoped that the activity to be continued. This study showed that storytelling benefit EFL children not only on acquiring new words in the stories read to them but also their learning of the words taught in the normal English class. In Hsieh's study with sixty-five 4th graders (2006), the storytelling group outperformed the dialogue group (only practice simple English dialogues) in all measures (listening comprehension, vocabulary matching, reading comprehension, story comprehension and organizing scrambling stories) and the storytelling group had more positive attitudes towards storytelling. Same results were also found for older learners. The seventy-eight junior high school students in Li's study (2003) outperformed their counterparts in the measure of reading comprehension after being read to. Also, the students developed a positive attitude toward reading literature, became more willing to read more complicated texts, and developed a greater insight about the characters' feelings and thoughts in the story. This

study suggests that storytelling brings about deeper understanding and comprehension of reading materials, based on which more self selected reading will naturally follow.

In Cho and Choi (2008), 6th graders learn EFL in Korea were read aloud with children stories by the teacher for 15 minutes each class sessions followed by self selected reading for 40 minutes once a week; while the control group received regular English instruction. The whole study lasted for 21 weeks. Results showed that the experimental group developed better English in listening, reading, and writing, as well as higher interest and confidence in reading English and lower anxiety in learning English as a foreign language.

It is no doubt that the power of reading has been empirically confirmed by research indicating that extensive reading or sustained silent reading is essential for language and literacy development (Goodman, 1973; Smith, 1983; Krashen, 1981, 2004). Despite some the slightly different approaches or the duration of the study, most studies have reached a strikingly similar conclusion: Both sustained silent reading integrated into a curriculum and after-school extensive free reading help with English acquisition in vocabulary, grammar, reading comprehension, writing and listening comprehension (for further review, see Krashen 2004, Lee 2005a, 2007, and Mason 2003). Lee (2007) concludes that at least three conditions need to be met to make a reading program successful: sufficient book access, sufficient program duration (for at least one year), and full self-selection with help from the teacher when needed. These conditions correspond perfectly with the Comprehension Hypothesis (Krashen, 1981) which states that we acquire language through obtaining a large quantity of input that is comprehensible and compelling to us.

In Taiwan, there have been a handful studies studying with university English majors (Yuan & Nash, 1992), non-English majors (Huang, 1996; Lee, 1998, 2007; Liu, 2007; Sims, 1996), vocational college English majors (Hsu & Lee, 2005, 2007, 2009; Lee & Hsu, 2009; Smith, 2007, 2011), and even fewer studies done with lower level students, such as junior high (Sheu, 2004) and Senior high students (Kao, 2004, SSR used only as a supplement instead of the core of the class conduct). For studies using SSR as the core element for the English class, the results were all positive favoring SSR over traditional classes. Experimental students consistently performed significantly better than the controls in grammar, vocabulary, reading and writing measures, as well as in the surveys of attitude toward reading as a means to learn EFL. Among the above mentioned studies, Hsu and Lee's three year longitudinal study (2009) with vocational college English majors provides important theoretical, empirical and practical implications. This study indicates a Hawthorne Effect in students' performance in writing in the first year, with students regressing in the second year and remaining steadily better than the control group in the third year. This study confirms that reading plays a significant role in writing ability; a reading habit is formed if a longer treatment is offered; and SSR works well

with vocational college students.

In light of the previous success with storytelling and SSR among nearly all levels of EFL students in Taiwan, it is of interest to see if SSR and storytelling could have the same impact on the reading comprehension development of vocational college non-English majors, who are lower in academic performance than university students and also less proficient in English.

Methodology

1. Participants

The participants were non-English major freshmen at an institute of technology in northern Taiwan. These freshmen were randomly divided into two groups. There were 52 students in the experimental group (reading group) and 49 in the control group (non-reading group). The students in the experimental group were from Department of Mechanical Engineering, Civil Engineering, Early Childhood Education, Information Management, and Leisure Management. On the other hand, some students in the control group were also from Department of Mechanical Engineering, Early Childhood Education, and Information Management, but others were from Department of Architecture, and Textile Science. Both groups have studied English formally for six years. Almost all participants reported that they had not done any book reading in English for pleasure before. In this study, the control group receives traditional classroom instruction and the experimental group participates in a free voluntary reading and storytelling course. In the free voluntary reading course, each student can select his/her own reading material based on his/her language proficiency level and personal interest. Both the experimental and control groups were taught by the same instructor, also the researcher. The study took place in the first semester of the one-year Freshman English course.

2. Treatment

(A) Control group (non-reading group)

The class met once a week for 100 minutes. It followed a traditional curriculum, which included textbook reading, comprehension questions, and vocabulary and grammar exercises. Students had to take quizzes, midterm and final exams.

(B) Experimental group (reading group)

The class also met once a week for 100 minutes. Instead of reading textbook, the instructor read stories out loud to the students in the first 60 minutes, first time in English, and the second time in Chinese to make sure everyone knows the gist of the story and to decrease

students' pressure. Three stories from Alphakids Plus series were read before the midterm exam, and two stories were read after the midterm exam. The students were provided with the script of the stories they heard in class. Difficult words and phrases would be explained if necessary. The following 10 minutes were devoted to checking out books and returning books, and the remaining 30 minutes were devoted to silent reading. The instructor provided 158 simplified readers from Oxford, Alphakids, and Alphakids Plus series, including Oxford Starters, Oxford level 1, Oxford level 2, Alphakids level 18-23, and Alphakids Plus level 18-24. The students had the freedom to select books which most interested them and suitable for their proficiency level of English. They could either read the books during the class or take the books home to read. After they finished the reading, either in class or at home, the students were asked to fill out a reading log, recording the title of the book, how many pages they read, and how much time they spent on reading. They were also required to write a short summary in Chinese. Besides, the students had to take two cloze tests and a mid-term exam related to the stories they had been told. Instead of a paper-pencil final exam, the students acted out the story they liked most as their final exam. The story could be one of the stories the researcher read aloud in class or the one they read by themselves.

3. Measurement

The GEPT Practice Test (General English Proficiency Test) was used as the pretest and posttest as it is the most convenient and reliable measure that the researcher can access to in school. The GEPT is a skill-based test assessing test takers' listening, reading, writing, and speaking ability at five levels: Elementary, Intermediate, High-Intermediate, Advanced, and Superior. In this study, only elementary level test was used, and only listening and reading sections were administered. The listening tasks include selecting the correct description for a picture, selecting a suitable response to a question, and responding to short conversations. The Reading sections consist of vocabulary items, cloze test, and comprehension of short passages. All listening and reading items were multiple choices. Both the experimental group and the control group took the GEPT practice test as the pretest in the second week of the semester, and took the same test as the posttest at the end of the semester.

Results

As the descriptive statistics showed in Table 1, the readers started at a lower proficiency level than the nonreaders on both listening and reading at the onset of the study, after one semester of listening to stories read aloud and reading graded readers, they improved so much that they even caught up with the nonreaders on both the posttests of measures, the listening posttest (98.34 vs. 98.14) and the reading posttest (79.33 vs. 76.61). For gains, the readers made a progress of 19.45 while their counterparts 13.00 in the measure of listening at the end of the first semester, which was statistically significant with $F=5.92$, $p=.017$. Furthermore,

when it comes to reading results, the readers improved so much and even made three times as much the gain made by the nonreaders (15.35 vs. 5.24); the results, from Table 1, obviously achieved statistical significance ($F=7.49$, $p=.007$).

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and ANOVA results

(N=number of subjects; SD=standard deviation)	Readers (The experimental group)	Non-readers (The control group)	F	Sig.
Listening-pre (N, SD)	78.23 (52, 15.22)	85.80 (49, 11.61)	7.82	.006
Listening-post (N, SD)	98.34 (47, 13.11)	98.14 (49, 11.17)	.01	.937
Reading-pre (N, SD)	65.12 (52, 19.09)	70.22 (49, 18.41)	1.87	.175
Reading-post (N, SD)	79.33 (48, 14.86)	76.71 (48, 16.01)	.69	.407
Gain – listening (N, SD)	19.45 (47, 13.57)	13.00 (46, 12.00)	5.92	.017
Gain – reading ^a (N, SD)	15.35 (48, 19.74)	5.24 (46, 15.78)	7.49	.007

N= the number of students; SD= standard deviation

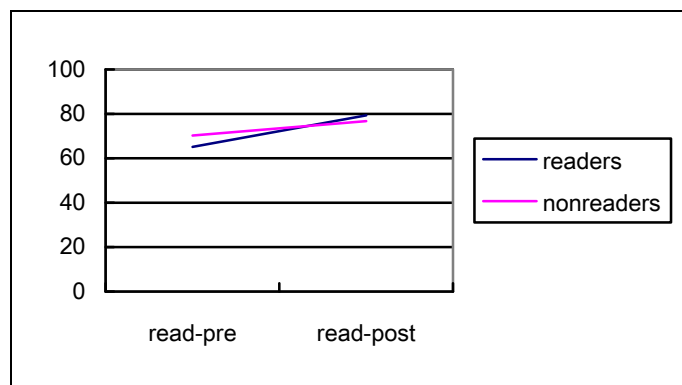


Figure 1. The reading results for the two groups

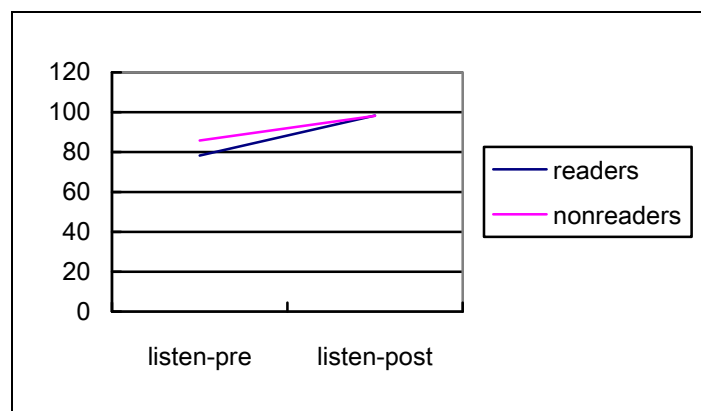


Figure 2. The listening results for both groups

When looking into the differences between the reading results, as Figure 1 displayed, the

readers, though started at a lower level comparing to their counterparts (65.12 vs. 79.33), made an impressive progress at the end of one semester of the treatment and, more important, surpassed the nonreaders (79.33 vs. 76.71) even though the difference was not statistically significant.

Moreover, the positive impact of the power of collaboration of sustained silent reading and storytelling was also seen in the listening results. Figure 2 showed clearly that the readers indeed made progress after only one semester of the treatment (78.23 vs. 98.34) while the nonreaders also improved on the measure (85.80 vs. 98.14). Note that even though both groups did enhance their listening competence, the readers made more improvement than the comparisons (98.34 vs. 98.14) though not statistically significant.

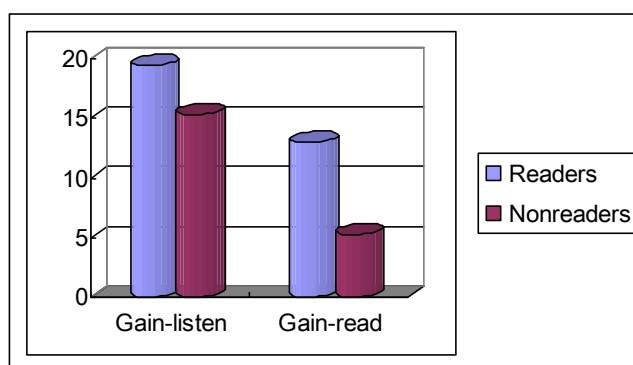


Figure 3. Gains for both groups on listening and reading

Both the readers and non-readers did improve in the measures of listening and reading at the end of one semester and the results reached statistical significance, as indicated in Table 1. Figure 3 displayed the comparisons of the differences between the two groups. First, the readers made impressive gains on the measures of reading (15.35) and listening (19.45) as well, while the nonreaders made moderate progress in the two measures, with 5.24 in reading and 13.13 in listening. Second, when comparing the two groups, it could be easily seen from Figure 3 that the readers made marked improvement in reading than the nonreaders (15.35 vs. 5.24) and still obviously great progress in listening with a gain of 19.45 to that of 13.13 in the nonreaders.

Discussion

The results of the statistical data revealed that sustained silent reading and storytelling are natural partners (Trelease, 2006). On one hand, the improvement of the reading and listening results made by the readers after only one semester of listening to stories read aloud and reading simplified readers indeed added another concrete example to the documented literature showing the same conclusion (Cho & Choi, 2008; Krashen 2004, Lee 2005a, 2007, and Mason 2003). Moreover, the results of the current study corresponded well with the Comprehension

Hypothesis (Krashen, 1981), which claims that we acquire language via a large quantity of input that is comprehensible and compelling. On the other hand, as the descriptive statistics indicated, the readers made three times as much the gain made by the nonreaders (15.35 vs. 5.24), such significant and impressive outcomes are very likely the manifestation of the power of the collaboration between sustained silent reading and storytelling in EFL acquirers' language development. More importantly, these substantial results uncovered the pressing need of integrating both sustained silent reading and storytelling into regular curriculum in EFL context. Likewise, even though both the two groups made progress in the measure of listening at the end of the first semester, the greater improvement shown in the readers suggested that storytelling indeed plays an important role in EFL learners' listening competence. Last, with the limitations of the current study, without a longer duration of the treatment and a delayed posttest, one might doubt that the impressive improvement made by the readers was achieved mainly due to the reading curriculum; however, if reading is the only different component made for the two groups, then the researcher may have very plausible reason to believe that it is very likely so. Also, informed by the promising results of the current study, the researcher believes that reading also helps with learners' listening ability growth, and this has not yet been found in any published research.

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Appendix: Sample Story Read in Class

Jack and the Beanstalk

Once upon a time there was a boy called Jack. He lived with his mother in a little house. They were very poor and hungry. All they had was a cow. "We'll have to sell the cow so we can buy some food," said Jack's mother. "Take her to market and make sure you get a good price."

Jack was walking to the market when a man passed by. "What a lovely cow," he said to Jack. "I'm going to the market to sell her," said Jack. "I will give you these magic beans for your cow," said the man. "Magic beans?" thought Jack. "What could be a better price for our cow? My mother will be so pleased with me!" But when he got home and showed his mother the beans, she was furious. "You silly boy!" she cried. "You sold our only cow for a handful of useless beans. What are we going to do now?" And she threw the beans out of the window.

Jack went to bed hungry and sad. When he woke up in the morning, there was an enormous beanstalk outside his window. It was so tall that Jack could not see the top. Jack climbed out his window and up the beanstalk. He climbed up and up and up.

When he got to the top of the beanstalk, Jack was high above the clouds. In front of him was a huge house. Jack crept inside the house. He followed the smell of food and soon found himself in the kitchen. The tallest woman he had ever seen was busy roasting chickens and stirring large saucepans of lamb stew. Jack hid behind an enormous saucepan.

All of a sudden the ground started to shake. Jack trembled in his hiding place. A giant appeared in the doorway. He sniffed the air and roared, “Fee! Fi! Fo! Fum! I can smell a little one!” “Don’t be silly,” said the woman to the giant. “There aren’t any children here. Sit down and eat your lunch.” The giant ate four chickens and two saucepans of lamb stew for lunch. Then the giant picked up a little harp. “Play!” said the giant to the harp. The harp played a tune. Jack was amazed that the harp could play by itself. Then the woman brought in a white goose. “lay!” said the giant to the goose. The goose laid a golden egg. Jack was amazed that eggs could be made of gold.

Soon the giant fell asleep. Jack ran out of the house and climbed down the beanstalk as fast as he could. Jack’s mother was waiting for him at the bottom, looking cross. She didn’t believe a word he said about magic harps that played on their own or geese that laid golden eggs. “Useless old beans and a useless beanstalk,” was all she said.

The next day Jack climbed back up the beanstalk and hid in the giant’s kitchen. The ground started to shake and the giant appeared in the doorway. He sniffed the air. “Fee! Fi! Fo! Fum! I can smell a little one!” he roared. Jack trembled at the giant’s words. “I think you must have a cold,” said the woman. “There aren’t any children here. Sit down and eat your dinner.” The giant ate an enormous dinner.

Jack waited until the giant fell asleep. When the air started to rumble with giant snores, Jack picked up the goose and the harp and ran out of the house as fast as his legs would carry him. “Master, master!” the harp cried out to the sleeping giant. The giant woke up and chased after Jack. Jack climbed down the beanstalk as quickly as he could. When he got to the bottom he chopped down the beanstalk and ran inside to find his mother.

Jack took the golden eggs to the market and sold them for lots of money. Now Jack and his mother never go to bed hungry. The harp plays its beautiful tunes for them every night. And Jack’s mother has not said another word about useless old beans.