

Effects of Extensive Reading on Thai Tertiary Students' Reading Attitudes

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Abstract

An exposure to free choice of inspiring reading materials among Thai students has not been largely promoted in English language class, affecting negative language learning attitudes and development of a reading habit. This present study examined the effects of extensive reading (ER) on Thai university students. To measure their attitudes towards comfort, anxiety, intellectual value, practical value and linguistic value before and after 15-week extensive reading. 68 undergraduate students were asked to complete the 5-point Likert scale questionnaire of 23 items adopted from Yamashita (2013). A semi-structured interview was also employed. The results revealed students had positive feelings in which ER increased their comfort and decreased their anxiety at the significance level of 0.05. They also had positive beliefs about the intellectual benefits. However, the practical value that ER might bring advantages to students' study or future career was lower in the posttest. There was no significant difference between the pretest and posttest in their beliefs about English language study benefits. Qualitative data from the semi-structured interviews showed that students satisfied with their own choice of reading preference. The findings suggested the use of ER approach in English as a foreign language (EFL) classes to increase students' positive attitudes, decrease their negative ones towards reading, and develop good reading habits through their reading engagement.

Keywords: *English as a foreign language, extensive reading, reading attitudes, Thai tertiary students*

Cite as: Porkaew, k., & Fongpaiboon, A. (2018). Effects of Extensive Reading on Thai Tertiary Students' Reading Attitudes. *Arab World English Journal*, 9 (1).

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.24093/awej/vol9no1.15>

Introduction

The average reading comprehension of EFL Thai students at the tertiary level is often found to be at a low level (Pratontep, 2007). Owing to their minimal exposure to the target language, they neither read well nor have good reading habits—they see reading as a tedious and arduous activity that demands tremendous effort (*ibid.*). As a result, they are likely to develop negative attitudes toward reading in English. However, even with their limited English reading proficiency, they still need to read English textbooks in order to pass exams and to fulfill their studies requirements.

As advocated by a large number of researchers, ER has been proposed as one way to foster students' interest in reading (Nuttall, 1996; Day & Bamford, 1998). ER is an approach to reading that provides students with massive amounts of comprehensible input that exposes them to a large amount of vocabulary effortlessly. They can choose what they want to read, which can contribute to their developing more positive attitudes towards reading than when they are forced to read textbooks or passages chosen by their teachers. Nuttall (1996, p. 127) has stated that ER offers “the private world of reading for our own interest”. It helps improve students' reading skills easily and effectively; students can read better “in a favorable climate...with enjoyment”. It can also increase students' word recognition and discourse structures, which are parts of their implicit learning system (Ellis as cited in Kirchoff, 2013). ER, as highly supported in the study of Yamashita's (2013), can create positive effects on EFL Japanese students' attitudes towards reading.

Given that, the present study was conducted in order to investigate the effects of ER on Thai tertiary students' reading attitudes.

Literature Reviews

Extensive Reading

ER is a teaching and learning approach to the second language or foreign language (L2/FL) reading in which students read a lot of books or other materials that are selected by themselves within their language competency (Day & Bamford, 1998). The exposure to practicing reading written comprehensible input in the English language which is slightly beyond the students' current existing knowledge can stimulate language acquisition to occur (Krashen, 1992) and develop their L2/FL vocabulary and structural awareness. Through large amounts of ER, readers can better read affecting their comprehension skills and background knowledge development. ER also helps to develop students' autonomy through repeated exposure to comprehensible materials in order to boost all of their language skills, apart from the reading skill (Maley, 2009); and learners can become exposed to the real world through reading various types of target-language materials. The students that always participated in ER outperformed those that underwent a regular instruction program (Krashen as cited in Maley, 2011) and this pays off in their exam success (Prowse, 2002). The best result that may occur is a positive attitude towards EFL learning because reading is chosen according to students' preferences and interests which influences students' confidence and motivation towards L2/FL reading (Grabe, 1991).

ER is good at getting students to read in English and to like reading, and it is also good at motivating them to spend more time on reading. Furthermore, ER can be done through non-printed

or printed materials, such as graded readers written in a simplified language and graded according to different difficulty levels in terms of vocabulary, grammatical structure, and a number of headwords in order to help EFL students read and learn L2/FL focusing on top daily words lists and uncomplicated grammatical structures at each level. Most of the books are graded from the beginning level (300-500 headwords) to the advanced level (2,000-3,000 headwords) with an aim to enable EFL readers to eventually read authentic materials written for English native speakers. Reading graded readers helps to motivate students to read and develop fluency in reading English, enhance and extend their grasp of vocabulary and grammatical structures, and also offer the most accessible source to expose them to the English language (Hill as cited in Wan-a-rom, 2012). Day and Bamford (2002) suggest that at least one graded reader book per week is the appropriate amount and a realistic target for learners at all proficiency levels, as books written for beginners and low-intermediate learners are very short so that they can benefit from reading extensively and establish good reading habits. However, non-printed materials mostly are online passages students can read easily through their smartphone or tablet, which is very trendy for costs saving and EFL learners can read extensively at anytime, anywhere, and at their convenience with little help from teachers.

Reading Attitude

Reading attitude is “a system of feelings related to reading which causes the learner to approach or avoid a reading situation” (Alexander & Filler’s, 1976, p. 1). Students’ reading attitudes are usually connected to their previous reading experiences and events, the exposure to people that read, and their perceptions about the usefulness of reading (Grabe & Stoller, 2002). Studies by Yamashita and Takase as cited in de Burgh (2011), found that students’ perceptions of the usefulness of their first language (L1) reading are more likely to be transferred to their L2/FL reading than their own feelings. When students believe in the benefits of reading, their belief will affect their attitude towards reading and their reading attitude will affect their behavior regarding reading (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). Day and Bamford’s (1998) model of L2 reading motivation show that materials and attitudes towards L2 reading have an equally strong effect on the desire to read, while uninspiring reading materials can cause negative attitudes towards reading and bring about boredom instead. However, the graded reader which is specifically designed to serve ER programs can inspire and possibly affect students’ positive attitudes towards foreign cultures and people. The EFL class environment where students can have their own choice of reading based on their interest and curiosity also affects positive language learning attitudes and development of a reading habit (de Burgh, 2011).

Yamashita (2013) studies the effects of ER on reading attitudes toward the English language of 61 second-year undergraduate Japanese students using a reading attitude questionnaire created by Yamashita (2007). Five attitudinal factors were examined under 22 items. The first variable is *comfort*, which is relevant to students’ positive and negative feelings towards ER. The second variable is *anxiety* or an uncomfortable feeling of nervousness about ER. Both variables represent the students’ feelings or emotions towards ER. The other three variables indicate the students’ evaluative beliefs about the three different values, which consist of *intellectual value*, or the students’ beliefs concerning the intellectual benefits that they might receive from reading extensively, *practical value*, or the idea that ER might bring benefits to them in terms of study or work, and *linguistic value*, or the students’ beliefs about the benefits of FL study. However, the

linguistic value was not included in the study analysis due to a ceiling effect and a small number of items under this variable. The findings revealed students' positive feelings in which ER increased their comfort and intellectual benefits and also decreased their anxiety. However, there was no significant difference between the pretest and posttest in their beliefs towards practical value.

Reading Anxiety

Reading anxiety is an uncomfortable feeling of nervousness while reading the target language texts (Saito et al., 1999). To measure this variable, Saito et al. (1999) devised the 20 items of foreign language reading anxiety scale (FLRAS), examining 383 university students FL reading anxiety while taking Spanish, Russian, or Japanese course. These students' FL classroom anxiety were also examined under 33 items scale. The findings reveal that "FL reading anxiety [exists] as a phenomenon related to, but distinct from, general FL anxiety... [both FL reading anxiety and general FL anxiety have] a negative relationship with student performance as measured by final grades" (p. 211). Reading in Japanese provoked the highest anxiety "due to the unfamiliar and non-Roman writing system as well as the foreign cultural content" (p. 212). Asking students to read the sentences aloud also caused reading anxiety in this study (p. 215). Worried and nervous participants felt uncomfortable when facing unknown words, grammar, and culture of their particular target language texts because they "expect that they should understand all the material that is presented to them" (p. 214). They devoted their effort and time to translation in order to get the tremendous understanding towards the written texts (p. 215). The participants' beliefs towards the difficulty of their particular target language had a positive correlation with their FL reading anxiety level (p. 215). The study suggests that when implementing authentic materials in class, EFL teachers should make sure that the difficulty levels of materials are matched well with students' literacy and also pre, while, post-reading activities should be listed explicitly in the lesson plans (pp. 216-217).

Previous studies on extensive reading

Numerous studies have found that ER has a positive influence on L2/FL development and learners' attitudes toward reading. For example, considerable studies on extensive readings have been conducted from different perspective such as the relationship between ER and vocabulary development (Lee & Mallinder, 2017; Pigada & Schmitt, 2006); ER and vocabulary teaching in the study of Benettayeb (2010). ER and its effect on reading comprehension (Tanaka & Stapleton, 2007; Robb & Susser, 1989). The study of both simplified and unsimplified materials for pleasure reading by Beglar, Hunt, and Kite (2012) (report an increase in the reading rates of Japanese university students). Yamashita (2004, 2007, 2008, and 2013) (studied the effects of ER on Japanese university learners' reading attitudes in their L1 and L2 and found that ER increase the students' positive attitudes towards reading and improve their reading abilities). In her recent study (2013) (she suggested more studies on reading motivation).

Several ER studies have been done in the context of Thai EFL tertiary students. Pratontep (2007, p.5), for instance, examined 76 Thai undergraduate students' self-regulated learning strategies and their English reading comprehension in a 10-week ER program. The participants were divided into two groups of 38 each; group one was taught regular ER instruction and the other group with regular ER instruction, plus self-regulated learning strategies. The results from

the English reading comprehension posttest mean scores showed no significant difference between the two groups. Both groups used “all three categories of self-regulation—metacognitive regulation, performance regulation, and learning environment regulation”. Channuan (2012) examined second-year undergraduate Thai students' learner autonomy strategies and their English reading ability in a 10-week ER program. Based on the findings, 37 participants often used cognitive and metacognitive strategies and their English reading ability was also improved together with positive attitudes towards ER and learner autonomy. With unmotivated students taking a reading course at one university, Laoarun (nd.) investigated 30 participants' attitudes before and after attending an ER program using tales, there was an increase in the participants' positive attitudes toward reading. Tamrackitkun (2010) explored reading comprehension, fluency, and students' attitudes after being exposed to ER. 284 EFL Thai participants, under two experimental groups and four control groups, reported their positive effects of ER on the students' reading comprehension and improvement in reading fluency plus their positive attitude toward ER. The findings also suggest that giving additional marks helps encourage the students to read. Controlled reading in class with timed reading tests was preferred in this study.

Research Question

1. How does extensive reading affect Thai EFL tertiary students' attitudes towards reading?

Methodology

Participants

The participants were 68 second-year undergraduate students enrolling in an elective reading course, 40 of whom were from engineering and 28 from applied science. They were between 18-21 years of age and did not take any other English courses while the study was conducted.

Instruments

The original twenty-two item reading attitude questionnaire with five attitudinal factors using a 5-point Likert scale by Yamashita (2013) was used. One additional item was added on linguistic item (item 23) in this study because the original questionnaire has only three items asking for linguistic value while the other values have at least four items. Additionally, Yamashita finally deleted this variable out of her study analysis due to a ceiling effect and a small number of items used for it. The questionnaire measured the participants' feelings of comfort (6 items), feelings of anxiety (5 items), the intellectual value (5 items), the practical value (4 items), and 4 items of linguistic value at the beginning and the end of the study. The 23-item reading attitude questionnaire was translated into the Thai language and checked by an expert in the field of language translation. The content of the revised version was validated based on the Index of Item-Objective Congruence (IOC) by three English language teaching experts. The estimated reliability of the instrument using Cronbach's alpha coefficient (α) was 0.75.

To elicit in-depth information regarding students' attitude, ten participants (15%) with the highest and lowest reading times were selected and asked to have an individual semi-structured interview at his/her own time of convenience. The interviews were audiotaped and conducted in Thai for participants' full understanding. The researcher followed a pretest-set list of questions as a guide to facilitate the informants' interactions at the beginning, “but can digress and probe for

more information” (Mackey & Gass, 2005, p. 365) to let the discussion moves without constraints from the researcher’s preconceived ideas and complement the data from the questionnaires.

Procedure

This study used a pretest-posttest design to compare the results from the participants’ pretest and posttest reading attitude questionnaires. During the experiment, the participants attended a three-hour class for fifteen weeks of a reading course. In week 1, the author, as the reading course teacher, met and got to know the participants. After most of the participants came to the classroom and finished the “getting to know you” activity, the teacher asked them to complete the reading attitude questionnaire as a pretest. They were told that there was no right or wrong answer and that their opinions would not affect their grade so they could feel free to express their real opinions. Next, the reading course description, objectives, material, and evaluation were introduced. Then the ER concept, the significance and benefit of the study, and materials selection were explained. Finally, the participants selected their preferred graded readers from the Self-Access Learning Center. Certain web links were also provided as another source for reading selection since some students might prefer reading through their smartphones, tablets, or computers.

The participants were asked to read extensively both inside and outside class at least twelve times during fifteen weeks—seven times before the midterm exam and five times after that, approximately one reading a week. They were suggested to spend at least fifteen minutes outside the classroom on their self-selected reading materials. Four to seven participants were assigned to talk about their two materials weekly before the midterm exam week.

From weeks 3 to 8, four to seven participants came to talk about their two ER materials before and/or after the class time. The teacher listened to the students and asked some questions or discussed problems they found while reading and encouraged them to continue reading. Twenty minutes before the end of the class time each week, the participants read their self-selected and easy-to-understand material without any interruption from the teacher. The participants had to find time to read outside of the class for at least fifteen minutes continuously. Totally, before the midterm exam participants had to complete seven ER materials.

During week 9, the rest of the participants came to talk about their ER materials. The teacher reminded them to continue their reading after their midterm exam.

From weeks 10 to 14, six to eight participants talked about one of their five ER materials before and/or after the class time. Twenty minutes before the end of the class time the participants read independently, and they also had to find time to read outside of the class for at least fifteen minutes continuously to complete five ER materials before the final exam arrival.

During week 15, the teacher administered the reading attitude questionnaire as a posttest to the participants and told that ten of them with the highest and lowest reading times would be invited to have an interview with her on the 11th - 14th January 2016.

One limitation of this study is that the researcher as a teacher conducted the interviews with her own students. The negative effect due to the teacher-student power relationship may exist in

the interview. The students as informants may provide data to please their teacher, which does not fully reflect reality, or what is known as *Halo effect*. To avoid their feelings towards the teacher-student power relationship, the semi-structured interviews were scheduled after the official grading announcement was made.

Results

To answer the research question, a dependent sample *t*-test was used to compare the data obtained from the pretest and posttest reading attitude questionnaires. The results revealed that there were differences between the pretest and posttest mean scores regarding the four attitudinal variables; namely, comfort, anxiety, intellectual value, and practical value at the .05 level ($p < .05$), but no difference regarding linguistic value was found.

Table 1 *Pair sample t-test and descriptive statistics of attitudinal variables*

Variable	Mean	S.D.	Meaning	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Comfort					
Pretest	3.06	0.62	Moderate	6.258*	.000
Posttest	3.43	0.58	High		
Anxiety					
Pretest	3.46	0.76	High	-2.906*	.003
Posttest	3.22	0.72	Moderate		
Intellectual value					
Pretest	3.84	0.50	High	2.098*	.020
Posttest	3.97	0.38	High		
Practical value					
Pretest	4.13	0.46	High	-4.127*	.000
Posttest	3.88	0.50	High		
Linguistic value					
Pretest	4.04	0.50	High	.339	.368
Posttest	4.06	0.38	High		

* $p < .05$ (2-tailed)

Discussion

According to the findings, ER, implemented during the 15-week elective EFL reading course, positively affected students' attitudes with increases in terms of comfort, intellectual, linguistic whereas showing the decrease in students' posttest of anxiety and practical value. The posttest mean scores of comfort increased to 0.37, but for anxiety, the only negative variable, the posttest mean scores decreased from the pretest to 0.24. Both magnitudes of mean scores differences were at the top two. From cognitive perspective, *choice* as Williams and Burden (1997) stated, is of central importance. It allows people to have choice over the way in which they behave and, therefore, have control over their actions" (p. 119). ER is given the wide choices of material selection, difficulty level, place, time, and reading pace for the participants to be able to control over their action and decision, thus contributing to positive attitudes towards reading. After success in the first few English readings, they would have more confidence in their reading ability, have less anxiety to overcome and be willing to continue their independent reading. Krashen

(1982) emphasizes the significance of these factors—motivation, self-confidence, and anxiety in language acquisition. Positive attitudes regarding these three factors were shown in the qualitative data:

“ER was useful...Normally, I do not read any books but I immersed in Swan Lake and I developed my reading skills”. (Student#15)

“I become fluent in reading English and open the dictionary less than before due to the assigned ER activity”. (Student#40)

“This course taught me how to spend my free time effectively and usefully and I could improve my language skills”. (Student#45)

“I was satisfied with what I was interested in reading and I really liked to read. I preferred printed reading materials because they are easy to read”. (Student#60)

“I felt satisfied reading fairy tales because they were easy to understand and I could search and read directly on the Internet”. (Student#64).

The findings of present study is resonant with those of Yamashita's (2013). The Thai EFL university participants' feeling of comfort increased whereas their anxiety was lowered.

The findings also showed the posttest mean scores of intellectual and linguistic increased to 0.13 and 0.02 respectively. It is interesting to note that the posttest mean scores of the practical value were lower than the pretest at -0.25 even though it was not a negative variable. At the beginning of this study, the participants did the pretest reading attitude questionnaire before knowing anything about ER. They simply defined reading as part of testing to get good grades or screen people for institutions or workplaces. They associated the English language reading with either academic studies or better opportunities for jobs in the future. The sole prior reason was to mark their progress. Reading as an assessment tool for their desired educational degree. Therefore, the pretest questionnaire items of the practical value mean scores were at 4.13, which were the highest pretest mean scores and consistent with their expectations. After exposing to ER for a semester, the participants understood more about the characteristics of ER. They realized that it was reading for enjoyment and pleasure and was meant to motivate them to spend more time on reading in large quantities and varieties with no requirements for exercises, comprehension questions, or evaluation. Consequently, the participants had negative perception on the future outcome that ER could bring benefits to them in terms of study or work reflecting through the posttest mean scores of the practical value was lower than that of the pretest ($\bar{x} = 3.88$). Some participants in this study may misinterpret the nature of easy and enjoyable English reading materials as shortcomings, comparing to their expectations of reading in English

The insignificant gain score of the linguistic value with the lowest mean scores differences at 0.02 was possibly caused by the characteristics of ER as reading for pleasure, with no effects on the course grade like other previous reading passages with a list of comprehension questions. ER just prepares students to be able to read more academic reading (Grabe as cited in Yamashita,

2015). This is in line with Yamashita's proposition; "the expectations for cognitive demands and levels of professional specialization are higher in academic reading than in ER) "2015, p .171 (since students then may not regard ER in the aspects of cognitive view because ER does not give them immediate feedback in terms of thinking and understanding complicated things, bringing no FL study or work benefits. This is unlike their feelings of comfort or anxiety that they could receive immediately while reading extensively as a real-time feedback toward reading materials. After finished the ER materials, the participants in this study did not have any assessment of their reading such as quiz, listing vocabulary, or comprehension questions. Instead, they just reflected their happiest moment of their reading, explaining why the affective variable was dominant in the present study .Macalister argues that "students often have clear expectations about the role of the teacher and the outcomes they seek from the course; reading for its own sake does not fit these expectations" (2010, p. 68). In the present study, the participant perceived negative effects of ER on their language learning. This may stem from the fact that the ER approach is not designed to distinguish students in terms of reading abilities or language proficiencies so students are not likely to perceive the plausible benefits in their studies. Moreover, these sixty-eight participants were in their second year so the benefits that ER could bring for their future work were too far for them to realize .Finally, due to limited exposure to ER, "15 weeks is not necessarily sufficiently long for the full benefits of ER to materialize" (Yamashita, 2013, p. 256). For the cognitive variables to develop, it takes a longer time span than the affective variables in order to see the inherent ER effects . This is supporting by the qualitative findings when asking the participants whether they still continue their English ER or not .Only three participants out of ten mentioned that they would continue their extensive reading . This can vividly reflect the very characteristics of ER, largely affecting reader's feelings rather than cognitive perspective. Readers need to have an interest and curiosity to start reading .The similar findings about the impact of ER on affective than cognitive domain can be found more in the studies of Karlin and Romanko (2010); Yamashita (2008); Greenberg et al. (2006).

Conclusion

The present study contributes to research in the area of ER and reading as it confirmed the positive effects of ER on EFL reading attitudes. The five-point Likert scale for the reading attitude questionnaire in the present study measured the students' attitudes, consisting of five variables—comfort, anxiety, intellectual value, practical value, and linguistic value—before and after reading extensively for 15 weeks. The study revealed students' positive attitudes towards reading gained from ER. Their comfort increased while their anxiety decreased when reading EFL materials. The study also reported positive beliefs about the intellectual benefits .However, the participants perceived no practical value that ER might bring advantages to students ' study or future career. Negative perception on cognitive domain of ER was found. In order to verify the cognitive value of ER, future research should be conducted for a longer period than 15 weeks.

Pedagogical Implications

This study serves as one of the research studies that have examined the attitudinal variables regarding the ER of EFL Thai tertiary students. The findings from this study shed lights on the use of ER as a teaching method for motivating Thai tertiary students to spend more time on reading with enjoyment to develop better reading habits to become avid, autonomous, and life-long readers. Perceiving ER benefits takes time and needs students to pursue reading continuously

during such a longer period of time so giving marks as a reward to motivate desired and persistent behaviors to pursue their reading goals is considered as an initial and external force to begin to read. Hopefully, they will develop their internal desire to do ER, which is considered to be more important in L2/FL achievement and sustain their learning ability (Williams & Burden, 1997; Komiyama, 2009).

This study does not cover an in-depth investigation on personal meanings and value in a reading community. For the future ER practice, the teacher should provide chances for students to share their readings with friends in class such as having an ER club in order to increase their reading engagement and encourage their motivation to read in large amount that can sustain their prolonged reading behavior. As a social being, students may form or construct their identities in accordance with a group they share the same interests with, they also may be proud of themselves when someone is interested in what they share. Therefore, ER appears to be one of the best choices to bring students' low intrinsic motivation back and stay engaged with language learning through the self-control over attractive reading materials based on students' preferences.

For educators and educational administrators, the findings of the present study will enable them to adjust their course content or curriculum so as to promote ER in the language classroom.

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Appendix A

Yamashita's (2013) Reading Attitude Questionnaire (*Item 23 was added in this study)

1. I can become more sophisticated if I read English.
2. I can get various kinds of information if I read English.
3. Reading English is troublesome.
4. Reading English is useful for my future career.
5. I feel anxious if I do not know all the words.
6. I can acquire vocabulary if I read English.
7. Reading English is useful to get a good grade in class.
8. I can acquire broad knowledge if I read English.
9. I feel relaxed if I read English.
10. I sometimes feel anxious that I may not understand even if I read.
11. I can develop reading ability if I read English.
12. Reading English is useful to get credit for class.
13. Reading English is dull.
14. I get to know about new ways of thinking if I read English.

15. I can improve my sensitivity to the English language if I read English.
16. . I feel tried if I read English.
17. I feel anxious when I'm not sure whether I understood the book content.
18. I feel refreshed and rested if I read English.
19. Reading English is useful to get a job.
20. I do not mind even if I cannot understand the book content entirely.
21. Reading English is enjoyable.
22. I get to know about different values if I read English.
23. Encountering unfamiliar expressions in English improves my English.

Appendix B

Semi-structured interview questions

1. What do you think about English ER activity after you participated in this semester?
Do you think English ER is useful? Why? Why not?
2. Were you satisfied with your self-selected reading materials? Why?
3. How do you rate yourself as a reader before and after English ER activity?
Did your reading ability improve? How?
4. Do you still continue your English ER? Why or why not?