

ER IN TAIWAN: SEARCHING FOR FERTILE GROUND

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Abstract: Taiwan's National Development Council recently announced plans for the country to become bilingual by the year 2030. However, the Council did not lay out a clear road map for how this major accomplishment is to be achieved, and the curriculum presently in place does not seem to meet the challenge. This article will review the current status of English education in Taiwan as well as extensive reading's under-utilized role in the present curriculum. It will then look at how ER is currently being implemented at one major university on the island and will conclude by arguing that, regardless of the kinds of curricular changes the Ministry of Education decides to adopt, extensive reading deserves an intrinsic role in the new design.

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Taiwan is located in the middle of East Asia, and as far as English language education goes, the island shares many of the same features that might be found in classrooms across the Asian region: a teacher-centered, form-focused curriculum; an over-reliance on rote memorization; and a heavy emphasis on developing test preparation skills. These long-standing features may be changing ever-so-slowly as the need for more global, marketable skills such as communicative competence becomes more evident, but for now their roots still run deep into the educational terrain. High English test scores are a ticket to a better junior high school, senior high school, or university, so any new approach to language instruction is likely to meet resistance, whether it is from teachers and administrators, parents, or perhaps even from students.

Another shared feature of these language teaching environments are powerful ministries of education that dictate educational policy, set curricular goals and oversee curriculum design, and approve classroom texts and materials. These large-scale bureaucracies, while no doubt necessary, also tend to inhibit change and reinforce the status quo. Taiwan's Ministry of Education has been incredibly successful in the areas of mathematics and science, producing students with some of the best scores in the world. For this they are to be applauded, possibly emulated. MOE-designed English language curriculums, on the other hand, remain a work in progress.

Up until 2001, compulsory English language instruction in Taiwan was introduced during junior high school and continued through senior high school. Beginning in that year, however, as a part of a new national education policy, English was introduced in the 5th and 6th years of elementary school. In 2005, this was extended to 3rd and 4th grades, and in many metropolitan areas, first and second graders also began receiving English instruction. The goals are quite modest: to learn basic grammar, sounds, and sentence structure. Students are meant to have a vocabulary of 300 English words upon graduation from elementary school.

Language training becomes much more intense in junior and senior high schools. The focus is on grammar explication, vocabulary development, and strengthening intensive reading skills, which are the areas deemed necessary to perform well on demanding national exams. Junior high school students have about 2-3 hours per week devoted to English instruction in their first two years and 4 hours in the third. Upon graduation, junior high school students are meant to have a vocabulary of approximately 2,000 words. In high school, hours of instruction vary from school to school, but graduates are meant to have a vocabulary of 4,500 English words. This was reduced from 7,000 in 2018 to allow teachers to devote more time to practicing listening and speaking skills. Thus, a slight shift towards developing communication skills is seemingly underway.

The General English Proficiency Test (GEPT) was commissioned by Taiwan's Ministry of Education in 1999 and was first administered in 2002. It was developed at the Language Teaching and Training Center at National Taiwan University and was meant to serve as a measuring device for students as they make their way through their required English studies. The test is divided into four levels: elementary, intermediate, high intermediate, and advanced. Each test has two parts: examinees must first pass a reading and

listening test before they can proceed to the second stage, which focuses on speaking and writing.

The elementary level test is meant to be suitable for junior high school graduates; the intermediate level is designed for high school graduates; the high-intermediate exam is meant to be appropriate for graduates of university-level English departments; and the advanced level is intended for those who have graduated from an English speaking university abroad. Unfortunately, as reported by Language Teaching and Training Center at National Taiwan University, passing rates for the GEPT in 2016—at all levels—are far from ideal, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Passing Rates for the GEPT

Level	1 st Stage	2 nd Stage
Elementary	50%	52%
Intermediate	46%	31%
High-Intermediate	51%	30%
Advanced	44%	20%

If we assume that many of the students taking these exams are those that have been deemed most ready, we can project that the actual number of students with the requisite language skills to pass these different levels is considerably lower.

An ETS report (Educational Testing Service, 2018) shows Taiwan test takers do perform somewhat better on tests like the TOEIC. The country-wide average score of 544 in 2017 still trails area rivals like South Korea (676) and China (600), but leads other Asian countries like Hong Kong (527) and Japan (517). So while Taiwan’s science and math students continue to excel, students in English language curriculums continue to somewhat underperform.

THE EXTENT OF THE INCLUSION OF ER IN THE ELT CURRICULUM IN TAIWAN

Extensive reading scholars are frequent visitors to Taiwanese universities and conferences. Stephen Krashen and Paul Nation have often delivered plenary sessions espousing the benefits of ER at the annual English Teachers’ Association of the Republic of China conference in Taipei; in fact, they were

co-headliners at the 2017 event. Richard Day, former Chair of the Extensive Reading Foundation (ERF), has likewise offered talks on ER at several well-known universities. Other ERF members, such as Tom Robb, Rob Waring, Marc Helgesen, and Willy Renandya, have also delivered ER-based presentations at local ER seminars.

Krashen (2004, p. 1) has described free voluntary reading's (his term for ER) role in language acquisition as follows:

Free voluntary reading (FVR) is one of the most powerful tools we have in language education...FVR is the missing ingredient in first language "language arts" as well as intermediate second and foreign language instruction. It will not, by itself, produce the highest levels of competence; rather, it provides a foundation so that higher levels of proficiency can be reached. When FVR is missing, these advanced levels are extremely difficult to attain.

In addition, Waring (2008, p. 2) echoes Krashen's position that extensive reading provides learners the means to reach more advanced levels of proficiency:

Bluntly stated, programs that do not have an extensive reading or graded reading component of massive comprehensible sustained silent individualized language practice will hold back their learners.

In a presentation delivered at a JALT conference in Tokyo in 2018 entitled, "What are the most effective changes a teacher could make to a language course?" Nation's first suggestion is to "set up a substantial extensive reading program." And yet, extensive reading has yet to take hold here as it has in other Asian locales, most notably Japan and Korea. There are likely many reasons for this, but a handful seem most plausible.

First of all, Taiwan's Ministry of Education has never fully embraced the extensive reading approach. Many other initiatives have been promulgated over the years—some sound, some less so—but ER has failed to receive a strong, full-throated, fully-funded MOE endorsement. Until that happens, widespread adoption remains unlikely.

Furthermore, junior and senior high school teachers are already burdened with large classes and full schedules, so the idea of any new addition to the curriculum—even if time permitted—is probably neither practical nor desirable.

Another roadblock that ER needs to overcome is a rather vague feeling of *foreignness* that teachers have towards the extensive reading approach. Many

local language instructors often express the feeling that this method is not how they studied English and the ER approach does not fit with their identity as a teacher. They may feel slightly suspicious about imposing this new approach on their students. There is a comfort level with traditional methods of language instruction from both the English-teaching faculty and the students themselves.

It is at the college and university level where ER has perhaps the greatest possibility of finding a foothold, but even here there seems to be a general resistance. For many university-level language instructors, the idea of “easy reading” or “pleasure reading” probably does not align with their idea of appropriate university reading material. This is perhaps understandable. There is the general feeling that university students should be interacting with challenging material and wrestling with adult, sophisticated topics. This is often expressed as the “no pain, no gain” approach. The question that remains, however, is how many of our university students are adequately prepared for this kind of difficult intensive reading and discussion of these serious issues. A look back at the passing rates for the intermediate level GEPT may provide some answers.

Budgetary concerns (who will pay for the graded readers necessary to implement ER successfully?), administrative concerns (where will the books be shelved? how will students access the collection?), and assessment concerns (how do teachers assign a score for students’ reading?) also undoubtedly hinder widespread adoption. But these concerns are typical of any new curriculum change and can be easily addressed with greater education and cooperation.

DISCUSSION ON HOW SCHOOLS IN TAIWAN IMPLEMENT ER OR WHY SCHOOLS DO NOT IMPLEMENT ER

Taiwan is home to several well-known ER researchers and a quick Google search reveals evidence of teachers across the island who have been implementing extensive reading and researching its effects for a number of years. However, these cases seem to be restricted to individual teachers at individual institutions, usually at the high school, technical college, or university level. Most studies tend to be focused on short-term, semester-long programs where the results are calculated and analyzed, but there seems to have been little in the way of long-term implementation or adoption as a result of these studies.

At a handful of universities in Taiwan, freshmen are required to purchase two or three graded readers along with their Freshman English textbook and are then asked to demonstrate they have completed this required reading by either answering questions added to a midterm or final exam or completing some tasks related to their reading, perhaps a poster presentation or book report. But almost all of these programs fail to provide students with the kind of massive reading input needed to produce the language learning benefits of a well-designed extensive reading program. More than likely, these programs also fail to give students a clear indoctrination into the purpose and practice of extensive reading. Admittedly, two or three books per term is better than no outside reading whatsoever, but extensive reading is truly about reading *extensively*. One book per week is considered ideal, so students should be reading 10-15 books per semester, not two or three (Bamford & Day, 2004).

THE FENG CHIA UNIVERSITY ER PROGRAM

At Feng Chia University in Taichung, Taiwan, where I have served as an administrator and instructor in the Foreign Language Center for upwards of twenty years, we have been implementing ER in our 4,000-student Freshman English program since about 2005. The adoption of extensive reading into our curriculum was kick-started by a talk by Stephen Krashen at a local university attended by several members of our FLC faculty. A collective light went off among the group, and we returned to campus convinced and determined to make ER a critical component of our freshman program going forward. What followed was a year-long sales' pitch and education process directed at a number of reluctant, doubtful faculty members, but this was time well spent. It is imperative to get all stakeholders educated about ER theory and its role within a language curriculum. If introduced incorrectly, extensive reading can become just another homework burden for teachers and students alike, one that they will opt out from instead of buying into. Therefore, all parties—teachers, administrators, and most importantly , students—need a fundamental understanding of the principles of ER. The Extensive Reading Foundation and local ER associations can provide invaluable assistance in this area.

Freshmen at Feng Chia are divided into four levels of Freshman English (FE) based on their high school senior year exam scores. Appropriate level, four-skill textbooks are selected for each level of the program and students meet with their FE teacher for one two-hour session per week. Instruction is

primarily in English and classroom work focuses on intensive reading, grammar, vocabulary development, and a special emphasis on strengthening students' communication skills. As mentioned earlier, this skill has only recently begun to receive sufficient attention at the high school level, and most students enter the university with poor communicative abilities and poorer confidence.

Outside of class, students read—a lot. The extensive reading program was introduced to serve as a complement to the classroom textbook-based portion of the course, and to give students the massive language input they need to begin to develop mastery of how the different language components—grammar, vocabulary, sentence structure—fit together to create meaning. As a point of contrast, one semester's reading input from the current four-skill textbook used at the Intermediate level totaled slightly less than 1,000 words; students at the lowest level of the Freshman English course are asked to read 40 times that per semester in the required ER portion of the program.

The program was designed with the main tenets of extensive reading firmly in mind. In their book *Extensive Reading Activities for Teaching Language* (2004), Bamford and Day reviewed existing ER programs and offered a list of ten key features these programs shared. While the entire list is significant and useful for those considering implementing an extensive reading program, the first four provided the cornerstones for the FCU program:

1. *The reading material is easy.* This can be a hard sell in Asia, where many teachers feel that the best way to learn how to read difficult material is to read lots of difficult material: “no pain, no gain.” But students' extensive reading should begin with easy—or at least appropriate level—materials, and students should stay at this level until they feel they are ready to move on to higher-level books. Dictionary use, while not forbidden, is strongly discouraged in ER so as not to interrupt the flow of a student's reading experience. In our program, students at the elementary level begin with Starter/Level 1 books; Intermediate students begin with Levels 1/2 readers; High Intermediate begins with Levels 2/3; while students at the Advanced level generally begin with Level 3 books or higher. Again, when to move up to more challenging reading material is dictated by students, not teachers.
2. *A variety of materials on a wide range of topics is available.* A willing, listening and generous librarian may be the greatest friend of any

extensive reading program, and that is what we had at our school. We communicated with library administrators about what we wanted to do with the reading program, and they went out of their way to find the financial resources to build an adequate collection of books. We began with 6-8 copies of all the books from the main publishers and later adjusted as needed. When new series became available in Taiwan, these too were added to the collection. For high-level students we also added *The Hardy Boys* library along with a selection of other young adult titles. Regardless of the level, students have an ample collection of reading materials from many different genres, fiction as well as non-fiction. While a large initial expenditure was needed to stock the reader library, twelve years later these original books are still being read and they are undoubtedly the most borrowed books in circulation. Students borrowing books is what English teachers—and librarians—most want to see. Teachers and librarians can find a comprehensive list of graded reader series on the Extensive Reading Foundations website (erfoundation.org).

3. *Learners choose what they want to read.* Students' reading materials are all self-selected. Early in the academic year, Freshman English teachers are encouraged to give students a tour of the library's reader collection, allowing them to become familiar with the different levels and titles available, much like browsing a local bookstore. And as with the local bookstore, most students are able to find reading material of interest. As most of their extensive reading takes place outside the classroom and apart from their teacher, freshman students get to know this corner of the library quite well. A video introduction of the collection has also been made available on the school's LMS for teachers to show in class. One possible exception that teachers and students new to ER may wish to consider is beginning with a class reader, where all students read the same title. This also allows a teacher to check global understanding in class and perhaps design in-class activities for students to undertake. A second exception may be where students read books in pairs or small groups, so more advanced readers can provide support to weaker classmates.
4. *Learners read as much as possible.* Students at each level of the FCU program are given semester reading targets. These targets correspond to roughly 10-12 books per semester. At the same time, however, students

are encouraged to go beyond these targets and are given extra credit for doing so. Our current reading targets are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Reading Targets of FCU Program

Level	Target
FE1 (Elementary)	40,000 words per semester
FE2 (Intermediate)	80,000 words per semester
FE3 (High-Intermediate)	100,000 words per semester
FE4 (Advanced)	100,000 words per semester

At the end of the current academic year, these targets will be re-evaluated to see if raising these word counts is viable as students have already exceeded our expectations.

Other principles in Bamford and Day’s list (2004) focus on the thorny issue of assessment in an ER program. For example, Principle 8 states, “*Reading is its own reward,*” and argues against the use of comprehension quizzes as a means of checking to see whether students are doing their required reading or not. It goes on to say that any type of assessment or follow up activity, “should respect the integrity of the reading experience and...encourage rather than discourage further reading.” (p. 3)

However, a couple of points of contention come to mind with respect to this principle. First, it assumes that easy, straight-forward comprehension quizzes would discourage further reading in a way that any of the 100+ activities offered in their book would not. Brierley (2009, p. 52), among others, have come to a much different conclusion: “In spite of their poor reputation, well-designed, reliable, short quizzes may provide accountability without being de-motivating.” Secondly, implementing an ER program as large as ours without any measure of student accountability would likely result in less, rather than more, reading. Students have busy, active lives. If we want them to take this part of their language education seriously, program administrators need to

show they consider it a serious component of the course. Students' monitored extensive reading counts 20% toward their final FE grade.

For our program, we have adopted MReader (mreader.org) as the principal tracking mechanism. MReader is a free online platform—supported by the Extensive Reading Foundation—that offers quizzes for thousands of graded readers. It also has learning management system (LMS) with capabilities that allow teachers to create class pages to track all students' reading performance. Book counts, word counts, quizzes taken and quizzes passed are displayed for every student. The system also allows the program administrator to set reading targets for each semester as well as inter-semester targets to keep students reading throughout the term. MReader is also customizable; the administrator can block books that are not currently available to students in the school's library.

Most importantly, MReader is asynchronous and promotes autonomous learning. Students borrow books that interest them, either from the school library or an online reading platform like Xreading (xreading.com). They read them in their own time, and take their assessment whenever and wherever they please. Teachers serve as reading coaches and monitor their students' reading, but the reading is done independent of the teacher.

Here is what a student's page looks like on MReader.



Figure 1. Student's Page on MReader

Once a student passes a quiz, the cover of that book appears on the student's personal page. This visual confirmation of a student's reading progress has proven, if anything, to be more motivating than less. And even though each cover represents a successfully completed quiz, many students try to collect as many covers as they can. Good-natured, healthy competition between classmates arises and this leads to more reading. To date, in our program quizzes have not proven to be a deterrent to continued reading.

Below this comes complete data about individual student's reading progress:










Username	Fullname Click to view screen	Start level	Current level	 	Taken quizzes	Passed quizzes	Failed quizzes	Total words this term	Total words all terms	Goal
fcufic-D0145654	TU, Edward	5	5		5	4	1	51573	51573	40000
fcufic-D0145893	WU, Sam	5	5		16	12	4	50583	50583	40000
fcufic-D0270310	LI, Taylor	5	5		7	4	3	43137	43137	40000
fcufic-D0270367	YANG, Sky	5	5		9	6	3	47823	47823	40000
fcufic-d0291012	CHEN, Edward	5	5		3	2	1	38004	38004	40000
fcufic-D0309294	LI, brian	5	7		19	15	4	150290	190799	40000
fcufic-D0309366	CHEN, Bruce	5	5		3	1	2	15606	67527	40000

Figure 2. Individual Student's Reading Progress

One deliberate way we encouraged students to accept the challenge to read extensively was to set up an MReader reading competition. The top readers at each level of Freshman English were awarded modest prizes (1st Place: US \$60; 2nd Place \$30; 3rd Place \$15). The results, however, were anything but modest. The figures below cover only the first fourteen weeks of the semester; four weeks still remain and students are still reading.

Table 3. Results of MReader Extensive Reading Competition

FE Level / Target	Top 3 Readers
FE4 (100,000)	1,000,970 (43 books)—688,437—536,080
FE3 (100,000)	261,599 (16 books)—259,053—219,242

FE2 (80,000)	304,487 (26 books)—301,544—243,655
FE1 (40,000)	166,585 (14 books)—159,445—131,232

During this period our 3,732 registered MReader users have read more than 226 million words, or an average of about 61,000 words per student. In subsequent semesters we are determined to build upon this solid beginning.

SUGGESTIONS ON HOW ER COULD POSITIVELY AFFECT LANGUAGE EDUCATION IN TAIWAN

While extensive reading is an excellent way for students to build language, it is also an effective method of consolidating previously taught material. English classes in Taiwan follow pre-set curriculums and students are asked to memorize long lists of vocabulary words and answer comprehension questions on hundreds of short, intensive reading passages and do pages and pages of grammar exercises. Some students are up to the task and progress smoothly through their language studies, but many students struggle and find it impossible to keep up with the curriculum and fall further and further behind with each passing week, month, and semester.

A well-structured ER program can work to counteract this phenomenon. More accomplished student learners can read at a level that enables them to continue to expand their language awareness; at the same time, less adept learners are encouraged to read at a level that reviews and recycles language and grammar from the classroom. Extensive reading allows each student to find his or her reading comfort zone, and as such makes an ideal complement to classroom instruction. This is the “individualized language practice” Waring (2008, p. 2) referred to. Whereas classroom reading input may be quite limited, extensive reading is by definition limitless: *Learners read as much as possible*.

One of the many stated goals of Taiwan’s 2001 education reform was to strengthen students’ autonomous learning skills. To the outside observer, though, it is unclear how the current language curriculum is working to achieve this goal. ER, by its very nature, works to cultivate students’ ability to work independently. They are asked to assume a greater role—and a greater responsibility—in the language learning process by allotting time and accessing reading materials outside of the classroom throughout the term. Again, individualized practice.

Finally, student feedback to extensive reading is generally quite positive. In the classroom, all students use the same text, do the same exercises and homework, and sit for the same exams. It is an approach that works for some students and certainly simplifies the process of delivering language education. However, ER makes allowances for individual preferences and encourages self-directed learning. This can be very motivating and empowering. If we want students to stay engaged in their language studies, we need to provide them with a path to pursue learning outside of the classroom, where so much of the language learning process needs to take place.

CONCLUSIONS

Extensive reading is not an unknown quantity in Taiwan; however, it continues to remain an under-utilized approach. This paper has attempted to demonstrate that this need not—and more exactly, should not—be the case. The massive exposure to simple, correct input that ER provides is invaluable to students trying to figure out the many nuances of a language so dissimilar to their native tongue. Not all of these complexities can be explained in the classroom; much needs to be worked out by the individual learner. ER encourages students to work independently and become more pro-active in their approach to language learning. And perhaps most importantly, the reading program at FCU has shown that local students will enthusiastically embrace extensive reading when given the opportunity. Bamford and Day (2004, p.1) have written:

Good things happen to students who read a great deal in the new language. Research studies show they become better and more confident readers, they write better, their listening and speaking abilities improve, and their vocabularies get richer. In addition, they develop positive attitudes toward and increased motivation to study the new language.

The earlier we can get students reading extensively, the earlier the benefits of ER can begin to bear fruit.

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