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DO EFL STUDENTS LIKE GRADED READERS?

Kenneth M. Smith

*English Department, Wenzao Ursuline College of Languages
Kaohsiung, Taiwan*

Stephen Krashen

*Rossier School of Education (Emeritus), University of Southern California
Los Angeles, CA, USA*

Abstract

Graded readers are widely used in English as a foreign language programs, but we have little information about whether students find them interesting. In this study, 14 to 16 year old students of English as a foreign language in Taiwan were asked to evaluate the readers they had read. Overall, 41% found the books to be interesting, and 24% did not, but only 4% strongly agreed that the books were interesting. This is an encouraging result, but if our goal is to help students find truly compelling reading material, we will have to look elsewhere for additional reading material.

Keywords: Graded readers, English as a foreign language, reading material.

INTRODUCTION

It has been argued that self-selected reading is the source of much of our language ability, and that free voluntary reading (FVR) is one of the most powerful tools in language education (Krashen, 2004). Supporting this view is the finding that programs that encourage self-selected reading for EFL students typically show success, with readers outperforming comparisons on a variety of tests of English literacy (e.g. Mason, 2010; Cho, 2010, Wang & Lee, 2007; Lee, 2006, 2007; Liu, 2005), but some failures have also been reported (Al-Nujaidi, 2003; Williams, 2007). While

Direct all correspondence to:

Kenneth M. Smith, English Department, Wenzao Ursuline College of Languages Kaohsiung, Taiwan,
ksmith@mail.wtuc.edu.tw, ksmith813@yahoo.com

Stephen Krashen, Rossier School of Education (Emeritus), University of Southern California Los Angeles, CA,
USA, skrashen@yahoo.com

a variety of factors might determine success or failure, one crucial aspect to examine is the books provided. It has been suggested that for language acquisition to take place optimally, input needs to be more than comprehensible, it needs to be interesting, or even compelling (Lee, 2005; Krashen, 2007).

Graded Readers

Graded readers are books specifically designed for L2 readers and are at the center of many free reading programs. Many studies advocate the use of graded readers as vital parts of an EFL reading program, but little has been published on whether EFL students are actually interested in the content of these books. In Sheu (2004), the focus was on the physical characteristics of graded readers. Kitao, Yamamoto, Kitao, and Shimatani (1990) reported that on a scale of 1-6 where 1 was “boring” and 6 was “interesting” EFL college students in Japan gave the graded readers they read an average score of 4.4 out of 6, showing clear interest in the books provided them.

The purpose of this study is to probe interest levels in commercially published graded readers among Taiwanese EFL teenagers majoring in different languages at a junior college in southern Taiwan. By doing so, this study will add to the little that has been written about a critical component of “extensive reading” research, whether students are interested in the material they are being asked or encouraged to read.

METHOD

The 245 participants were between 14 and 16 years old and were first and second year junior college students. All were registered in a required first or second year reading class taught by the same instructor. Some were English majors and others were not, majoring in French, German, Japanese, or Spanish, but all students took the same number of English classes.

All classes spent at least some time doing self-selected reading of graded readers from the following series: Penguin Readers, Oxford Bookworms Library, Longman Originals, Heinemann Graded Readers and Cambridge English Readers.

This study examined students in five different intact classes: two first-year reading classes consisted only of English majors, and three second-year reading classes, consisting of English majors and majors in other languages who had done well in English the year before. All five classes included extensive reading, with one first-year class doing only extensive reading, and one first-year class doing extensive reading supplemented by

activities as advocated in Bamford and Day (2004) that encouraged students to talk about and write about the books they had read.

Second-year English included self-selected extensive reading of graded readers for one hour out of the three-hour per week class, one hour of traditional instruction, and one hour studying two graded readers chapter by chapter.

All students completed logs of the readers they read during the self-selected reading time. They were asked to indicate author, title, number of pages read, and time spent reading.

They were also asked to what extent they found the books they read to be interesting, where 1 = strongly disagree that the books were interesting and 5 = strongly agree that the books were interesting.

RESULTS

TABLE 1

Year 1 – English Major Interest in Graded Readers:
To what extent students feel books for extensive reading were interesting

GROUP	N	STRONGLY DISAGREED	DISAGREED	NO OPINION	AGREED	STRONGLY AGREED
Reading only	52	1 (2%)	12 (24%)	20 (40%)	16 (32%)	1 (2%)
Reading + activities	50	0 (0%)	4 (8%)	13 (25%)	28 (54%)	7 (13%)
TOTAL	102	1 (1%)	16 (16%)	33 (32%)	44 (43%)	8 (8%)

FIRST YEAR STUDENTS: ENGLISH MAJORS

Table 1 presents results just from first-year English majors, with data presented separately for the class that did extensive reading only and for the class that also had supplementary activities. The "reading plus activities" class was more enthusiastic about the graded readers, and the difference was statistically significant (combining strongly agree and agree categories as well as strongly disagree and agree categories and not including the "no opinion" column, $p = .035$, Fisher exact test). This is a strange result, as the reading-only group outperformed the reading plus exercises group of tests of English literacy (Smith, 2006).

For year two, students with other majors had very similar attitudes (Table 2), and were slightly more positive than the English majors, the difference falling just short of statistical significance ($p = .051$, Fisher test, two-tails).

TABLE 2

Year 2 – Non-English and English Major Interest in Graded Readers:
 To what extent students feel books for extensive reading were interesting.

GROUP	N	STRONGLY DISAGREED	DISAGREED	NO OPINION	AGREED	STRONGLY AGREED
FRE/GER	45	1 (2%)	9 (20%)	19 (42%)	15 (33%)	1 (2%)
SPA/JAP	48	4 (8%)	8 (17%)	18 (38%)	17 (35%)	1 (2%)
ENGLISH	50	7 (14%)	14 (28%)	16 (32%)	12 (24%)	1 (2%)
TOTAL	143	12 (8%)	31 (22%)	53 (37%)	47 (33%)	3 (2%)

The most important result, however, is the overall combined finding. Combining the results presented in tables 1 and 2, overall, 41% (102/245 of the students agreed or strongly agreed that the books were interesting (91, or 37% agreed and 11, or 4% strongly agreed). Overall, 24% (60/245 of the students disagreed or disagreed strongly that the books were interesting (47, or 19% disagreed and 13 or 5% disagreed strongly. Eighty-six students, or 35%, had no opinion.

This result is nearly identical to that reported by Kitao et al. (1990). Recall that Kitao et al. asked students to rate books on a scale of 1 to 6, and the average score was 4.4, or about 73% of the maximum (4.4/6). In our study, a one to five scale was used. The average score was 3.35, or 67% of the maximum (3.35/5).

CONCLUSION/DISCUSSION

As noted in the introduction, for input to be relevant for language acquisition, it must be comprehensible and interesting. The results reported here and by Kitao et al. (1990) confirm that in general, graded readers meet this requirement. The average rating for graded readers in both studies reflected at least mild interest, and perhaps high interest for some of the books and some of the readers.

But, as noted earlier, optimal input needs to be not just interesting, it also needs to be compelling, so interesting that the reader is drawn into the text and is in a state of "flow" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1992). It is hard to create flow when there are limitations in language. Graded readers might occasionally result in flow, but the search continues for additional ways to stimulate deep interest in books for foreign language students.

THE AUTHORS

Kenneth M. Smith teaches English reading, and composition courses to junior college and college students at Wenzao Ursuline College of Languages in Kaohsiung, Taiwan . At Wenzao, Ken has run a weekly reading group called “Book Travelers” for the past five years. His research interests focus on second language acquisition through comprehension based approaches, particularly reading and specifically sustained silent reading.

Stephen D. Krashen is Emeritus Professor of Education, the University of Southern California. He is best known for his work in establishing a general theory of second-language acquisition, as the cofounder of the Natural Approach, and as the inventor of sheltered subject matter teaching. He is the author of numerous books, including *Condemned Without a Trial: Bogus Arguments Against Bilingual Education* (1999), *Every Person a Reader: An Alternative to the California Task Force Report on Reading* (1997), and *Under Attack: The Case Against Bilingual Education* (1997), all available from Heinemann.

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