



Learning English reading in a mobile-assisted extensive reading program

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ABSTRACT

Previous studies on Extensive Reading Programs (ERPs) have reached positive conclusions, namely, that an ERP for language learners is effective in improving their linguistic abilities related to reading and promoting their motivation and attitudes toward reading. Current mobile devices, even though suitable for reading, have not yet been applied to develop language learners' linguistic proficiency and affective abilities in any ERP. The aim of the present study was to address this gap in literature by investigating the effects of using mobile tablet PCs in an online ERP on adolescent English learners' online activities, reading ability and users' perceptions. Two intact classes taught by a same English teacher in a senior high school in Taiwan were recruited to participate in a ten-week online ERP. One class was assigned to the mobile group reading their assignments on their tablet PCs and the other, the PC group, reading theirs on desktop PCs. During the online ERP, each class dedicated one class period every week for in-class reading and the participants in both classes were encouraged to read as many as possible after the class period. The results favored the mobile group who not only outperformed the PC group in online activities and reading achievement but also showed greater appreciation of the online ERP than their PC counterparts. The study also proposed two directions for future studies on mobile-assisted reading. They included learners' studying textbooks and their reading strategies on mobile devices.

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1. Introduction

A globally recognized problem that language teachers have been faced with is that most learners feel “reluctant to read in the target language (L2)” on their own (Arnold, 2009; Day & Bamford, 2002). Due to the intensive reading approach, studying reading material in detail, including memorizing morphological information and analyzing sentence structures, oftentimes deteriorate learners' interest in reading. Subsequently, memorizing vocabulary items and grammar rules is considered the only skill that needs to be learned in a reading class (Grabe & Stoller, 2002; Tomlinson's argument in Arnold, 2009). To change learners' misleading impression of reading, many language teachers have attempted to incorporate extensive reading or an extensive reading program (ERP; references below) in their classes.

The goal of incorporating an ERP in a language class is simple. In addition to studying text in isolation for tests, learners need to be exposed to a vast amount of reading material in context for such purposes as enjoyment, information and understanding (Day & Bamford, 2002). Advantages of an ERP have found support from empirical studies and they include improving reading ability, promoting their motivation and changing attitudes toward reading (Asraf & Ahmad, 2003; Bell, 2001; Iwahori, 2008; Yamashita, 2008; more below). Based on the advantages from previous empirical studies, ERPs have been implemented on computers and on the internet (Arnold, 2009; Huang, 2013a; Pino-Silva, 2006; Sun, 2003). Nowadays, off-line digitized text is equipped with multimedia functions, such as voice reading with text highlights and interactive stories, and online multimedia e-books are freely available, for example, Clifford Interactive Storybooks (teacher.scholastic.com/clifford1) and MightyBook (www.mightybook.com). As language teachers and researchers embrace technology far more than before, mobile devices have been used to enhance language learning in various areas (Kukulska-Hulme, 2009, 2012; Kukulska-Hulme & Shield, 2008). The latest publications on mobile-assisted language learning include Stockwell (2013) for vocabulary, Hsu, Hwang, and Chang (2013) for reading, Abdous, Facer, and Yen (2012) for listening, Liu and Chu (2010) for speaking, Liu and Tsai (2013) for writing and the

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October issue 2013 for mobile-assisted language learning on *Language Learning and Technology* (lt.msu.edu). However, mobile devices have not yet been used in any online ERPs. The urgency of the present study is, therefore, obvious.

The purpose of the present study was to assess whether mobile integration in an online extensive reading program in natural settings was effective or not. The context was learning English as a foreign language (EFL). The concerns of the present study on mobile-assisted extensive reading were practical. The present study was concerned with the effects of mobile-assisted extensive reading on engaging participants in online reading activities, on developing participants' reading skills specific to reading material and on participants' perceiving online extensive reading. Findings of the present study would provide empirical evidence to answer the three efficiency questions that preoccupy those language teachers who are suspicious of mobile integration in language classrooms.

2. Background studies

2.1. Offline ERPs

Extensive reading (ER), defined by various authors, can be understood as a reading pedagogy in which language learners freely choose reading material of their interests and, in a rather fast pace, they read large quantities of material for enjoyment, information and comprehension (Grabe & Stoller, 2002, p. 259). Theoretically, ER found its support from the input hypothesis (Krashen, 1982), which holds that learners acquire a second language (L2) by “understanding the language that contains structure a bit beyond *their* current level of competence ... with the help of context or extra-linguistic information” (p. 21; italics by the author). Evidences in L2 showed that learners are able to acquire vocabulary and grammar by reading extensively in the target language (Krashen, 1982). Pedagogically, L2 learners in an extensive reading program learn how to read in a real-life situation: they are free to select what they enjoy reading and they read a great number of them for pleasure (Yamashita, 2008). For this pedagogical approach to L2 reading, Day and Bamford (2002) compiled ten principles for teaching extensive reading (Appendix A), which many previous studies and the present study adopted. From the viewpoint of ER, reading is viewed as an individual endeavor, described in Principle 8 in Day and Bamford's list, so books are not discussed in class. Many classroom teachers then engage learners in post-reading activities so that learners' comprehension, vocabulary acquisition and grammar learning can be checked (Arnold, 2009).

Two major areas that the pedagogy of extensive reading has contributed greatly are language learners' linguistic improvements and their affective promotion. The improvements of learner's language were centered on the reading ability. Reading comprehension (Nakanishi & Ueda, 2011; Tanaka & Stapleton, 2007; Yamashita, 2008), reading strategies (Nishino, 2007), and reading rate or speed (Bell, 2001; Iwahori, 2008; Tanaka & Stapleton, 2007) were reported improved after the treatment of ERPs. In terms of vocabulary acquisition, the learners' vocabulary size was enlarged in general (Pigada & Schmitt, 2006; Shin, 2003) and new words were learned faster in an extensive reading program (Horst, 2005). Other linguistic benefits also included grammatical competence (Yang, 2001) and writing fluency (Tsang, 1996); and, most impressively, reading extensively enhanced L2 learners' overall language proficiency (Bell, 2001; Iwahori, 2008). In addition to linguistic improvements, learners' affective promotion was also reported. Asraf and Ahmad (2003) and Hitosugi and Day (2004), for example, found their L2 learners changed their attitudes toward reading and felt that they were motivated to read in L2 after an ERP. Tanaka and Stapleton (2007) found that their Japanese EFL teenagers, assigned to the graded readers group (ERP), enjoyed extensive reading because graded readers offered interesting topics matching their proficiency level to reduce their workload.

2.2. Online ERPs

While most ERPs studies were conducted on printed papers, few reported on results of using “authentic, online” material for reading instructions (Arnold, 2009; pp. 344–345). Four studies on online ERPs were related to the present study.

Sun (2003) constructed a reading website, Extensive Reading Online (ERO), on which various online tools, including online dictionary, concordance, annotation, test generator and others, were available for EFL college students to post web-based reading material and learn reading strategies. With college learners' positive feedback, Sun concluded that the ERO could enhance “learner autonomy, independence, and long-term reading interest” (p. 446). The significance of Sun's pioneer study on extensive reading lies in the use of online resources freely selected by EFL college learners and the integration of the online platform where those learners could share reading material that they found interesting and informative.

Pino-Silva (2006), based on the results of a 10-year-old paper-based Extensive Reading (p-ER) in Venezuela, implemented the web-based extensive reading program (w-ER) to guide EFL adults to learn English and to promote them to become life-long autonomous learners. The EFL adults, after reading sufficient authentic online material that the program collected for them, reported that they increased their vocabulary power greatly, benefited from teachers' assistance on the online platform, and acquired useful skills in web-based learning. Similar to Sun's study discussed above, Pino-Silva emphasized the importance of the acquisition of self-efficacy relative to extensive reading.

Using a qualitative method, Arnold's (2009) online extensive reading program in German for eight advanced learners featured learners' free selection of authentic online reading material (Principle 3 in Day & Bamford, 2002) outside of class. The analyses of the learners' self-reports on seven individual online sessions found that the online reading program not only successfully improved the learners' reading ability but also increased their motivation for reading and raised their confidence to read in German. The advanced learners stressed the importance of reading for pleasure and demonstrated learner independence in the online reading program.

Opposite to Arnold's free-selection online reading program, Huang's survey study (2013a) prepared strictly selected downloadable e-books, including 77 non-audio and 36 audio, for the target EFL college learners. Following Sun's platform design, Huang's online self-study website also provided the learners with referencing tools, submission function and discussion forum. The results of learning journals, surveys and interviews showed that the EFL college learners gave positive feedback to the program, in particular, the functions of journal submission, discussion posts and statistics for downloaded e-books. They also agreed that their linguistic ability improved and their sense of learning community was fostered in the program.

Consistent with the findings of their paper-based versions discussed above, online extensive reading programs were found efficient in that adult learners of English improved their overall reading skills (Arnold, 2009; Huang, 2013a; Sun, 2003) and vocabulary knowledge

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