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Cultivating a Reading Habit: Silent Reading at School

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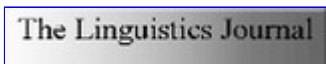
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**Abstract**  
In most EFL settings, reading is seen as related to language subjects only. Students rarely read for pleasure; they think that reading is part of the textbook-related activity. With the implementation of an extensive reading scheme and school-based assessment, students in Hong Kong begin to see reading a little differently. This paper investigates the effectiveness of a new whole-school approach reading scheme in a Chinese school in Hong Kong. Students read at least 15 minutes every school day in either Chinese or English. Results of the questionnaires and the interviews, conducted for teachers and students, indicate that teachers and students see the role of reading differently. It concludes that junior level students who have less public examination pressure enjoy reading better than the senior students. The paper informs educators in non-Asian countries as well; they will know why students from Asia are reluctant to read. The implication is that when reading has not been formed as a habit, holding up a book will be considered just part of school work.

**Key Words:** Reading, silent reading, extensive reading

**Background**  
In many EFL situations, English is, more often than not, learnt as an examination subject rather than a tool for life. The reason is plain: most students need not use English outside the language classroom. Although lessons on ordering in the restaurant or asking for directions have been taught, students never apply the use of skills because the real need is not there off campus. This phenomenon is acute in many Asian cities. In Hong Kong, for example, students attend about eight 40-

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minute English lessons every week, a little bit more than 60 minutes per school day, if the teacher is efficient and is free from conducting class business: disciplining, collecting books, etc. In 114 out of 400+ secondary schools in Hong Kong, students enjoy a better English environment because these schools are considered English medium of instruction (EMI) schools. That means all other subjects, except Chinese language, are taught in English in terms of lectures, textbooks and homework, by mostly local Chinese. The rest of the secondary schools are Chinese medium of instruction (CMI) schools where lessons are conducted mostly in Cantonese (the local dialect), and occasionally Putonghua (the national language).

Despite the tongues, language teachers still maintain that languages are the basis of communication, be it spoken or written. A new senior secondary syllabus has been in place; an oral component has been implemented for the Chinese language in the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination, the public examinations in Hong Kong for all grade 11 students. The oral component of the English language in the same examination has been strengthened; it now carries a total of 30% of the subject marks. Half of this 30% comes from a school-based assessment, where teachers evaluate students at least four times when they are in grades 10 and 11. Students are supposed to read/watch four texts: print fiction, print non-fiction, film fiction, and film documentary (HKEAA, 2005). At the assessment, students should report on the materials read/watched, and interact with students who read/watched the same materials at the level. All these are done in order to encourage students to read more and to expose themselves more in the language.

Aside from the change of the language syllabus, there have been changes in other subjects, mathematics, chemistry, etc. where open-ended questions are now given. Students are asked to write a short essay explaining a phenomenon or situation, rather than plainly giving numerical answers. All these involve language skills, in addition to the technical knowledge of the subjects. Language issues are the concerns not only for language teachers, but also content subject teachers. Seeing the change, many schools in Hong Kong find it important to cultivate students' reading habits, using a whole-school approach, so that students' communication skills will improve. Schools strengthen the Silent Reading Activities (SRA), Extensive Reading Scheme (ERS), and class library ideas for junior students in language lessons, to a much larger scale which involves all teachers and students of the school. This paper investigates how a school responded to the change of teaching and examination syllabuses; and it implemented a morning reading session activity, soliciting assistance from most teaching staff. Reading in the morning at school carried a strong message to students that the school intended to boost overall language proficiency, not only through language teachers, but through all subject teachers with every means, including making slight adjustment to the time table. Past research focused on the importance of reading, but seldom considered its practicality.

This research permitted students to voice their opinion on the implementation of the reading scheme, as well as their progress. The purpose of the investigation was to find out how fruitful students find the morning reading session. The writer's assumption is: students would endeavor to read because the session was scheduled in the time table, but it would be difficult for students to see the links between leisure reading and school work. The findings are encouraging and will provide a model for schools needing such reforms. Educators outside Asia will also understand better why some Asian teenagers do

not enjoy reading books for pleasure.

#### Literature review

The term Uninterrupted Sustained Silent Reading (USSR) was introduced in 1960. Though terminologies vary, basic rules are the same across SSR practices (McCracken, 1971). Students read a lot of easy, enjoyable books (Helgesen, 2005). Bomford and Day (2004) suggest that easy books build speed and reading fluency. Extensive reading seems to support all four skills, even speaking and listening, because of the increased exposure to English vocabulary and discourse. McCracken (1971) states that no student, able or remedial, should be chided for reading an easy book. A student in an SSR class wrote in his journal that in the past, the only time he read was when it was required and he knew that he would be tested on the material (Valeri-Gold, 1995). With SSR, books were read for pleasure.

Success of SSR depends on the support of the principal, teachers, and other staff members in the school. Wiesendanger and Birlem (1984) hold the view that the attitude of the teacher toward SSR may be very significant. Teachers' enthusiasm or lack of interest in reading is easily communicated to students. Creating a quiet, relaxing and non-evaluative classroom environment is also a key element for successful SSR (Chow and Chou, 2000). Campbell (1989) argues that what the teacher does during and after the reading time is crucial. Teachers have the opportunity to demonstrate their interest in and enjoyment of reading by providing a role model of silent reading. Coley (1983) reported that over the six-month period of the project, gains in reading achievement occurred in both 7th and 8th grades.

Although there have been successful studies (see Herbert, 1987; Dwyer and Reed, 1989), an earlier suggestion was made by Wiesendanger and Birlem (1984): while the effect of SSR on word recognition and reading comprehension appears inconclusive, the relationship between SSR and positive reading attitudes seems clearly established in most studies. Wiesendanger and Birlem (1984) observed only after a period of at least six months, improvement may be seen. From her experience of implementing a successful high school SSR program, Ozburn (1995) agrees that it will take over four months for an SSR program to show results. She points out that the time may be longer. It takes many students four or five months to become hooked on books.

Fielding, Wilson, and Anderson (1986) agree that reading the wide range of topics in trade books can provide insights into different kinds of people, interpersonal relationships, and moral dilemmas that can be difficult to learn from real life. Grubaugh (1986) stresses that students learn reading is laughing, crying, adventuring, exploring, or finding out how to do things. Students will discover reading as a worthwhile pastime and begin to develop an appreciation of the magic of books. In doing so, Valeri-Gold (1995) incorporated SSR in her reading classes and found that the majority of students felt that SSR had a positive influence on their attitudes about reading. To gain the best results, Campbell (1989) suggests that teachers should comment upon, talk about books they read. Students in class will become eager to do the same. "If we want our adolescent students to grow to appreciate literature, the first step is allowing them to exert ownership and choose the literature they will read" (Atwell, 1987, p. 161).

Because of the differences seen in the previous studies, and the need of hearing students' voice in the reading activity, the present research was conducted. It is assumed that although teachers and students both believe reading is important for education, they hold very different attitudes as to how

reading sessions should be conducted. Allowing students to select their own reading materials will enhance students' motivation to read. Implementing a program is to allow students to cultivate a reading habit on their own. To carry out this study, the design of research methods is provided below.

### Procedures

The morning reading session was implemented in early-September 2004 in a Chinese medium of instruction secondary school in Hong Kong. Every school day, all students (grades 7 to 13, age 12 to 18) read for at least 20 minutes in class, under the supervision of the class teacher, before the first lesson. Students chose their own books according to the designated language of the month; they chose English or Chinese books in alternate months. Class teachers were asked to role model at the same time, as far as possible.

Students kept their reading progress in a log book. At the end of each 20 minutes, students jotted down some useful phrases learnt in the log book; in every fortnight, students wrote brief comments on the portion read in a few sentences in the same log book. The class teacher would collect the log books at the end of each month, and have an overall idea on the class reading progress. This is to make sure students were reading progressively; the checking on the log book did not affect grades on student report cards.

At the end of September 2004, all 36 class teachers were asked to invite any three students (108 students in total) to fill out a 20-item questionnaire in Chinese (Appendix 1); the 36 teachers filled out the same questionnaire as well. The questionnaire had been set on a modified Likert-scale (1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=agree, 4=strongly agree); readers responded to the reading activity, what they had learnt, their reading attitudes, and how the activity promoted learning. The results were compared against the same questionnaire conducted in late-May 2005 to 27 classes (grades 11 and 13 classes had left school for sitting for public examinations in March 2005), with five additional items on the possible improvement over the year. Instead of three, four students in each class were chosen randomly to fill out the May questionnaire (108 students in total); teachers also responded to the same questionnaire (27 teachers in total). All questionnaires were tallied and analyzed.

Evaluations were done through four instruments. The log book served as a continuous qualitative comment source from students. Upon completion of the questionnaire, students were asked to respond freely to other aspects not addressed in the questionnaire. They were invited randomly to attend comment sessions where open-ended questions were asked regarding the activity and their language attitudes. The interview sessions were audio-taped; the relevant materials were transcribed for reference. Teachers' observation contributed to the qualitative input of the writing up of this paper.

### Analysis and discussions on the questionnaire results

The results of the questionnaires were tallied in five categories: all respondents, students only, junior form students only, senior form students only, and teachers only. It is surprising to see that the rankings of Q1 and Q2 in the five categories are almost identical; this is especially true to the five items most agreed and disagreed (see Table 1).

| Respondents | β agreed              | Items | disagreed à        |
|-------------|-----------------------|-------|--------------------|
| All (Q1)    | 9, 16, 18, 2, 1       |       | 14, 17, 13, 12, 11 |
| All (Q2)    | 9, 18, 16, 2, (1, 15) |       | 14, 11, 12, 13, 17 |

|                   |                        |                      |
|-------------------|------------------------|----------------------|
| Junior (Q1)       | 9, 15, 18, 16, 19      | 14, 13, 12, 17, 11   |
| Junior (Q2)       | 9, 15, 16, 18, (2, 19) | 14, 11, 12, 13, 17   |
| Senior (Q1)       | 18, 9, 2, 1, 10        | 11, 13, 17, 12, 5    |
| Senior (Q2)       | 18, 9, 2, 1, 10        | (5, 11), 17, 13, 12  |
| All students (Q1) | 18, 9, 15, 2, 16       | 5, 13, 12, 17, 11    |
| All students (Q2) | 9, 18, 15, 2, 16       | 5, 11, 12, 13, 17    |
| Teachers (Q1)     | 16, (1, 5), 4, (8, 9)  | 10, 11, 13, 12, 17   |
| Teachers (Q2)     | 16, 23, 4, (1, 5)      | 10, 11, (12, 13), 17 |

Table 1: The rankings of the top five and the bottom agreed items  
(Item numbers in brackets indicate same ranking)

Most respondents agreed that students should choose their own reading materials (mostly fiction) and read quietly for at least 15 minutes every day, in addition to the reading they do on their own (items 9, 16, 18, 2, 1, 15, see Table 2). However, preferences in other areas varied. Senior form students believed that teachers should prepare more loan reading materials for them (item 10); junior form students thought that reading sessions were generally useful (item 19). Teachers thought that students could concentrate more on reading in the morning under supervision; students gradually developed reading habits; they also believed reading made people more cultured (items 5, 4, 8, 23).

| Items   | 53 Counts |
|---|-----------|
| 9. Students choose their own reading materials.                       | 9         |
| 16. I think reading sessions should be at least 15 minutes.           | 8         |
| 18. Students should schedule reading time on their own.               | 8         |
| 2. Students bring their own reading materials.                        | 7         |
| 1. Students read quietly in the reading session.                      | 6         |
| 15. I like to read fiction in reading sessions.                       | 5         |
| 10. Teachers should prepare more loan reading materials for students. | 2         |
| 5. Readers concentrate more in the morning.                           | 2         |
| 4. I think reading sessions allow students to develop reading habits. | 2         |
| 19. I think reading sessions are useful for me.                       | 2         |
| 8. Students in this class need teacher's supervision while reading.   | 1         |
| 23. Reading makes people more cultured.                               | 1         |

Table 2: Most frequently-appeared top five agreed items in Q1 and Q2 (53 counts)

In most primary schools and junior secondary schools, there is a class library in the classroom; about 100 books at the level are stocked in the classroom for student's perusal. In a way, students are used to getting recommended materials from the school. This explains why junior form students voted for confidence in item 19. Although all students brought their own books for the morning reading sessions, senior form students wanted more suggested titles or even loan materials from the teachers (see item 10 below). This phenomenon suggested that students read, but they might not be able to choose their

own materials. The situation is more so for older teenagers for they have to face public examinations. Studying for the examinations already takes up much of their time; if and when they find time to read, they want the materials to be ready, rather than spending time exploring the readability of the books.

Teachers' opinions on *what*, *how*, and *when* regarding reading were a bit conservative and were not shared among students in the top five items. This may reflect that there was a difference of the daily habits between the two generations. Teachers believed that turning in and getting up early was essential for a healthy life. However, most students at the voluntary interviews expressed that it was not at all possible. Many of them slept for less than six hours per night; they sleep between 1am and 7am. It was easy to picture the dozing off situation in some of the classrooms for the morning reading sessions (see item 5 below). A few students found it easier to do leisure reading before bedtime.

| Items   | 50 Counts |
|---|-----------|
| 11. Students record reading progress properly.                        | 10        |
| 12. Students write reading reflections properly.                      | 10        |
| 13. Reading materials should be related in lessons.                   | 10        |
| 17. I think reading sessions should be scheduled in lunch time.       | 10        |
| 5. Readers concentrate more in the morning.                           | 4         |
| 14. I like to read shorter materials in reading sessions.             | 4         |
| 10. Teachers should prepare more loan reading materials for students. | 2         |

Table 3: Most frequently-appeared bottom five agreed items in Q1 and Q2 (50 counts)

Respondents reflected very strongly on the recording of reading progress. In all sets of questionnaires, none of the respondents thought that students had recorded properly; neither did they think that reading materials should be related to lessons, nor scheduled the reading sessions in lunch time (items 11, 12, 13, 17). Contrarily to the teachers' belief, students did not think they concentrated better in the morning for reading (item 5); this was more so among senior students. Junior students also disagreed that they liked reading shorter materials. This is perhaps partly contributed to the stocks of the class library where novellas and novels are stocked, rather than short prose passages or short stories.

The very small changes seen in Q1 and Q2 in the same respondent groups indicate that readers have a set of expectations, and the expectations become beliefs. However, the beliefs may not be shared between teachers and students. The assumptions of assigned workload and the actual workload may not be the same; so teachers do not have a clear picture on how students use their time. This is more so with the senior students who have a dire need to prepare for the public examinations; their reading habits are different from the years when they were in primary or junior secondary.

| Items 21-25 | All | Junior | Senior | All students | Teachers |
|-------------|-----|--------|--------|--------------|----------|
| Highest     | 23  | 21     | 21     | 21           | 23       |
|             | 21  | 23     | 23     | 22           | 21       |
|             | 22  | 22     | 22     | 23           | 22       |

|        |    |    |    |    |    |
|--------|----|----|----|----|----|
|        | 24 | 24 | 24 | 24 | 24 |
| Lowest | 25 | 25 | 25 | 25 | 25 |

21. Reading in Chinese is helpful for learning non-language subjects.
22. Reading in English is helpful for learning non-language subjects.
23. Reading makes people more cultured.
24. Chinese reading improves students' Chinese communication skills.
25. English reading improves students' English communication skills.

Table 4: The rankings of the newly-added items in Q2

Five items were added in Q2; none of them made the top or bottom five lists except item 23: Reading makes people more cultured (ranked 2nd) with the teachers. Respondents are not sure about how the reading sessions help them in their non-language subjects, and hardly do they see the relevance of how reading improves one's communication skills in languages. This phenomenon probably is due to the fact that most people, including teachers, see languages as subjects rather than communication tools. For years, students had to read designated passages for the Chinese language public examinations (this practice will be ceased in 2007). For English examinations, students are trained to tackle different tasks with examination strategies, rather than responding to questions with daily communication skills.

In addition, pleasure reading had long been associated with language subjects. Book reports were done as part of the assignments in Chinese and English lessons only; social or science subject teachers seldom asked students to do pleasure reading and write book reports. Because of this, students, as well as some non-language subject teachers, failed to see the relationship between reading and non-language subjects. While Chinese and English subjects required students to write with proper language structures and grammar items, the requirement was more lax in other subjects. Oral examinations were exclusive for the language subjects. Therefore, many respondents failed to link the dots between reading and communicative skills with non-language subjects.

More than half of the junior student respondents provided comments in Q1 and Q2; some excerpts have been loosely translated as follows:

- *I think we need more reading time, about 40 minutes.*
- *I think Chinese books are more interesting than English books.*
- *I would like teachers to tell me what books to read.*
- *I hope my science teachers will introduce some books to me.*
- *English books are too difficult.*
- *I cannot finish reading a book in a month. I don't want to start the English book at once.*
- *Recording reading progress and writing reflections are useless.*

Teachers also provided some comments:

- *Junior form students responded better in morning reading sessions.*
- *Most students bring their own books; those without books are those who don't care about their education.*

- *Students cannot complete their reading records properly.*
- *Students are quieter when they see the teacher reads as well.*
- *Sometimes, I had to use the reading time to do housekeeping, for example, collecting money for school functions.*
- *Students seem to be more interested in reading Chinese books than English books.*
- *Perhaps the school should consider asking students to read English books in the first term, and Chinese the second. The language switching poses some problems for the forgetful students.*

#### Interview summary

A total of seven students (2 grade 7, 1 grade 8, 2 grade 9, and 2 grade 10) volunteered to attend the interview session. The questions asked were loosely based on the findings and attempted to follow-up and clarify points made. Students' comments confirmed the findings above: (1) that reading was only associated with the language subjects; (2) that the two languages were examination subjects; (3) that reading in English took up too much time; (4) that long stories were for book report purposes; (5) that some classmates pretended to read; therefore they failed to complete their reading entries.

Three teachers (1 Chinese, 1 English, and 1 Physics) attended an informal interview; they were more positive than the students. They believed that reading did students good, but it would take time before teachers and students see the results. However, the Chinese teacher commented that she saw a larger range of vocabulary in the class she was then teaching, comparing with the one she taught the year before (both upper intermediate). She sometimes saw sophisticated expressions used in students' essays. She asked the students and was told that the expressions were learnt from the reading session books. The teacher said that this encouraged the whole class.

The English teacher commented that her students knew the importance of learning the language, but they just could not see the relationship between reading story books and the English subject. Students preferred to read English newspapers rather than fiction. The Physics teacher commented similarly. He confessed that when he read with the students in the second term, he felt that students concentrated more; he was not able to read with the students during the same reading session in the first term because of the overwhelming of clerical and administrative work for the class.

#### Conclusions

The absence of the two levels of students who took part in the public examination rather than filling out Q2 might distort the findings. However, the two levels were simply too busy preparing for the public examinations. In addition, the arrangement of reading pleasure books in two languages in alternate months might upset students' reading schedule. A few students complained to their teachers that when they were forced to read in the language they did not choose, they lost interest in the book at once. However, it is agreed that students should have a balance of language input.

Although the school had only put the whole school approach reading scheme into practice for a year, members of the school seem positive, except for the writing of the reading entries. The school has reported that students should spend time reading, rather than writing. As long as students continue



to read, the writing training will be done in other tasks. With the government-mandated Extensive Reading Scheme and the newly-implemented School-based Assessment in September 2005 which focuses heavily on reading skills and discussing materials from pleasure books, students have to change their mindset and start reading for everyday knowledge. Students in the junior level will benefit further from the morning reading session; a reading habit will be formed sooner. It is the school's intention that students should read on their own.

This paper concludes that students find it fruitful reading during school time, because it allows them to cultivate a reading habit, and they can find time to do leisure reading when they grow older. Although there are different expectations of reading between teachers and students, they agree that reading promotes language proficiency. Reading indicates the motivation level of learners; it increases readers' vocabulary and language pattern power. With better knowledge, readers may be able to communicate with others with better ease, and in more sophisticated structures. A mandatory reading session may not work such miracles overnight. However, a habit may be formed when teenagers are doing it under supervision. Teenagers may enjoy reading better, at home or abroad; teachers around the world will also appreciate the environment some Asian students are in as they grow up, and provide proper reading strategies for them.

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Appendix 1 (see PDF file)



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