ENHANCING ENGLISH LEARNING AUTONOMY THROUGH READING ACTIVITIES

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ABSTRACT

In 2010, a project of "An Experimental Study of English Curriculum Reform" has been initiated in New Taipei City. It spotlighted the needs of reforming elementary schools' English education in Taiwan. Therefore, this study aimed to echo the spirit of the project. Most research studies noted that read aloud was superior to silent reading in primary EFL classrooms in Taiwan; nevertheless, other studies (Wang, 2003; Parr and Maguiness, 2005) have provided a methodology to bring talk into silent reading. Therefore, the purpose of this article intended to compare the influences of two different storytelling instructions: read aloud and silent reading along with group discussion on vocabulary acquisition, learning attitudes, and learner autonomy at two G4 classes in Taiwan. There were 35 fourth graders spending 40 minutes per week in a semester to experience the storytelling activities. The results of this study indicated that both storytelling modes (read aloud and silent reading) had a positive influence on vocabulary acquisition and reading attitudes. The other important finding was that students' learning autonomy levels were enhanced in both groups. It is hoped that the results of this study can provide a new facet of storytelling for researchers and give pedagogical inspiration to encourage EFL teachers to explore new instructions of storytelling in the language classroom to continue this valuable dialogue.

Keywords: learner autonomy, storytelling, read aloud, silent reading, English proficiency

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Introduction

With the trend of globalization, English education in elementary schools has been organized and followed by systematic official curriculum guidelines. From 2010, "An Experimental Study of English Curriculum Reform" has been initiated in New Taipei City. The major objectives include increasing learning hours and reforming English curriculum through storytelling, role-play, cartoons, and readers' theater with the hope that students can learn for fun without any tests and pressure. Due to the reasons above, the storytelling, a classic and educational tool, was used by the researcher. It aims not only to create a harmonious environment to facilitate English learning but also to explore the beauty of literacy and to raise students' learning autonomy, attitude, and vocabulary acquisition.

Reading stories to elementary school students elevates learning motivation and provides opportunities of language learning as well. Students are thus able to be exposed to literature atmosphere and feel the variations of vocabulary (Bishop and Kimball, 2006; Miley, 2009). However, most studies in relation to storytelling described the correlations between storytelling and learning motivation, attitudes and English proficiency (e.g. Chang, 2008; Chen, 2008; Joseph, 2001). Few studies investigated the influence of storytelling instructions on EFL students' reading ability and learning autonomy.

Read aloud and SSR (Sustain Silent Reading) were two common used reading modes by English teachers in primary level in order to guide students into reading passages. The comparison of the effects of these two reading modes on comprehension was equivocal (Fuchs and Maxwell, 1988; McCallum et al., 2004). For example, comprehension became significantly higher when students read passages aloud, as opposed to silently (Rowell, 1976). On the contrary, other research claimed that SSR was superior to reading aloud especially after the sufficient duration (Armbruster, 1991). Students formed a reading habit and acted as autonomous readers.

In Taiwanese EFL contexts, most studies ranging from elementary to senior high schools only reasoned either word recognition or proficiency and attitudes of two reading modes (Cheng, 2008; Hsu, 2007). Those studies seldom addressed elementary students' autonomy levels and in-depth research on the effects of vocabulary acquisition, and attitude was still translucent. Moreover, research results rarely discussed the effectiveness of providing discussion session after SSR.

Some studies have considered that group discussion was an effective instruction. For instance, peer-led literature discussions were found to be productive forums for students to develop their comprehension strategies (Berne and Clark, 2006). In a qualitative study conducted by Maguiness (2005), it indicated that bringing talk into SSR could encourage students to read and teachers enjoyed and found valuable. Consequently, those studies inspired the researcher of this study to remove the "silent" from SSR and to integrate another instruction--group discussion in an attempt to answer the following questions:

1. Are there any differences in vocabulary acquisition and English proficiency between the group receiving read aloud instruction and the group receiving silent reading along with group discussion?

2. Which reading mode, read aloud or silent reading along with group discussion, will enhance the levels of English learning autonomy?

3. What are students' attitudes toward two storytelling instructions in this study?

Literature Review

Instructions of storytelling

Storytelling was a popular and classic method of education and entertainment for centuries. Even the on-line programs or e-books have become a trend nowadays, storytelling is still a vital teaching tool to motivate children's learning interest and build their self-confidence.

Numerous studies have indicated read aloud and SSR (Sustain Silent Reading) were two useful reading skills to enhance reading ability of children (e.g. Chall, Jacobs, and Baldwin, 1990; Krashen, 2004). The follow-up group discussions could also provide advantages, such as developing higher level thinking skill, improving students reading comprehension, fostering students' positive attitudes towards reading activities, and promoting a verbal interaction with peers (Gillard, 1996). Moreover, group discussion was further found helpful to facilitate learners' intellective growth (Wang, 2003), and to accomplish a range of goals (Chinn, Anderson, and Waggoner, 2001; Evans, 2002).

Effects of storytelling instructions

Storytelling instructions and learning autonomy

The concept of autonomous learning rose to prominence with new views of education. Many researchers believed that autonomous learners have better ability to decide what knowledge to be acquired, learning techniques to be used, the time to be consumed and the activities to be engaged (Benson, and Voller 1997; Sheerin, 1997). In addition, effective learning outcomes appear among learners when they are active in the learning process and willing to take responsibility for their learning (Nunan, 1997; Sherrin, 19977). Little (1991) also addressed learning can be more focused and purposeful for students when they were involved in autonomous learning. In terms of the method enhancing learner autonomy, it is reported that students need teachers or peers to provide a certain amount of coaching and encouragement to promote autonomy especially in reading instructions (Matsubara and Lehtinen, 2007). That is, with proper interaction with teachers and peers, students might be able to follow the steps to control the learning process. Finally, learning autonomy level would be raised.

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Storytelling and learning attitudes

Storytelling is an enjoyable reading activity for young learners. In addition, storytelling was proved in relation to positive attitudes toward language learning whether in English as a first language context or in ESL or EFL contexts (Cheng, 2008; Davis, 1998). For instance, many studies have supported that storytelling activities increase one's learning attitudes in the first language setting (e.g. Davis, 1998; Joseph, 2001). The similar results were also found in Taiwanese contexts (Chen, 2008; Cheng, 2008). Their results indicated that students became more interested in English learning and English picture books after engaging in storytelling activities.

Method

Participants

The participants in this study were 35 forth graders from two classes in an elementary school in Taipei city. There were 14 boys and 21 girls. The participants were divided into two experimental groups – one was the reading aloud group, and the other group was implemented silent reading along with group discussion. For the silent reading group, students were divided into six smaller groups with similar English proficiency. Each class participated in a forty-minute class per week in the morning.

Measurement Instruments

The measurement instruments included the STYLE standardized test, pre/ post-vocabulary tests and pre/ post- questionnaires. In order to find out the English proficiency level of the participants in the two classes, STYLE standardized test was administered. Besides, vocabulary quizzes related to the materials were conducted before and after the experiment to monitor students' progress.

As for the questionnaires, two major parts were included: English learning autonomy scale and English learning attitudes scale. English learning autonomy scale was adapted from

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Üstunluoglu's (2009) version and contained three parts: students' responsibilities, students' abilities, and students' activities. English learning attitude scale was adapted from Hsu (2009) and was designed to find out students' attitudes toward reading materials, reading activities, reading time, and storytelling instructions.

Overview of the Procedures

This was a quasi-experimental study. Participants were chosen from two fourth grade classes in an elementary school in Taipei City. Both classes were experimental groups; hence, two classes received vocabulary pre-test, and surveys to investigate their learning autonomy and learning attitudes before the experiment started. In addition, the STYLE standardized test was administered at the same time in order to see if there were differences in English proficiency between the two groups. When the experiment came to finish, the two groups were given the same vocabulary test and the same questionnaires so as to examine the acquisition of vocabulary and the influences of two kinds of storytelling instructions on learner autonomy and attitudes.

Pilot Study

Upon implementing the draft of English Learning Autonomy Scale and English Learning Attitude Scale, the researcher randomly invited 51 fourth graders to participate. Among 51 students, 27 students filled out the questionnaire for read aloud group and 24 students filled out the questionnaire for silent reading group. The English Learning Autonomy Scale in the pilot study showed .78 internal consistency reliability (Cronbach's alpha, n=27) for read aloud group, and .77 (n=24) internal consistency coefficient for silent reading group. On the other hand, the English Learning Attitude Scale in the pilot study showed .94 internal consistency reliability (Cronbach's alpha, n=27) for read aloud group, and Cronbach's alpha is .87 for silent reading along group (n=24).

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Results

Research Question 1:

Are there any differences in vocabulary acquisition and English proficiency between the group receiving read aloud instruction and the group receiving silent reading along with group discussion?

According to Table 1, the mean score of the vocabulary pre-test for read aloud group was 47.06 (SD=31.45), and mean score was 44.12 (SD=31.95) for the group of silent reading along with group discussion. The statistical results revealed that there was no significant difference between those two groups on vocabulary acquisition in the pre-test (p=.66 >.05). After receiving storytelling instruction, the mean score of the vocabulary post-test was 70.69 (SD= 34.93) for read aloud group, and the mean score was 82.50 (SD=25.19) for silent reading group. The statistical results indicated there still was no significant difference between two experimental groups in the post-test (p=.50>.05) even though the gap was as large as 12 points.

Table 1.

Pre-test and Post-test of the Read Aloud Group and Silent Reading along with Group Discussion Group in Vocabulary Recognition

	Groups	N	M	SD	Mann-Whitney U	Wilcoxon W	Z	Exact Sig. [2*(1-tailed Sig.)]
Pre-test	RD	18	47.06	31.45	139.50	292.50	-.45	.66
	S+G	17	44.12	31.95				
Post-test	RD	18	70.69	34.93	132.50	303.50	-.71	.50
	S+G	17	82.50	25.19				

Note. RD refers to read aloud group. S+G refers to silent reading and group discussion group.

In order to control the level of English reading proficiency in both groups before the experiment, a standardized test (STYLE) was conducted. The mean scores between two groups were close before the intervention. They are 44.72 for the read aloud group and 45.29 for the

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silent reading group (see Table 2). The statistic result between two groups did not show a significant difference existing among students before the experiment (z=-.03, p>.05).

In addition, students progressed after the instruction. The mean score of the reading proficiency post-test in read aloud group was 55.86 with a standard deviation was 35.52 while the mean score was 57.84 with a standard deviation was 24.62 in silent reading along group. The silent reading group performed slightly better than read aloud group. Moreover, the change of the deviations between the two groups is worth to be addressed. The two deviations were alike before the intervention; however, the difference between two deviations became large in the posttest. The learning gap in silent reading group became less than that of read aloud group. Nonetheless, the statistical result didn't suggest a significant difference in reading proficiency between those two experimental groups after the treatment (z= -.22, *p*>.05).

Table 2.

Students' Performance in the Groups of Read Aloud and Silent Reading along with Group Discussion on STYLE Pre-test and Post test

	Groups	N	M	SD	Mann-Whitney U	Wilcoxon W	Z	Exact Sig. [2*(1-tailed Sig.)]
Pre-test	RD	18	49.69	31.11	152.00	353.00	-.03	.99
	S+G	17	50.33	30.96				
Post-test	RD	18	55.86	35.52	146.50	317.50	-.22	.83
	S+G	17	57.84	24.62				

Note. RD refers to read aloud group. S+G refers to silent reading and group discussion group.

Research Question 2:

Which reading mode, read aloud or silent reading along with group discussion will enhance students' learning autonomy levels?

To investigate the autonomy levels of two groups, nonparametric two related sample test was conducted. Significant results were found for students' self-perceived abilities (pre-m=3.50,

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post-m=3.94, p<.05) in read aloud group and students' responsibilities (pre-m=1.82, post-m=1.66, p<.01) in silent reading group. Students in read aloud group became more confident to evaluate and identify their learning weaknesses when the experiment came to the end. In contrast, students in silent reading group showed higher level of willingness to take responsibilities and not surrender most of responsibilities to teachers after the silent reading instruction. However, students' learning autonomy levels of two groups on others subscales didn't reveal significant difference after the storytelling instruction, as detailed in Table 3.

Table 3.

Nonparametric Two Related Sample Test of the Read Aloud Group and Silent Reading along with Group Discussion Group in English Learning Autonomy

Groups	Subscales	Questionnaires	M	Z	Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)
RD	Responsibilities	Pre	1.72	-.64	.52
		Post	1.64		
	Abilities	Pre	3.50	-2.03	.04*
		Post	3.94		
	Activities	Pre	2.76	-1.11	.27
		Post	2.76		
	Total	Pre	2.64	-.33	.74
		Post	2.71		
S + G	Responsibilities	Pre	1.82	-2.61	.01**
		Post	1.66		
	Abilities	Pre	3.18	-1.55	.88
		Post	3.19		
	Activities	Pre	3.04	-.40	.69
		Post	2.98		
	Total	Pre	2.67	.00	1.00
		Post	2.67		

Note. RD refers to read aloud group. S+G refers to silent reading and group discussion group.
*$p<.05.$$*p<.01$

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Research Question 3:

What are students' attitudes toward two storytelling instructions in this study?

Read Aloud Group

One-sample T test was conducted to investigate students' English learning attitudes toward reading materials, reading activities, reading time and storytelling instructions. The means and standard deviations of read aloud group are illustrated in Table 4. The mean score of whole questionnaire was 3.13 (p=.000) in a 5-point Likert Scale. Besides, the mean scores of four subscales were 3.09 (p=.011), 3.28 (p=.000), 3.01 (p=.002) and 3.08 (p=.002) respectively. The results also yielded significant attitude levels. In other words, students in the group of read aloud tended to have positive attitudes toward the reading activity after the experiment.

Table 4.

Students' English Learning Attitudes in Read Aloud Group

Subscales		Test Value=2.5				
	N	*M*	*SD*	*t value*	*Sig. (2-tailed)*	95% CI
Material	18	3.09	.87	2.838	.011*	〔.15, 1.03〕
Activities	18	3.28	.72	4.613	.000***	〔.43, 1.14〕
Time	18	3.01	.59	3.629	.002**	〔.21, .81〕
RD Instruction	18	3.08	.68	3.593	.002**	〔.24, .93〕
Total	18	3.13	.56	4.78	.000***	〔.35, .91〕

Note. RD refers to read aloud. CI refers to Confidence Interval.

*p< .05, **p<.01. ***p < .001.

Silent Reading along with Group Discussion

In silent reading group, students' learning attitudes were found positive after the experiment

as well (m=3.04, p<.01) (see Table 5). In addition, there was a statistical significant tendency on reading material (m=2.89, p<.05), reading activities (m=3.08, p<.01), reading time (m=3.16, p<.01) and silent reading along with group discussion instruction (m=3.25, p<.01) respectively. The results imply that, students in the group of silent reading also had positive attitudes toward the learning mode.

Table 5.

Students' English Learning Attitude in the Group of Silent Reading along with Group Discussion

Subscales	N	M	SD	Test Value=2.5		
				t value	*Sig. (2-tailed)*	95% CI
Material	17	2.89	.63	2.53	.022*	〔.06, .71〕
Activities	17	3.08	.71	3.36	.004**	〔.21, .95〕
Time	17	3.16	.67	4.04	.001**	〔.31, 1.00〕
S+G Instruction	17	3.25	.83	3.72	.002**	〔.32, 1.17〕
Total	17	3.04	.62	3.57	.003**	〔.22, .86〕

Note. S+G refers to silent reading and group discussion. CI refers to Confidence Interval.
*$p< .05$, **$p<.01$.*

Conclusion

It is hoped that this research will provide a valuable insight into storytelling instructions by investigating the vocabulary acquisition, English proficiency, learning autonomy and learning attitudes of elementary school students. Some studies in Taiwan have reported that read aloud activities would help students perform better than silent reading (e.g. Hsu, 2007; Lo, 2008). Therefore, one of the purposes of this study was to implement instruction after silent reading

activity to investigate the influences. The results revealed that students' vocabulary ability could be reinforced when silent reading coped with group discussion and the outcome could compete with read aloud instruction. The finding echoes Allen's (1983) claim. He noted that vocabulary learning must experience through three stages: hearing the word; seeing it, and saying it. Group discussion did facilitate students' vocabulary learning via hearing and saying the words while silent reading only could see the words.

According to the results of the English learning autonomy investigation, students in read aloud group demonstrated more confidence to choose learning materials, to set their learning objectives, and to identify their weakness than those students in the group of silent reading along with group discussion. The findings are consistent with similar research conducted by Üstunluoglu (2009) that students submitted almost all responsibility to teachers, whereas they perceive themselves capable in choosing materials, deciding how long to spend on each activity and evaluating learning. Moreover, the results in read aloud group seem to be consistent with the studies contributed by Littlewood (2000), and Chan et al. (2002). They have found that Asian students want to be active and independent in classes as European students though they perceive teachers like an authority figure. However, it is interesting to address here that students in silent reading group did not contribute their learning responsibilities to teachers after the experiment. They became more willing to take responsibilities. One of the possible reasons might be

because those students were more independent during the silent reading instruction. Unlike read aloud instruction, students followed teacher's guidance. What is more, group discussion was shown to enhance learner's autonomous level because group members must work together to make the decision and solve the problems by themselves. Above conditions highlighted the results that integrating students' responsibility into the language curriculum with a well-structured focus will promote students' learning autonomy levels.

Something is worth to be mentioned that both groups responded positively toward storytelling activities. Participants like storytelling instructions in their classroom and picture books. They also regarded that having morning storytelling and in-class activities facilitate their English learning.

Results of this study indicate that students with different learning backgrounds and styles need more opportunities to be inspired. Morning activity time would provide another chance to extend their learning hours. In addition, group discussion was another effective storytelling instruction, since learning gap could be shortened after implementing group discussion with silent reading. Moreover, as revealed in this study, students' responsibilities and students' abilities of autonomy could be raised by two storytelling instructions. In Taiwan, most English classrooms are teacher-centered; therefore, most students are passive learners. However, two storytelling instructions (read aloud, silent reading along with group discussion) offer feasible pedagogies to elicit the autonomous learning. Finally, positive attitudes were found toward storytelling instructions. It proved that storytelling activities and instructions could enhance students' English learning. When students have better positive attitudes toward instructions, they enjoyed learning more. In conclusion, the more they enjoyed storytelling activities and instructions, the more they improved.

For future researchers, it is suggested that studies need to be done with more participants in the future to obtain a more comprehensive view of the application of the storytelling instructions in an EFL context.

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