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Approaching Reading Development through Children's Literature: Insights from A Case Study of the University Student with Low English Proficiency

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports a case study exploring the feasibility of using children's literature for EFL (English as a Foreign Language) reading development. In the test-oriented educational environment, Taiwanese students tend to perceive reading as a task to pass tests. This study attempts to propose another path to facilitate the reading development, especially for those who are less proficient in English. Focusing on one university EFL learner with low English proficiency, the report provides in-depth description of her reading obstacles and progress while engaging in reading English children's literature. Findings of the reading sessions showed that the learner (1) improved the oral reading fluency, (2) acquired better awareness of pronunciation rules, and (3) developed better reading comprehension. The result of this case study suggests a supplementary path for the EFL reading development of similar learners: free voluntary reading of children's literature complemented with proper scaffolding and corresponding instruction tailored to individual learner's needs.

Keywords: Children's literature, EFL reading development, less proficient EFL learner.

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1.0 Introduction

The importance of reading in EFL learning cannot be overemphasized. However, as Arden-Close (1999) pointed out, many Taiwanese university students associate English reading solely with gaining vocabulary and learning important grammar patterns to pass exams. Such perception could be attributed to the exam-oriented English classes in their high school years. Many high school teachers rely heavily on the grammar translation method and view one of their key missions in terms of reading instruction as to expand students' vocabulary to help them pass the joint college entrance exam. Students are trained to memorize long and difficult vocabulary and to skim the reading text in order to answer the test items. Once they get into college, this test-driven attitude toward reading is reinforced

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because one of the graduation requirements of most universities is to pass the CEFR (Common European Framework) B1 level of an English proficiency test. Other than studying English textbooks for test purposes at school, the reading that students engaged in, if any, involves mostly English studying magazines and test preparation books for TOEIC, TOEFL, IELTS or other internationally recognized English language tests (Lee & Mallinder, 2012). The excessively test-centered attitude toward English reading is ubiquitous (Tien, 2015).

This longitudinal research attempts to shift students' focus from test preparation to reading itself. The proposed approach is to combine free voluntary reading with children's literature to enhance reading development of university students with low English proficiency.

2.0 Literature review

2.1 Extensive reading approach

Reading freely and extensively is a prominent factor contributing to literacy development for both first (L1) and second (L2) languages (Krashen, 1989; 2004). Extensive reading, advocated by Krashen (1985), offers language learners access to a variety of enjoyable reading materials that they can comprehend in a low anxiety context. Many extensive reading programs have shown promising benefits for L2 learners on various aspects including reading comprehension (Davis, 1995; Nation, 1997), reading fluency (Beglar, Hunt, & Kite, 2012; Bell, 2001; Kusanagi, 2004), vocabulary acquisition (Cho & Krashen, 1994; Horst, 2005; Pigada & Schmitt, 2006), grammatical knowledge (Elley & Mangubhai, 1983), reading habits (Asraf, & Ahmad, 2003), and confidence and positive attitudes toward reading (Camiciottoli, 2001; Constantino, 1995; Dupuy, Tse & Cook, 1996; Nash & Yuan, 1992; Stoeckel, Reagan, & Hann, 2012; Tien, 2015). It is worth investigating if extensive reading can serve as an option to help university students approaching reading aside from the test preparation angle.

Despite of the growing research findings confirming the positive effects of extensive reading, Cobb (2008) questioned the sufficiency of free reading itself on L2 acquisition and pointed out, "it is an idea that grossly misrepresents the problems faced by L2 readers who need to read to learn in their second languages. For these learners, an adequate second lexicon will not happen by itself; it will be provisioned through well-designed instruction including but not limited to reading. (p. 113)" Krashen (2004) had mentioned that there are limitations of extensive free reading and that adequate direct teaching and cautious use of grammar handbooks and dictionaries might help fill some of the gap to a certain extent. Many educators tend to value both implicit instruction (i.e., extensive reading) and explicit instruction (i.e., direct teaching) for L2 acquisition (Nation, 2001; Schmitt 2008). One area that deserves further investigation is what types of explicit instruction do the L2 learners need that complement their incidental language learning while engaged in free reading.

2.2 Reading material

Graded readers are the main type of reading materials used in current extensive reading programs. In essence, it provides simplified text that is written within strictly controlled vocabulary and grammar designed to facilitate orderly reading progression so that language learners would eventually make smooth transition to unsimplified authentic texts, such as novels and newspapers (Uden, Schmitt, & Schmitt, 2014). A longitudinal study by Uden, Schmitt, & Schmitt (2014), illustrated such transition of four motivated adult ESL learners with the upper-intermediate level of proficiency (CEFR B2 level). Despite an estimated gap of 3,000-4,000 word families between these two types of books, which indicates an increase in unknown vocabulary from approximately one in every hundred words to around one in twenty five, these learners were able to progress from the highest level of graded readers to authentic novels with adequate reading comprehension and reading fluency. For higher proficiency English learners, the gap between graded and authentic novels is not as big as commonly perceived (Uden, et al., 2014). Another area that stirs further exploration is whether less proficient EFL

learners (CEFR A2 level and below) who haven't reached the highest level of graded readers would be capable of reading authentic books.

A growing interest is shown in the use of children's literature in teaching and learning of less proficient EFL learners (Paran, 2008). The rationales for using children's literature are (1) it offers authentic and meaningful context that facilitates L2 vocabulary acquisition and grammatical awareness, and (2) it is part of a country's culture and thus reading it promotes L2 learners' cross-cultural awareness and understanding (Lee & Mallinder, 2012; Malu, 2013; Sell, 2005). Among the very limited empirical studies of the use of children's literature with adult and adolescent EFL learners, the positive results included enhanced confidence in reading and improved oral language (Ho, 2000), better reading motivation and confidence (Lee, 2015), and facilitating oral discussion of profound themes (Reid, 2002). There is still a need for more research investigating the use of children's literature with older EFL learners at lower English proficiency level.

2.3 Research questions and hypothesis

This study intends to examine the free voluntary reading approach and children's literature as the authentic reading materials with the following research questions:

- (1) Can free voluntary reading be a supplementary approach to enhance less proficient EFL university learners' L2 reading development?
- (2) Can children's literature be the comprehensible authentic texts for the less proficient EFL university learners to facilitate L2 reading development?
- (3) While engaging in free reading of children's literature, what types of explicit instruction would help the less proficient EFL university learners' reading development?

Based on the literature, this paper hypothesizes that free voluntary reading can be a supplementary approach to enhance the reading development of the university learners with low English proficiency. Children's literature can be comprehensible authentic texts for these learners to facilitate L2 reading development. However, teachers' direct feedback and corresponding instructions will be necessary while they are engaged in free reading of children's literature.

3.0 Methodology

This study was carried out in a private university in Taiwan. The mandatory EFL courses, from which the participants were recruited, had unified textbooks and curricular design. Therefore, the free voluntary reading of children's literature was implemented as extra-curricular activities. From the library or from the researcher, they could check out a book that was at the appropriate level and interesting for them to read. The book could be children's picture storybooks, children's novels, adolescent novels or any English novels of their choice. After reading the book on their own, they would need to orally read the whole picture storybook or one randomly assigned chapter from a novel aloud to the researcher. The researcher would listen and check the participant's comprehension regarding vocabulary, phrases, sentences, or passages. Guidance, correction and explicit instruction on the pronunciation principles and comprehension tips were given tailored to each participant's performance.

Participants were recruited from 4 different majors: business management, international business, mass communication, and accounting. Out of the two hundred sophomore students who were aware of this research project, twenty-two participated in this year-long study. Their English proficiency ranged from CEFR A2 to B1 level. Because of the heterogeneous nature of their English ability, the books chosen by the participants ranged from 300-word picture storybook to 170-page children's novel. All participants were encouraged to read as many books as they could, but were also given the freedom to do the read-aloud as their own choice.

This in-depth case report focus on one of the participants, Sally, whose English proficiency was at the

CEFR A2 level. Data were collected from multiple sources as Yin (2003) suggested for case study. Oral reading of the books she selected was the major source of data supplemented with an open-ended interview after each read-aloud session and participatory observation of her classroom performance. During the school year, 6 one-on-one out-of-class voluntary reading sessions, each of which lasted 30 to 40 minutes, were held for Sally to read the self-selected children's books aloud and for the researcher to provide feedback and guidance based on Sally's oral reading and reading comprehension performance. Data from the reading sessions was analyzed in terms of oral reading fluency, mispronunciation patterns, and comprehension obstacles.

4.0 Findings

4.1 Profile of the case

Sally was a non-English major sophomore student in a private university in Taiwan. As other sophomore students, she had had six years of formal instruction of English prior to college. She never had a native English speaking teacher. The average class size in her high schools had been about fifty. She felt her English wasn't as good as her peers because her vocational high school didn't place as strong emphasis on English as academic-oriented high schools. In her high school years, she had 2 hours of English class per week, whereas her peers from the academic-oriented schools usually had 6.

There were forty-five sophomores in her English class. The class met for two fifty-minute periods each week. She always sat at the front row of the class, paid full attention to the teacher, and actively participated in class activities. On the school unified midterm and final exams, she did better on reading (around 80 on the 0-100 scale) than on listening (around 60 on the 0-100 scale). Her TOEIC test result also indicated slightly better reading proficiency (with the score of 190) than listening (with the score of 170). Aware of the importance of English in her future career, she was very motivated to engage in this out-of-class reading to improve her English.

4.2 Initial stage-book 1

The first book Sally chose to read was *Alexander and the Wind-up Mouse* by Leo Lionni, a heartwarming story about the friendship between a real mouse and the wind-up mouse. The way she prepared for the reading session was to quickly browse through the story to get the general idea, and then looked up the unknown words in the electronic dictionary. After she understood all the vocabulary, she spent about 1 hour practicing reading it aloud several times to a more proficient classmate whose TOEIC score was over 500. On the day of the reading session with the teacher, it took her 12 minutes and 9 seconds to finish reading the 741-word story; that is, a reading rate of 60.9 wpm (words per minute). In this first story, she mispronounced 70 words out of the total of 741 words, an error ratio of 1:10.6, meaning one error was made in every 10.6 words and an accuracy rate of 90.6%. She self-corrected 6 errors, which equaled a self-correction ratio of 1:12.7, meaning one self-correction was made every 12.7 errors. The entire time, she read with fixed speed (about one word per second), flat tone, and constant pauses at unfamiliar words. The details of her problems in terms of fluency, pronunciation, and comprehension were presented in the following sections.

4.3 Fluency

Her oral reading of this first book sounded noticeably choppy because of the constant pausing whenever there was a word she wasn't sure of its pronunciation. Take the first two lines of the story as example (the word in parentheses was her pause or mispronunciation):

0101 (page1, line1) "Help! Help! A mouse!" There was a (1s pause) scream. Then a crash (crush).

0102 (page2, line2) Cups, (1.5s uhnn) saucers, and spoons were (wa, where) flying in all (in a, in all) directions.

There was a 1-second pause before she could correctly pronounce the word, *scream* (on the first line of page one, denoted as 0101), and a 1.5-second pause before the word, *saucers* (on the second line of page one, denoted as 0102). The hesitation indicated the unfamiliarity of the pronunciation of *scream* and *saucers*. Similarly, other words in the story that stumbled her but were eventually read correctly were: *blackberry, blocks, broom, chase, circles, frightened, hideout, lizard, said, squeak, tiny, toys, whispered, woolly*. Some of these words were new vocabulary to her (e.g., *broom, saucers, squeak*); whereas some were words that she already knew (e.g., *circles, said, toys*). Other words in the stories that she paused to think of pronunciation but mispronounced were: *alas, Alexander, blinding, cautiously, crumbs, cuddle, pebble, pebblepath, pillow, precious, quivering, searched, suddenly, wheels, wind-up*. There were two words, *blinding* and *precious*, that the pauses were longer—4 and 5 seconds respectively. What further contribute to the choppy reading was that she didn't always pause at the proper place of a sentence. Thus, even for a sentence with no difficult words for her to comprehend, she sometimes paused in the middle of a phrase, resulting in auditorily less comprehensible narrative. Take the third line on page one for example (the word in parentheses was her mispronunciation and the “|” marks her pause):

0103 Alexander (*A-li-san*) ran for his hole | as fast as his little | legs would carry him.

As she read onto this line, two brief pauses were placed, one between *hole* and *as*, another between *little* and *legs*. The first pause was a proper one since it marked the boundary of two major phrases in the sentence. However, the second one was misplaced as the noun phrase, *his little legs*, was then split into two broken parts. Such misplaced pausing right before the noun in a noun phrase was prevalent throughout this read-aloud. Here are some of the examples: *the | blackberry, a magic | lizard, that very | afternoon, the | path, a | gift, in the | bush (push), in the | baseboard*. Other less prevalent ones include misplaced pausing right between noun and verb, such as, *said | Alexander, Willy | sighed, he | thought*. Some of the above examples could be resulted from her unfamiliarity of those nouns' or verbs' pronunciations so that she needed the brief pause to think. However, the following examples were situations when she paused inappropriately in the middle of a phrase containing no difficult words for her (bolded part of the line).

1002 ... In a cu-corner of the | pan-try **he saw | a box | full of |**
 1003 **old toys, ...**
 1201 Alexander ran back **to the |**
 1202 **house | as | fast as he could.**

This could be resulted from the lack of grammatical concepts to properly break a sentence into meaningful parts. In response to her initial choppy reading, the instructor demonstrated how to read a sentence with proper pause, varied speed, and intonation. Although she was struggling with correct pronunciation and fluent reading, which left limited room for improving intonation, the instructor still explained the western custom of reading a story to a child, demonstrated how to read a story with emotion, and encouraged her to do so by reading the next story to her friends or young relatives.

4.4 Pronunciation

In the interview, Sally mentioned that she hadn't learned phonics rules nor understood the phonetic symbols used in the dictionary; therefore, what she did with an unfamiliar word was to listen to the audio pronunciation of the electronic dictionary or to consult her classmates. In the following table, the 70 miscues were organized into three categories: vowel sounds, consonant sounds and miscellaneous miscues.

Table 1: Book 1 reading miscue I

Type of Miscue	Text	Reader
Short Vowel	crash	crush
a e i o u	back	bake

	at		ate
	mousetrap		mouse-trip
	wanted		went
	Alexander		A-li-san
	Alexander		A-lixander
	Alexander		A-lixander
	Alexander		A-lixander
	Alexander		Alixander
	Alexander		Alizier; Alexiden
	teddy		tidy
	pebblepath		pablepath
	pebble		per-pe-, perple
	empty		impy; empy
	Willy		Welly
	wish		wash
	blinked		blank; blanked
	colors		clouds
	crumbs		croo, croombs
	suddenly	san-, sun-, san-den-d-ly; sanderly	
	suddenly		sen-den-ly; seddenly
	hungry		hangry
Long Vowel	wind-up		wend-up; wide-up
i	light		lit
	quiet		quit
Vowel	instead		in-stayr
Combination	bear		beer
ea ee oi ou ui	bear		beer
	heard		hear-d
	wheels		whe, whis
	voice		voce
	mysteriously		mys-ter-ris
	round		roon
	penguin		penground
	Quivering		quo-vering

Unfamiliar with the phonics rules, Sally had difficulty with short vowel sounds (*a, e, i, o, u*), long vowel sound *i*, and vowel combinations (*ea, ee, oi, ou, ui*). There were several occasions when she uttered the short vowels long, as in the examples of back (pronounced as *bake*), at (*ate*), Alexander (*Alixander*), empty (*impty*), and crumbs (*croombs*); on the other hand, there were a couple of words she made the long vowel *i* short, as in wind-up (*wend-up*), light (*lit*), and quiet (*quit*). Vowel combinations also seemed confusing to her and her struggle was manifested through some words such as bear (*beer*), wheels (*whis*), voice (*voce*), round (*roon*).

Table 2: Book 1 reading miscue II

Type of Miscue	Text	Reader
Consonant	bush	push
b vs p	bush	push
d/n vs r	pebble	per-pe-, perple
th vs t/d	instead	in-stayr
x vs s/z	suddenly	san-, sun-, san-den-d-ly; sanderly
-stle	rustled	re, rus, rustly; rushely
	thought	tought
	thought	tought

	thrown		drow
	Alexander		A-li-san
	Alexander		Alizier; Alexiden
Omission	Alexander		A-li-san
d k l le ly n r s t	Alexander		Alizier; Alexiden
	round		roon
	squeaked		s-quea
	wheels		whe, whis
	cuddle		cu, cud
	pillow		pi-ow
	mysteriously		mys-TER-ris
	thrown		drow
	wind-up		wend-up; wide up
	wind-up		wide-up
	wind-up		wide-up
	tired		tied
	loves		loves, love
	empty		impy; empy
Insertion	suddenly	san-, sun-, san-den-d-ly; sanderly	
d n r s	suddenly		sunddenly
	penguin		penground
	colors		clouds
	dumped		drum
	mysteriously		mys-ter-ris
	pebble		per-pe-, perple
	himself		himself-s
	friend		friend-s

The pronunciation problems with consonants included mispronunciation, omission, and insertion. Firstly, the mispronunciation patterns included replacing *b* as *p*, as in bush (pronounced as *push*) and pebble (*perpple*), replacing *d* or *n* as *r*, as in instead (*in-stayr*), suddenly (*sanderly*), mispronouncing *th* as *t* or *d*, as in thought (*tought*) and thrown (*drow*), mispronouncing *x* as *s* or *z*, as in Alexander (*A-li-san*, *Alizier*). Secondly, the omitted letters included *d*, *k*, *l*, *le*, *ly*, *n*, *r*, *s*, *t*, while the recurring ones being *d*, *l*, *n*, as in Alexander (*Alizier*), round (*roon*), wheels (*whis*), pillow (*pi-ow*), thrown (*drow*), wind-up (*wide up*). Thirdly, the inserted consonants included *d*, *n*, *r*, *s*; a few examples were penguin (*penground*), suddenly (*san-den-d-ly*), dumped (*drum*), and himself (*himself-s*).

Table 3: Book 1 reading miscue III

Type of Miscue	Text	Reader
-ed	wanted	went
	whispered	whisper
	rustled	re, rus, rustly; rushely
	dumped	drum
	excited	excite
	blinked	blank; blanked
	squeaked	s-quea
	sneaked	sneakd, sneak-d
	asked	asked, a-ask-k-d; ask
	hugged	hug-ged /Id/
The /θɪ/	the (+vowel)	the (+consonant)
Stress	ordinary	ordi-na-ry
Unpronounced	searched	stre-
Word	blinding	b-

	alas	o-
	precious	-
	cautiously	-
Substitution	everyone	everyone, everybody
	a	the
	the	he
	were	wa, where
	Why	What

Among the last category, miscellaneous types of miscues, the *-ed* ending sounds of the past tense verbs was the most problematic mispronunciation. Many times she omitted the *-ed* sounds; while a few times when she did utter the *-ed* sounds, she couldn't distinguish when to pronounce it as /t/ /d/ or /ɪd/. The mistakes associated with this *-ed* ending pronunciation along with the pronunciation of *the* before a vowel sound and the proper stress of a word were commonly made across other less proficient EFL learners (CEFR A2 level) in this research.

When Sally mispronounced a word, 40 percent of the time, the instructor would directly correct it by demonstrating the right pronunciation. Sally often repeated after the instructor's demonstration for at least one to two times. Some of the words, such as crumbs, cuddle, and pebble, she did remember after one correction; while some, such as Alexander, wind-up, and suddenly, she struggled with throughout the story. After reading, the instructor would pinpoint a few prominent problems and explain the phonics rules. In this reading session, the short vowel u (as in crumbs, hungry), the pronunciation rules of *-ed*, and how to understand the stress symbol in the dictionary were explained. In addition, the instructor also pointed out Sally's tendency of omitting or inserting l (as in wheel), n (as in suddenly) sounds or r (as in dumped) and had her listen to the differences.

4.5 Comprehension

Despite the amount of mistakes made during the oral reading, while the instructor checked Sally's comprehension of the story, she could effortlessly reiterate the plot and the main idea of the story in Chinese. She mentioned that this story wasn't too difficult to comprehend. The next table listed the words Sally was asked to translate, her attempt, and instructor's guidance if needed.

Table 4: Book 1 reading comprehension – words and phrases

Text	Sally's 1 st Attempt	Instructor's Guidance	Sally's 2 nd Attempt
spoons			
sneaked in			
cuddle			
pillow			
envy			
I've heard			
quivering voice			
tiny			
quiet			
cautiously			
wheels	ears	story context	V
crash (n)	something's falling (v)	story context	?
squeak	chattering sounds	story context	?
ordinary	original	correction	
mousetrap	mouse' stuff	correction	
saucers	?	picture cue	V
broom	?	picture cue	V

crumb	?	acting out	V
blink	?	acting out	V
blinding light	?	story context	V
dawn	?	guided question	V
cried	?	guided question	V
In vain	?	correction	

* note: bolded text – mispronounced words; V – correct translation; ? – ntranslated.

The first 10 words were correctly translated even some were mispronounced while reading (i.e., cuddle, pillow, quivering voice, cautiously). This was also a common phenomenon of other less proficient EFL students in this research; they knew a word's meaning but were unable to pronounce it while reading or utter it while talking. The next 13 words were either incorrect or not translated. With the instructor's guided help, she was able to use the story contexts or picture cues to correctly guess most of those words' meanings. Among them, there were three notable difficulties that other less proficient EFL participants also faced: (1) correctly interpreting words with multiple meaning (i.e., *cried* as shouted, *wind* as twist), (2) correctly comprehending a word based on the part of speech that word was used as (i.e., *crash* as a noun vs a verb), and (3) correctly understanding the meaning of idioms (i.e., *in vain*). The instructor's response to these was demonstrating appropriate use of online dictionary or google and coaching them how to look up an unfamiliar word or idiom and how to determine the most suitable meaning in the story's specific context.

In the next table, it listed the sentences or passages Sally was asked to translate. In the original text, the details that weren't translated were underlined. The texts that weren't correctly translated were bolded in both original text and Sally's translation.

Table 5: Book 1 reading comprehension – sentences and passages

Line No.	Text	Sally's Translation
0103	Alexander ran for his hole as fast as his little legs would carry him.	<i>This mouse, he used his little legs to run, to carry him to run, very quickly ran away.</i>
0601 - 0608	But when he was alone in the dark of his hideout, Alexander thought of Willy with envy. "Ah!" he sighed. "Why can't I be a wind-up mouse like Willy and be cuddled and loved."	<i>When he was alone in his hiding place, he sighed, and thought why he couldn't be like the toy mouse.</i>
0701 - 0703	One day Willy told a strange story. "I've heard," he whispered mysteriously, "that in the garden, at the end of the pebble path, close to the blackberry bush, there lives a magic lizard who can change one animal into another."	<i>He wanted to tell him a strange story. In the garden there was a... (pause) crystal path. At the end, there was a place, with the plant... next to this plant. Then there was a magical lizard, ... could change him into another.</i>

She was able to get the big picture, but sometimes the details were left out. Aside from the reason that she forgot the meanings of some vocabulary (i.e., pebble, blackberry), the two other barriers were lack of syntax knowledge and lack of understanding of figurative phrases. The former one could be illustrated with how she translated the phrase, "Alexander ran for his hole." She comprehended it as the mouse *ran away* (from troubles described in the story's previous contexts), but couldn't put the key preposition *for* with *ran* to work out the further detail of where he ran to. Another example concerning preposition would be *thought of Willy with envy*; the passive, *be cuddled and loved*. The latter could be illustrated with the second part of the same sentence, "Alexander ran... as fast as his little legs would carry him." Her understanding of it, *the mouse used his little legs to run, to carry him to run very quickly*, was the literal meaning of each word. Thus, the instructor had to explain to her the meaning carried in this commonly used phrase, "as...as" and the word "would".

4.6 Book by book progress

Sally's progress from book 1 to 6 are summarized in table 6 with information about each book's total number of words, number of new vocabulary for Sally, reading rate, number of mispronounced words, accurate pronunciation ratio, error ratio, and self-correction ratio.

Table 6: Book 1-6 progress summary

Book	Total Word	New Word	Reading Rate (wpm)	Miscue (# of wds.)	Different Miscue (# of wds.)	Accuracy Rate (%)	Error Ratio	Self Correction (# of wds.)	Self Correction Ratio
1	741	28	60.6	70	60	90.6	1:10.6	6	1:12.7
2	687	17	105	33	17	95.2	1:20.8	12	1:3.8
3	398	25	73.8	23	23	94.2	1:17.3	9	1:3.6
4	855	28	75	36	31	95.8	1:23.8	17	1:3.1
5	901	30	102	44	38	95.1	1:20.5	26	1:2.7
6	1207	40	68.7	68	62	94.4	1:17.8	20	1:4.4

4.6.1 Book2

The second book Sally chose to read was *One Fine Day*, written by Nonny Hogrogian, a retelling of an Armenia folktale about a fox's journey to get his tail back. Before the reading session, she spent about 1.5 hours preparing for it, about the same amount of time as the first book. The total read-aloud time of this 687-word story was 6 minutes and 32 seconds, which is a reading rate of 105.2 wpm. A total of 33 miscues were made, which was an error ratio of 1:20.8 and the accuracy rate of 95.2%. She self-corrected 12 errors, which was a self-correction ratio of 1:3.8. This was a much better performance compared to the first book. Because of the story's cumulative folktale feature, many words were repeated in the series of the chain events. This was why Sally felt that this book didn't have as many new words for her as the first one. By the same token, however, reading this story full of the repetition required proper pause and rhythm to convey the effects. That was why Sally felt it was hard for her because it was almost like saying the tongue twister. Take the climax of the story for example. A proper pausing of the longest sentence would be like this:

I have to trade it for the egg | to pay the peddler | to get the blue bead | to give the maiden in return for her jug | to fetch the water to give the field | to get the grass to feed the cow | to get the milk to give the old woman | so she'll sew my tail in place, or all my friends will laugh at me.

Sally still tended to pause between the article and its following noun, or between to and its following verb. Here is how she paused:

I have to trade it | for | the | egg to pay the | peddler | to get the blue bead to | give the maiden | in return for her jug to fetch the water to give the field to get the grass to | feed the cow | to get the milk to give the | old woman so she'll | sew my tail | in place, or all my friends will | laugh at me."

Despite the fact that proper pausing was still a problem, there were less long pauses to think of the pronunciation (only 3 instances which lasted 1 to 2 seconds), indicating that she was able to pronounce most words in this story. Her increased self-correction rate also showed a little better knowledge of the pronunciation and awareness of the pronunciation mistakes. For instance, the -ed pronunciation rules were applied correctly except to two words *lapped* and *begged*, both of these one-syllable verbs were pronounced as two syllables, *la-ped* and *be-ged*. The omission of *l*, *n*, *r* sounds were found only in *milk*, *kind*, *fire*, and *cleverness*; substitution of *r* with *l* was found in *fair*, which was pronounced as *fell*; mispronunciation of vowel *a*, *i*, *o*, and *ow* was found in *trade* (*trad*), *smiled* (*smelled*), *chopped* (*chapped*), and *cow* (*ca*). One interesting miscue was the contraction, *she'll* and *I'll*. In contrast to a proficient native reader, who often expect contraction and might read *couldn't* when seeing the text *could not*, Sally, or less proficient EFL readers of English, didn't know how to pronounce the contracted parts, such as *'ll*, *'d*, *'m*, *'ve*, and would read it *will*, *had/would*, *am*, *have*.

As Sally indicated, this story didn't contain many difficult new words nor utilize very complex grammar; therefore, it wasn't hard for her to grasp the big picture of the story. However, a few homonym and syntax structure still hindered her detailed comprehension. The homonym that troubled her was *lap* and *pleased*. In the sentence "... he had lapped up most of the milk," she translated *lap* as greedy or tip (the milk pail) over; in "... she will be pleased with you," she translated *be pleased with you* as treat you well. (But she did translate another homonym *fair* in *a fair maiden* correctly.) As for the syntax, there was a sentence that she couldn't understand: "... the peddler was not taken in by the promise of a pretty smile or the cleverness of the fox..." and thought of it as *someone didn't carry out the promise*. What she lacked to fully understand the sentence involved two things, syntax knowledge and inference skills. The first part of the sentence, *was not taken in by the promise*, involved the passive voice of a verb phrase, *take in*. Neither the concept of the passive voice nor the verb phrase was understood. The second part, *a pretty smile or the cleverness of the fox*, involved connecting to the previous plots to understand what smile and cleverness had to do with the promise. In response, the instructor guided her through the story context to deduce the correct meaning.

4.6.2 Book 3

The third book Sally chose was *Rita and Whatsit at the Beach* by Jean-Philippe Arrou-Vicnod and Olivier Tallec, a light-hearted story depicting a little girl and her dog's fun day at the beach. Despite the fact that this story contains fewer texts, a 398-word story, she still learned more than 25 new words from it. Her reading rate was 73.8 wpm, accuracy rate 94.2%, error ratio 1:17.3, and self-correction ratio 1:3.6. Although the reading rate wasn't as high as the second book (105 wpm), it was still better than the first (60.6 wpm). The reading accuracy rate stayed very close to the second book (95.2%), and the self-correction ratio was a little better compared to the second (1:3.8). Some of these corrections reflected her improved awareness of similar mistakes previously made, such as the contracted word, *would-wouldn't*, inserted *n*, *Sun-Suddenly*, verb tense, *escape-escapes*. However, there were new mispronunciation patterns; in response, the instructor explained short and long vowel *a*, short vowel *i*, and the digraphs *oo* and *ea*.

As previous story, her general comprehension of the main plot was correct. However, when it came down to more detailed translation, the gap appeared. The author of this book used a lot of common expression, such as *wet blanket*, *all in all*, *you've gone too far*, *he had better behave*, which she couldn't quite figure out their meanings. To enhance her use of dictionary and online tools to find the meaning of these idioms or phrases, the instructor spent a great amount of time demonstrating how to search by the whole chunk of texts instead of conducting word by word search. Other parts she seemed to lack detailed comprehension involve syntax structure or require using inference skills. One such example was the text: "*It's far too hot to fight an enemy as strong and nasty as Captain Whatsit.*" To help her understand this sentence, the instructor explained the grammar – "*too... to...*" and "*as... as...*" and guided her to make connection of this sentence to the plot on previous page.

4.6.3 Book 4

The fourth book Sally chose was *Circle of Hope* by Karen Lynn Williams, an inspiring story about how a rural Haitian boy overcame many obstacles to plant a tree for his new baby sister. Her reading fluency of this 588-word story was 75 wpm, with an accuracy rate of 95.8%, error ratio of 1:23.8, and the self-correction ratio of 1:3.1. (e.g., *lick-licked*, *got-goat*, *non-not*, *crayd-cried*, *pale-path*, *live-leaves*, *run-ran*, *He-She*, *shod-shade*). As the above numbers showed, she did make steady progress each time. In general, the oral reading was less choppy and had less improper pauses, but there still were pauses right after the possessive pronouns or articles (*his | mango tree*; *an | idea*; *Facile worked | in the | hot sun down | the | treeless mountainside*).

In addition to her gradual improvement in oral reading, she started to understand a few of the instructor's English questions regarding the plot; while previously, those English questions had to be

repeated in Chinese. Despite the fact that she still answered the questions in Chinese, she mentioned that she could understand some of the words the teacher used, especially if the words were from the story. Some of the questions were: "Why does he plant the mango?" "What's happening here? Why has it turned into a black twisted stick?" "What do you think it means at the end?" It seemed that the phonological element of a word gradually integrated with its form and meanings in her mind.

In this story, Sally was introduced to a Haitian custom of planting a fruit seed when a child was born and the tree would be seen as the guardian of that child. She also encountered several words that couldn't be found from the dictionary because they were Haitian Creole. The instructor demonstrated how she could find the meaning and pronunciation using Google translation tool; at the end, they found out the glossary in the last page explaining the meaning of those Haitian words. Despite the disadvantage of those unknown words, she did use the contexts or pictures to deduce the possible meanings of them – showing the application of previously demonstrated reading techniques. Her comprehension of the story appeared to be improving. One example passage was: "Carefully he held the mango pit and climbed down from his tree. With a rusted *tin* he dug a hole in the dry earth. He placed the seed in the hole and gently covered it with dirt until only the tip was showing." She was able to translate this passage with almost no mistake: "He carefully takes the mango tree... mango seed... (1sec pause) takes it on his hand, and then climbs down from the tree. Uses tool, rusted tool, digs a hole inside the dry dirt, then he plants the seed, and then carefully uses the dirt... (3sec pause) cover... just leave the pointing little." Seemingly more confident in reading, the next books Sally intentionally chose were more challenging and contained more difficult vocabulary.

4.6.4 Book 5

The fifth book Sally chose was *Badger's Parting Gift* by Susan Varley, a touching story about how Badger's friends coped with his death through sharing the great memories they had with him. This western approach to deal with loss and grief of a loved one was very different from that of Sally's own culture, making reading this book an enriching experience for her. She learned about 30 new words from this 901-word story. Her reading rate was 102 wpm with the accuracy rate of 95.1%, the error ratio of 1:20.5, and the self-correction rate of 1:2.7 (e.g., *afraid to-afraid of, somebody-someday, wash-wished, toward-towards, swift-swiftly, air-earth, begun-began, snig-snug, The(ðə)-The(θɪ), guide-guided, ever-every, invent-invented, specially-special*). While reading, she applied the phonics rules previously taught to sound out all the words and her self-correction revealed that she paid more attentions on the details now. Although she still wasn't able to read with intonation, her tone wasn't as flat as the initial book. Her reading fluency of this book was impressive (better than book 1, 3, and 4) giving the fact that this book was more challenging than previous books (thus number of miscue was higher than book 2 to 4).

Although problems with homonym, syntax, and making inference still existed, the extent of details that she comprehended was improved. Here are some of the passages she translated correctly: "He wished more than anything that he could run with them, but he knew his old legs wouldn't let him. He watched Mole and Frog, enjoying the sight of his friends having a good time." "Badger moved swiftly, running faster and faster through the long passageway, until his paws no longer touch the earth." "Badger had always been there when anyone needed him." She indicated that she had applied the principles and techniques the instructor had demonstrated to prepare for this read-aloud session.

4.6.5 Book 6

The last book Sally read was *Stellaluna* by Janell Cannon, a story that cleverly integrated science facts into the adventure of a lost baby fruit bat who survived with the help of a bird's family and finally found her way back home. This 1207-word story was the most difficult one for Sally because it contained a variety of slightly different terms to vividly depict different actions. Among the 40 new words for Sally, half of them fitted in to this category (e.g., *croon, chirp, shriek, howl, hiss, gasp, startle, stutter, murmur, babble, swoop, dodge, perch, clutch, grip, clamber, crawl*), which made the read-aloud a lot more

challenging than all previous books. Her reading rate was 68.7 wpm, only better than the first book (60.6 wpm); however, she maintained very close accuracy rate of 94.4% as book 2 to 5, with an error ratio of 1:17.8 and self-correction rate of 1:4.4 (e.g., *strike-struck*, *tring-twig*, *the-this*, *him-herself*, *wing-wings*, *surround-sound*, *are-all*, *wraped-wrapped*, *howl-howled*, *nod-nodded*).

In terms of vocabulary comprehension, it was quite an accomplishment that she remembered a lot of new vocabulary, such as *clamber*, *clutch*, *grip*, *grasp*, *gasp*, *wrap*, *startle*, *clumsy*, and she was able to choose the proper meaning to a homonym, *bear*, as a verb. As for story comprehension, there was no problem with her understanding of the main idea, the theme, and the entire plot, but to correctly translate every bit of detail was still a challenge to her. For instance, the underlined parts of this passage were not translated: “*The dark leafy tangle of branches caught Stellaluna as she fell. One twig was small enough for Stellaluna’s tiny feet. Wrapping her wings about her, she clutched the thin branch, trembling with cold and fear. ... By day break, the baby bat could hold on no longer. Down, down again she dropped.*” Sally herself pointed out, “I can understand the story in general, but there are details and some pronunciations that were more challenging than other books.” The more complex syntax used in the story and the overwhelmingly large amount of new vocabulary probably contributed to the gap of her comprehension of some details. Other than the word, *tangle*, in the above passage, words that she couldn’t remember the correct meaning included *ripe*, *thumb*, *stuttered*, *gasped*, *limb*, *tangle*, and *ray*. Although the vocabulary of this book seemed too difficult, she indicated that the story itself was a pleasure to read.

5.0 Discussion of major obstacles

5.1 Oral reading

Arden-Close (1999) pointed out that students’ previous EFL learning experience in high schools greatly impact their English learning attitudes and methods in colleges. The concept of expanding vocabulary as the most essential way to improve reading rooted in Sally’s mind as well as many other university EFL learners’. When the researcher asked her if she was engaged in any out-of-class reading activities, Sally referred to studying TOEIC vocabulary whenever she had time as the main one. As many students with lower English proficiency, she would memorize the spelling and the meaning of the vocabulary, but she wouldn’t be able to pronounce the words. The obstacle of not knowing the pronunciation symbols and the phonics hindered her not only in oral reading but also in listening and speaking. Initially, she couldn’t pronounce some simple words, such as *far*, *dry*, *set*, *had*, *lived*, *were*, *free*, *grow*, *side*, *child*, *ready*, correctly, even though she recognized those words. As Yan & Wang (2011) observed, a less proficient EFL reader would rely heavily on the bottom-up process to decode letters and words. With very little phonics to start with and the incidental teaching of the instructor, she progressively show better phonological awareness – being able to correctly sound-out words, self-correct miscues, and apply the correct vowel sounds (e.g., *shade*, *settle*, ***earth***, *wish*, *cried*, *goat*), –ed ending sounds (e.g., *ached*, *wrapped*, ***howled***, *visited*, *guided*, *nodded*) and some consonant sounds (e.g., *twig*, *path*). The more difficult ones for her involves vowel combinations (*ea*, *ee*, *ou*, *oo*, *oi*, *ie*, *ir*, *ew*, *ow*), short versus long vowel sounds (e.g., *passage*, *lesson*, *yell*, *grip*, *knot*, *hopper*, ***until***, *rays*, *complete*, *climbed*, *silence*, *mused*, *confused*), and other complex sounds (e.g., ***except***, *peculiar*, ***through***, ***neither***, ***shrieked***) which were the dominating miscues till the last read-aloud. In addition to the above struggles, she couldn’t understand nor respond to most of the instructor’s English questions until the 4th read-aloud. She mentioned in the 5th interview that starting from winter break she listened to some simple English songs for the purpose of listening practice and she could finally catch some keywords while doing so. In her mind, those keywords would pop up in written forms and then she would think of the Chinese meaning of the words. It still took her a while to process and guess the meaning of the lyrics, but she felt delighted that her listening was improving. However, speaking was still challenging for her. Up till the last session, she still responded to the instructor’s questions mainly in Chinese and occasionally in one to two simple English words but never in complete English sentences.

5.2 Comprehension

In terms of reading comprehension, Sally's general understanding of the plots was correct. The obstacles were hidden in the detailed comprehension when the following were involved: (1) homonyms and idioms, (2) grammatical knowledge, (3) cultural background knowledge, and (4) inference skills. Homonyms and idioms are more complex and difficult to learn even for L1 beginning readers (Tompkins, 2011). As for Sally, in the very beginning of her participation in this reading research, she wasn't aware that many words have multiple meanings and tended to associate one meaning to one word. One possible reason could be that she was too used to the layout of most vocabulary study books: one vocabulary followed by its commonly used definition in Chinese and one example sentence in English and Chinese. The homographs that she misinterpreted included *wind-up* (book1), *lap* (book2), *nasty* (book3), *blinking* (book4), and *slippery* (book5). She also tended to look up one unfamiliar word at a time; thus created problems understanding idioms or phrases such as *as...as* (book1), *all in all*, *wet blanket*, *you have gone too far*, *he had better behave* (book3), *scrub fire* (book4), *settled down* (book5). With the instructor's demonstration and guidance of how to interpret a homograph by choosing the best meaning for the context and how to look up the meaning of idioms, phrases, or slangs, she was capable of applying above tactics to enhance her comprehension. In contrast, beyond words and phrases, when it required more grammatical knowledge, cross-cultural background knowledge, or inference skills, her reading comprehension still suffered.

6.0 Conclusion

Despite the recurring difficulties with homonyms, idioms, more complex grammar, cross-cultural background knowledge, and inference skills, Sally's progress of the 6 one-on-one read-aloud sessions showed (1) improved oral reading fluency, (2) gradually developed conscious awareness of the pronunciation errors and thus increased self-correction rates of oral miscues, and (3) progressively better competence to apply the reading comprehension techniques taught by the instructor. As the EFL learners' responses from previous studies (Ho, 2000; Lee, 2015), Sally also indicated that the out-of-class reading of children's literature provides authentic reading materials that she could read with more pleasure and confidence. Although these findings were based on one case, the promising results do encourage a complementary reading option for less proficient EFL learners. It would be worth further investigating whether the use of literature – from children's to adolescent and eventually to adult's – provides the EFL learners another progressive path to develop reading competence.

This case study also reveals the deliberate guidance that less proficient EFL learners need to facilitate better reading comprehension and language development. When implementing free voluntary reading program, there are four major areas that would need explicit guidance and supplementary instructions (1) dictionary use, (2) reading techniques, (3) grammatical knowledge, and (4) phonological knowledge. Appropriate dictionary use helps EFL learners become autonomous and independent (Nation, 1998). The most common kind of dictionary use among EFL learners was simply gaining quick access to a word's meaning and pronunciation. Untrained EFL learners are likely to encounter difficulties, as Sally did, when looking up meanings for homonyms and idioms. It is essential to help them effectively deal with that situation by training them to make optimal use of dictionary. Secondly, it is critical to help EFL learners go beyond word and phrases to gain better comprehension. In this case study, reading techniques that the instructor demonstrated included visualizing the texts, deducing meaning from context clues, monitoring and clarifying the understanding of texts, and making inferences. Among these techniques, inferencing skill is the most challenging one for Sally, and likely other less proficient EFL learners (Shimizu, 2002). With these critical techniques EFL learners would be more capable to read independently. The last two areas that the less proficient EFL learners need are grammatical and phonological knowledge. As Bowey (1986) pointed out, grammatical knowledge is critical to coherently comprehend texts and monitoring reading comprehension. As for the importance of phonological knowledge, it not only can impact oral reading, but also facilitate oral communication. Grammatical and phonological knowledge are systematically taught in most EFL courses in Taiwan, but usually in the decontextualized format of drill and practice of rules. Only when the EFL learners encounter enriching

and contextual reading materials, would they start to connect the rules and their usage. In the one-on-one read-aloud sessions of this study, the EFL learner's needs in terms of these four areas were addressed with individual scaffolding and explicit teaching by the instructor. As Paran (2008) stated, providing adequate scaffolding is vital in maximizing the effects of reading literature on L2 development. This case study demonstrated the promising results of free voluntary reading of authentic children's literature complemented by proper scaffolding and explicit instruction for a less proficient EFL learner.

This study has a number of limitations. First of all, this study only analyzed the effects of one reading approach, without any direct comparison with other approaches. Although the results were promising, the comparative effectiveness with other approaches was unattainable. Secondly, the findings were drawn from one single case. To gain more insight into the benefits and feasibility of this type of practice, research in larger scale of less proficient EFL learners is needed. Furthermore, research is needed to shed light on effective ways to strengthen the weakness of less proficient EFL learners – referencing skills and grammatical knowledge in meaningful context. More research focusing on less proficient EFL learners' learning needs should be encouraged to empower educators with more effective approaches to enhance reading development of these learners.

The findings of this case study indicate that university learners with low English proficiency could benefit from the free voluntary reading approach of children's literature with proper scaffolding and corresponding instruction tailored to individual learner's needs. Universities can apply this approach as a supplementary tutoring program to enhance these learners' EFL reading development.

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