

## **Promoting English language development and the reading habit among students in rural schools through the Guided Extensive Reading program**

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### **Abstract**

This paper describes an extensive reading program conducted in three rural secondary or middle schools in Malaysia, aimed at motivating the students to read extensively in English and helping them overcome their problems in understanding English texts as a means towards increasing their proficiency in the language. The paper begins by discussing the rationale for extensive reading for students in rural schools, the aims and features of the reading program, the materials used, as well as the perceptions of students undergoing the program. The problems faced by the students in understanding texts written in English are particularly highlighted, and implications drawn for the successful implementation of extensive reading programs in rural schools.

*Keywords:* extensive reading, sustained independent reading, guided independent reading, reading programs, rural schools

### **Introduction**

Research suggests that one of the best ways to help students increase their language proficiency is to encourage them to read extensively. Krashen (1993), as a result of an examination of research on in-school reading and "out of school" self-reported free voluntary reading conducted in many different countries, concludes that free voluntary reading or sustained independent reading results in better reading comprehension, writing style, vocabulary, spelling, and grammatical development. A study by Hayashi (1999) of the effects of extensive reading on Japanese university students' proficiency in English found that students who reported reading more English books experienced significantly greater improvement in reading ability and vocabulary knowledge than those who reported reading less, as measured by pre- and post-tests. The students also reported that the extensive reading program helped them to improve their English. The same perception towards extensive reading was held by the students studied by McQuillan (1994), in which they overwhelmingly found extensive reading to be not only more

pleasurable, but also more beneficial for language acquisition than instruction in grammar. The same results were also found by Dupuy (1997) in replicating McQuillan's study.

However, the most convincing evidence for the benefits of extensive reading comes from what has come to be known as the "book flood" studies (Elly & Mangubhai, 1981; Elly & Mangubhai 1983), which looked at the effect of extensive reading on the English language proficiency of Fiji elementary school children. These studies, which studied from about a hundred to several thousand students, and for a period of about one to about three years, provide evidence of the remarkable increase made by these students on measures of *language use* (which the researchers specified as oral language, reading comprehension, and writing), *language knowledge* (which included word recognition, vocabulary knowledge, and grammar), as well as *academic performance* (as measured by the examinations used across the Fiji elementary school system). In a repeated study conducted in Singapore, using a similar design, and involving over 500 students from Grades 1 to Grades 3, Elley (1991) found the same to be true. After three years of following the Reading Acquisition and Language Program (REAP), the students made significantly more gains in vocabulary and other language skills than the control groups. In reviewing the Singapore and Fiji studies, Elly asserts that children who are exposed to an extensive range of interesting and illustrated storybooks, and encouraged to read and share them, are consistently found to learn the target language more quickly. He adds that they appear to learn the language incidentally when immersed in meaningful text. The same results were obtained by Day, Omura, and Hiramatsu (1991) in their study of 191 high-school and 397 university Japanese EFL students engaged in sustained silent reading for pleasure. At the end of the treatment, they found that these students scored significantly higher than the control group subjects in correctly identifying the meanings of target vocabulary items.

Numerous studies have also suggested that extensive reading leads to greater writing proficiency. Janopoulos (1986), for instance, found that writing proficiency correlates positively with the quantity of time spent on reading for pleasure in the second language. Tudor & Hafiz (1989) and Hafiz & Tudor (1990), in studying the effects of extensive reading among students in the UK and Pakistan respectively, and Robb & Susser (1989), in studying the same among students in Japan, found that of the language skills, writing was the area in which they had made the most significant improvement. Indeed, Tsang (1996), in comparing the effects of three different programs on writing performance, also found that of the three programs, the one that included extensive reading was found to be significantly effective overall. In the area of content and language use, the extensive reading program was also the only one that was found to be significantly effective. Finally, the book flood studies (Elly & Mangubhai, 1981; Elly & Mangubhai 1983; Elly, 1991) provide further persuasive evidence of the effect of the systematic exposure to extensive reading in the second language on second language proficiency. In these studies, second language composition was found to be positively influenced by pleasure reading in the second language.

In addition to its cognitive benefits, extensive reading helps to develop a positive attitude among students towards reading in the second language. It also increases their motivation to read in the second language (Hayashi, 1999; Hedge, 1985; Constantino, 1994; Day & Bamford, 1998). Perhaps this is because the more one reads, the easier reading becomes. Elley (1991) asserts that

children who read extensively appear to learn the language incidentally, and to develop positive attitudes towards books when immersed in meaningful text.

The effects of extensive reading are thus both cognitive as well as affective. Not only does it lead to improvement in reading, writing, and language use, but it also leads to a positive attitude towards reading, which would help to increase students' language proficiency in the long term.

### **Helping rural school students improve their proficiency in English through an extensive reading program**

We decided to implement an extensive reading program for Malaysian rural school students after careful deliberation on the best means of helping them increase their proficiency in English. The issue of English proficiency has always been of concern among Malaysian teachers, academics, and Ministry of Education officials because students' lack of proficiency in English deprives them of the opportunities open to those who are able to use the language well. This is especially so for rural school students, whose failure rate in national standardized English examinations is twice that of their urban counterparts (Mohd Asraf, forthcoming). Many rural school students have difficulty understanding English, and few are able to use English in simple conversation. This study was thus part of a larger study that tried to address the problem of how we could help rural school students, whose lack of proficiency in English is primarily due to their lack of exposure to the language.

We had also considered other approaches, but given the Malaysian rural school context and the facilities available in rural schools, and given the benefits of extensive reading that have been documented by research, we felt that motivating students to read extensively in English would be the most effective long-term means to help them increase their vocabulary in English, and ultimately, their proficiency in the language.

We thus decided to set up an extensive reading program for students in rural schools, which we named the Guided Extensive Reading (GER) program. This program was adapted from Hsui's (2000) Guided Independent Reading (GIR) Program, which, as she suggests, "may be used as a supplementary reading program in upper primary (5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grade) and lower secondary (7<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> grade) classrooms....for students who can read with varying degrees of proficiency, but who generally will not read for various reasons, such as failure to develop a love for reading, unavailability of appropriate reading materials, insufficient time to read extensively because of school demands, and lack of motivation to read extensively" (p. 31). We felt that the way in which Hsui's GIR program was structured would benefit students in rural schools in Malaysia, where English is -- for the majority of the students -- a foreign language, as it seldom used beyond the English language classroom. The decision to set up an extensive reading program was also inspired by the work of Day & Bamford (1998) on extensive reading in the second language classroom.

This descriptive study was thus aimed at determining whether and how students in our rural schools would benefit from extensive reading in English and exploring the possibility of having extensive reading as a main feature of the English Language Program for rural schools. It was

also aimed at studying, in-depth, the difficulties that the students had in reading in English and their attitudes towards reading in English, and hence provide a real-world context in which the program was conducted, as this was an area in which we felt studies are still lacking. We decided not to measure the effects of the reading program on reading gain or on English proficiency, however they may be defined, because Malaysian rural school students lack basic vocabulary in English to be able to respond to reading tests or tests of vocabulary that are currently available. Because of their lack of exposure to English, many students are not able to use the language beyond the word level. This is based on our knowledge of the rural school situation gained through our experience as teacher educators, and based on a pilot study that we had conducted on the teaching and learning of English in rural schools. After taking into consideration the circumstances in which rural school students are learning English, we decided to adopt a qualitative-naturalistic approach to program evaluation (Guba and Lincoln, 1981; Patton, 1987), because we are of the view that the potential benefits that the students would gain from extensive reading cannot be fully appreciated unless we understand their attitudes towards reading in English, which, in turn, cannot be understood without understanding the difficulties they have in reading in English. Hence, we wanted to understand and describe these processes and their holistic effects on the students. We are of the view that quantitative means are not able to completely capture the essence of the difficulties that rural school students have in learning English or take into account the complexity of learning English in the rural school situation.

The aim of this paper is describe how students in three Malaysian rural schools responded to a program on extensive reading. Specifically, it aims to describe the students' attitudes towards reading in English, the difficulties they had in reading in English, as well as their perceptions of the extensive reading program. The students' reactions to the program, the teachers' perceptions of the effects of the reading program on their students, as well as our observations of the students' and teachers' reactions to the program were used to provide us with an indication as to how the students benefited from the program. The methods we employed will be discussed in greater detail in the "Methods" section.

### **The aims and features of the GER program**

The GER program is aimed at motivating students to read extensively -- to read as many books as possible, and to be excited about reading. It is thus aimed at having students read books for pleasure. However, because of their lack of proficiency in English, rural school students have often found it difficult to read English books on their own, let alone to read extensively. Hence, although extensive reading is generally associated with "reading large amounts with the aim of getting an overall understanding of the material" Bamford and Day (1997, para. 3), in this study, we view extensive reading as an *approach* to teaching reading in which the purpose or outcome (as cited in Bamford and Day, 1997) are: pleasure reading (Mikulecky, 1990), free voluntary reading (Krashen, 1993), or Sustained Silent Reading (SSR), in which students read quietly a story of their choice. For students in rural schools, we needed to adopt an approach in which the students could be motivated and guided to read extensively, hence the GER Program. We were acutely aware of the fact that without incorporating extensive reading as part of a class program, the students might not read English books on their own.

The following are the key features of the GER program:

- The teachers need to be well-informed about the books and reading materials that would appeal to their students.
- GER needs to be conducted in a relaxed, informal, classroom atmosphere, where the teacher focuses on helping students read for pleasure.
- The reading materials should be within the students' level of competency.
- Students are given the opportunity to choose the books that they would like to read.
- The program needs to be conducted on a regular basis.
- Established routines, aimed at inculcating the reading habit and love of reading among students, are an important part of the program.
- Students are encouraged to retell, to the class, the stories they had read.
- Students' reading progress is monitored and reinforced by giving words of praise and encouragement or by awarding them "stars", etc., for books read.

The features of the GER program seem to correspond with most of Day and Bamford's (2002) "Top Ten Principles for Teaching Extensive Reading". These include the fact that the reading material should be within the learners' level of competency, that they be allowed to choose what they want to read, that the teachers orient and guide the students, that reading is individual and silent, and that the purpose of reading is for pleasure. As Day and Bamford have mentioned, these are among the basic ingredients of extensive reading, and among the conditions and methodology necessary for its success. We share Day and Bamford's view that reading is its own reward, and hence, have not included the answering of comprehension questions as part of the activity. We also share their view that the teacher should be a role model of a reader.

We used graded readers, as we felt that that these books would be simple enough for the students to read and understand. We share Hsueh-chau's and Nation's (2000) view that graded readers do not require as much background knowledge as academic texts or newspapers do, and hence, are likely to represent the most favourable conditions for reading. Secondly, although the aim of the program was to have the students read as much as possible, we felt that this could only be achieved to a certain extent, as the students' vocabulary was very limited. Hence, we focused on *motivating* them to read as much as they could by having the program as part of an in-class program so that they could be guided and helped by their teachers. We felt that once they could see the value of reading, they would be more likely to read on their own.

## Method

In order to provide us with a "truer" picture of the students' attitudes towards reading in English as well as how they felt about the GER program, data were gathered from several sources to allow for triangulation. Firstly, and primarily, data were gathered from in-depth classroom observations of the Guided Extensive Reading Program sessions, carried out once a week, every week, over the course of four months of the first school term. During these sessions, each of us noted our impressions of how the teacher conducted the GER classes as well as the students' reactions to these classes. Each of these weekly sessions was videotaped, after which the contents were analyzed to provide us with the details as to how the sessions were conducted and how the students reacted during the session, details that we may have otherwise missed. At the end of each session, we discussed with each teacher some of the problems she encountered, and ways of overcoming these problems for future classes. Planning for the next GER class was also done during these discussion sessions. On many occasions, we also played the role of participant observer, in which we would go around the class, together with the class teacher, to help students who have difficulty with their texts, while at the same time making our observations. These observations were quickly recorded as part of our field notes at the end of the GER session.

In addition to in-depth classroom observations, data were also gathered from the teachers' diaries, which we had requested they keep, in which they recorded their thoughts on extensive reading, their reflections on how well they had carried out the GER sessions, as well as their perceptions of the students' responses towards the program. Writing a diary helped teachers reflect upon whether and how extensive reading had made an impact on their students, and to record these reflections as they were made, thus increasing the reliability of their observations. Later, in the "Results" section, we present the selected observations, reflections, and comments of the teachers as recorded in their diaries. Finally, open-ended, in-depth interviews were carried out to obtain the views of the teachers and students with regard to the GER program. Hence, triangulation through multiple modes of data collection (Patton, 1990) and prolonged engagement (Creswell, 1998), were used to enhance the credibility (Patton, 1990), or trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) of the findings and to enable us to provide a thick and rich description of the students' as well as the teachers' perceptions towards the reading program, as well as the difficulties students may have had in reading in English. Credibility was also accomplished by confirming (Marshall & Rossman, 1995) our fieldnotes with what had been recorded on video and audio-tape, and by testing for rival explanations. Finally, as researchers, we temporarily set aside and examined our predispositions and biases towards extensive reading and made a concerted effort to be aware of those biases that could have influenced our analysis and interpretation of the data.

### *The participants*

Four classes participated in the program. Three classes were Form 1, or 7<sup>th</sup> grade classes, while one was a Form 3, or 9<sup>th</sup> grade class. The first group of 7<sup>th</sup> grade students, all of whom were Malays, were from a rural school in Perak, one of the states in Malaysia. The second group of 7<sup>th</sup> grade students, all of whom were also Malays, were from a rural school in neighboring Selangor, while the third group of Form 1 students, all of whom were Chinese, were from a rural school in Pahang. The fourth class was a Form 3, or 9<sup>th</sup> grade class. We also included this class because

the teacher of this class wanted to try out this program on her students. Her students came from a 9<sup>th</sup> grade class that had been ranked lowest in the grade in terms of academic achievement as well as English. She felt that a program on extensive reading would be good for her students. At least, she said, the reading would help them improve their vocabulary, and perhaps, they may gain other benefits from the program as well. The number of students in these classes ranged from 14 to 35.

The majority of the students from all the three schools hardly speak English -- whether at home or in school. The parents of the majority of the students in the school in the state of Perak were factory workers or farmers, and the language used both at home and in school is Malay. English is used only in their English classes, and even then, usually in response to their teacher's questions. Similarly, the language spoken at home and in school by the two classes of students in the rural school in Selangor is Malay. English is also used mainly in response to their teacher's questions. For the students in the rural school in Pahang, the language spoken at home and in school is one of the Chinese dialects. When English is spoken, it is only in their English class, and also mainly in response to their teacher's questions. On numerous occasions, these students used Malay when they found that they could not communicate in English. The students seemed to be more comfortable in using Malay than English. This may be due to the fact that Malay is the medium of instruction in schools in Malaysia, and hence, students of different racial backgrounds are more at ease using Malay than English. As in the other two schools, the majority of their parents were farmers.

Only the students from the best, or highest ranked 7<sup>th</sup> grade class from each of these schools were selected, as we needed to assume, among the students, a certain level of motivation to study and to do well in school as well as to learn English. It is important that we selected students with a certain level of motivation to study and do well in school because no reading program would work if the students were not motivated to learn. We made an exception for the 9<sup>th</sup> grade class because of the teacher's request that they be allowed to participate. In any case, we felt that it would be good to include this group, so that we could determine whether the program would also benefit students who have been ranked by their school as being the "weakest" students in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade.

#### *How the GER program was conducted*

Prior to carrying out the GER program, the teachers were briefed on its aims and objectives as well as the rationale for implementing it. In fact, we placed special emphasis on this aspect of the program. We felt that it was important that the teachers fully understood the aims and objectives as well as the rationale for extensive reading, because it is only when the teachers believe in its value would the program work. Then several aspects pertaining to the implementation of the program were emphasized. These included issues such as organizing the program, establishing routines and expectations, implementing related activities, and monitoring the progress of students' reading. The teachers were given the opportunity to raise any questions they had pertaining to the implementation of the GER program.

The program was carried out in almost the same manner by the teachers in the different schools. They all chose a certain day of the week to conduct the GER, and this timetable was consistently

followed. The teachers also ensured that the time that had been set aside for GER was, in fact, devoted to GER and that no work other than reading in English was carried out. The thrust of the GER class was on silent, individual reading, as well as on the "retelling" of their stories orally to the rest of the class. The retelling of stories is an important part of the GER program, as it is aimed at giving learners the opportunity to share with their classmates the stories they had read. In doing so, they will learn to express themselves, no matter how difficult at first, in English. Telling their classmates about the stories they had read would also help to motivate the students to read more books, as it creates a sense of accomplishment in having read one book after another. Thus, for any given class period, the students spent part of their time on silent reading and the rest of the time on retelling their stories. In addition to these two main activities, the teachers also dealt with difficult vocabulary, either by helping the students individually, or by approaching it as a whole-class activity. The teachers monitored their students' reading by having them write, in their notebooks, the stories they had read. The teachers also recorded their observations of their students' progress in their diaries.

### *The books used*

The books that were used in the GER program were a series of graded readers supplied by the research project, for which we had obtained considerable funding. These well-written and well-illustrated storybooks were published by *Fajar Bakti*, the local arm of Oxford University Press, and included stories that dealt with the students' own culture as well those of others. To enable us to provide the books that would be suitable for the learners, we requested that the teachers of the respective classes select these books. We felt that they would be the best persons to do so, as they know their students' abilities and interests. The teachers were asked to choose from the series, which ranged from books meant for students in the primary, or elementary school to books meant for students in the secondary school. The teachers were given the opportunity to look through and inspect all the books in the series before they made their choice.

Most of the books chosen were those meant for students in the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grades, with a few of the simpler books meant for students in the 7<sup>th</sup> grade. The choice of the level of the books surprised us at first, not because we were not aware that the students in these schools may have a more difficult time understanding some of these books compared to students in certain urban schools, for example, but that the level was much lower than we had anticipated. The teachers told us that many of their students would not be able to understand the other books that they had not selected, and some may not even understand all of the books that had been selected (Later, as we participated in helping the students with their reading, we understood the reason for the teachers' choice. The students had a very limited vocabulary in English, and really needed to read at several levels below their actual grade level). Finally, the books chosen by the teachers seemed to reflect the interest of students of this particular age group. They did not choose the more "childish" stories, such as stories about the mousedeer, a popular and well-known Malaysian folk-tale, as part of the collection of books.



## Results

### *The students' initial response to the program*

We made weekly visits to the schools on the days that the teachers had set aside for the GER program. During these visits, we played the role of observer as well as participant, in which we also went around the class helping the students with the difficulties they had with the text. Our observations of the students' reactions during the lesson and the difficulties they had in reading were recorded as we were making these observations and almost immediately after the class ended.

We noticed that, *initially*, the students did not seem to be motivated to read English books. This was clearly evident during our observations of the first GER classes in these schools. The teacher, in introducing the GER program to the students for the first time, asked, "Do you like to read?" To this, the students answered, "Yes". But when she asked, "Do you like reading English books?" the answer, given in a chorus, was a unanimous and vehement, "No". When prompted further, the students said that English books were difficult to understand and that there were so many words that they didn't know the meaning of. However, when asked further by their teacher, they said that they enjoyed reading Chinese books, especially cartoons, as they were full of pictures. The response of the Malay students from the school in Selangor and from the school in Perak did not differ very much from that of the Chinese students in Pahang. The students said that they liked reading, and read often. However, the books they enjoyed reading were Malay books. They found English books difficult to understand. "*Susahlah nak faham buku Bahasa Inggeris*", which means, "English books are so difficult to understand", was the response given by many Malay students when asked why they did not enjoy reading English books. Only a few students -- and they were the children of teachers or teachers of English -- read English books regularly.

In addition to observing how the teachers carried out the GER and how their students' reacted during these sessions, we also closely observed how the students responded to English texts. In the school in the state of Pahang, the students laboriously poured over their storybooks and looked up their English-Mandarin dictionaries to help them find out the meanings of words they could not understand. On the average, the students had difficulty with at least two words in almost every sentence of the book they were reading. The students diligently wrote down the meanings of the words in Mandarin. In the one period or class session that the teacher had allotted for GER, the majority of the students only managed to read a few pages. The reading was terribly slow, as the students approached reading at the word level. The Malay students from the school in Perak and from the school in Selangor did not differ very much in how they approached the texts. As the students read their books, they looked up, in the dictionaries, the words that they could not understand. The meanings of these words were then written in Malay into their graded readers. In the two-period (eighty-minute) class that the teacher had allotted for reading and retelling, the majority of the students managed to read barely half of the story. Only about two or three students in the first class meeting were able to finish the story they were reading.

Going around the class and helping the students with the problems they had in reading allowed us to gauge not only the kinds of difficulties they had in trying to understand a text, but also the extent of these difficulties. During the first few GER sessions in each of these schools, the students used the dictionary to look up the meaning of each and every word that they could not understand, although we had suggested to the teachers earlier that they encourage their students to try to get a general understanding of the text by guessing the meanings of the words they found difficult rather than looking up the meaning of each word in the dictionary. However, we found that most of these students could not understand many simple or basic words -- words such as "candle", "both", "poor", "village", and so on. This explains why they had to look up the meanings of many of these words, as it is difficult to guess the meanings of words in context if one does not have sufficient vocabulary to do so. As we went around the class during the silent reading sessions, we encouraged the students to ask us for the meaning of any word they could not understand, and not feel bad about asking.

At first we did not get any response from the students. They were shy about asking questions. However, later on in the session, and in later sessions, many of them responded enthusiastically by raising their hands as they saw us approaching. We would then explain to them the meanings of the words they asked about by using various strategies such as exemplification or acting out the meaning. We went around explaining the meanings of difficult words to as many students as we could so that they would be able to read much faster and would not find reading a chore.

In subsequent class meetings, the teachers encouraged their students to read for understanding, and to try to guess the meanings of the words they could not understand. To help them read more quickly, we encouraged the students to circle these words as they read, so that they could concentrate on trying to understand the story. We told them that they could ask us, or their teachers, the meanings of these words as they went along so that they would be able to concentrate on understanding the gist of the story, and hence, enjoy their reading more.

### *Retelling the stories*

Retelling the stories was initially very difficult for the students. This was something the students had never done before, as related to us by the teachers. In the first GER class, most of the students in the three schools copied parts of the story from the book and merely read out these notes. This made it very difficult for us to understand what they were trying to say because there was no coherence in their summary.

The reason the students resorted to copying parts of the text in retelling their story is that it was very difficult for them to express themselves in English. In subsequent lessons, we suggested that the students be asked to retell the story in their own words -- without resorting to notes. However, we also suggested to the teachers that they help their students along when they found it difficult to find the right words to tell their story. We also suggested to the teachers that it was all right if the students used Malay once in a while -- especially if they could not find the right words. We emphasized that what was important was that they have understood the story and that they shared their stories with their classmates.

In subsequent lessons, the students tried retelling the stories in their own words, but it was obviously very difficult for them. They were trying to get used to the idea of expressing themselves in English. The thought itself scared them, as related to us by several students when we interviewed them about their feelings about reading. They were afraid of making mistakes, and they were afraid of being laughed at. However, with the encouragement of their teachers, the students kept on trying.

On many occasions, the students switched to Malay when they got stuck -- even the Chinese students. There was one boy who was trying to retell his story in English when he paused and asked the teacher, "*Cikgu, boleh saya gunakan Bahasa Melayu*"? ("Teacher, may I use Malay"?). He had obviously got stuck and could not proceed in English. When he was allowed to continue in Malay, he was able to express himself quite well.

Another girl retold her story by reading a summary of that story written in her own words, in English. Because it was read in a monotonous tone, it failed to capture her classmates' attention, and many of them spoke to one another as she was telling her story. However, when the teacher asked her to tell her story in Malay, the whole story came to life. She related the story in such an interesting manner that her classmates became very interested in the story. This was apparent from the many questions that were asked afterwards.

The students' difficulty in retelling their stories in English and the ease with which they retold it in Malay is consistent with the notion of the "silent period" (see, for example, Krashen, 1981; Krashen & Terrell, 1983), during which learners build competence in the second language through listening and focusing on trying to understand the language. Indeed, it has been suggested (e.g., Postovsky, 1977; Dulay, Burt, and Krashen, 1982; and Krashen and Terrell, 1983), that providing learners with the opportunity to go through a silent period would be beneficial for their second language development.

Later, we discussed with the teachers the issue of using Malay when retelling a story, and we all agreed that if students found it difficult to tell a story in English, they could use Malay. Our rationale was that the main aim of GER was for the students to read extensively in English and for them to enjoy reading English books. The retelling of the story was a related activity to extensive reading -- to motivate them to read further by providing them an opportunity to share with their classmates what they had read, and also for the teacher to gauge if they understood the story. So if they could describe to the teacher and to their classmates what they had read, even if they had to do it in Malay, at least we would have achieved the objective of their having learnt something from their reading. We also felt that an activity that was meant to motivate should not itself be demotivating.

We noticed that after the teachers had "relaxed" their expectations pertaining to the use of English, the students expressed themselves more. They were also more enthusiastic about the activity. We began to see those who had not previously retold their story do so for the first time.

### *Classroom atmosphere*

With the exception of the GER session of one teacher, the atmosphere in which GER was conducted was rather stiff and formal -- at least initially. Students usually responded to the teachers' questions with one-word answers. And even then, some students needed to be coaxed to answer questions. The boys seemed to find it more difficult to respond in English, and this made one of the teachers irritated with them.

We feel that the stiff atmosphere had to do with the stern tone the teachers used. In fact, one of the teachers, when asking the students to circle the words that they could not understand, spoke to the students as if the session were a test. She had asked the students not to discuss their stories with their classmates and not to ask them any questions. The teachers were also initially very concerned about correctness in terms of the students' retelling of the stories. One teacher kept on correcting the pronunciation of the students as the story was being related to his or her classmates or when questions were asked about difficult words. Another teacher frequently corrected their grammatical errors.

In our discussions with the teachers after the conduct of the GER sessions, we raised the issue of the stiff and formal classroom atmosphere. We suggested that the teachers not place too much emphasis on correcting students' errors or pronunciation, although some gentle correction would be all right once in a while. We also suggested that they sound less stern and make the classroom atmosphere more informal and relaxed. By this time, we had established a comfortable working relationship and a bond of trust, and the teachers took our suggestions quite readily. In fact, they later admitted to us that they had conducted their classes rather formally. As a result of these discussions, we noticed that the teachers became more relaxed themselves, and were not as stern to the students as they had been before.

As we had mentioned earlier, with the exception of one teacher, the others had initially conducted the GER in a formal and stiff manner. This particular teacher was, in fact, teaching a class that had been ranked lowest in terms of students' academic ability. What caught our attention about this teacher was the way in which she conducted her class. The atmosphere in her class was relaxed and informal, yet she had effective control of the classroom. She spoke in a soothing voice, yet loudly enough for everyone to hear. For a class that had been ranked lowest in terms of academic ability, one would think that the students would be passive, especially in the English classroom. Yet, the students were clearly motivated, and very interested in the lesson. There was a great deal of participation in this class, and the students did not hesitate to ask questions, or to let the teacher know that they did not understand the meanings of words. When the teacher asked questions pertaining to the passage they were reading, many students eagerly raised their hands. They also readily volunteered to read. And all this was a consistent feature of her classes.

Before the start of the GER program, this teacher had requested that instead of asking her students to read different books, she would like all of them to read the same book, as she did not feel that they would be capable of reading different books and then retelling these stories in class. She said that they needed a great deal of help in understanding the text. We agreed, as we felt that the teacher knew her class and her students better, and thus, ordered 35 copies of the

same book. She had selected a book that was meant for students in the 5<sup>th</sup> grade, although her students were in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade.

The teacher started the class by reading one of the stories in the graded reader to her students. She read in a manner that captivated her students' attention. In fact, not only did it captivate her students' attention, but our attention as well, and that of the technician who found himself following the lesson -- and enjoying it -- as he was videotaping the class. She read half of the story, after which she asked her students the words that they did not understand. She then explained the meanings of these words using various strategies such as giving analogies, giving examples, and giving hints or prompts to the students as to what the answer or meaning might be, but most often, she used the Malay translations of these words. She also sometimes asked them to look up the words in the dictionary. All this time, we observed that the students' attention was glued to the lesson. In this class, the teacher paid a lot of attention to explaining the vocabulary, as this was an area the students were apparently weak in. The following are words the students had difficulty with during one of the GER sessions when the students were reading "The Heart of Stone": "village", "poorest", "proud", "afraid", "headman", "rich", "poor", "clever" "simple", "daughter", "arrived", "port", "heavy", "biggest", "cheap", "perhaps", "spend", "trader", "carry", "seasick", "ship", "felt".

Observing this particular class gave us mixed feelings of joy and sadness, joy to see how lively and enthusiastic the students were in the classroom, how very much they wanted to learn -- defying the stereotypes that students in rural schools are not motivated to learn English -- and sadness because students in the lowest ranked class are almost always stigmatized in terms of their academic ability. It is sometimes, or perhaps often assumed, that they lack the motivation and ability to succeed, and effort is not exerted to help them achieve.

### *Signs of progress*

Although the students initially read very slowly and found quite a great deal of difficulty in understanding the stories they were reading and in retelling the stories they had read, reading apparently became easier for many of these students as the term progressed. We observed that students started participating more, and also noticed, towards the end of the school term, that many students were able to complete reading their story of five to six pages within the time given to them, when in the beginning, they would only be able to finish reading one or two pages. As related to us by one teacher, *"At first, I could see that they took a long time to read even one paragraph. But after we told the students to circle the words they didn't understand but just go on reading to try to get the meaning, many of them could finish a story by the end of the class. I could also see the improvement in how they retold the stories"*.

Another teacher reported in her diary: *"In order to attract the students' attention towards the reading programme, today a story with the Chinese background had been selected for the whole classroom to read. The students showed a good response as the introduction was being carried out which was about The Republic of China....During the whole classroom discussion, students did take part actively in it. Most of the students could also be able to answer the questions raised regarding the story they'd read today....The type of the story chosen may attracted them course it's in a way related to a few of their cultural traits like the dragon"*.

This same teacher, in a later diary entry, then said: *"Some students have shown an improvement in their reading ability. For example, a student of mine who was very weak where his reading ability is concerned has now able to even retell what he had read; fluently although in 'broken language'. There were also students who were reluctant readers before but now are more motivated to read. [Student name], for example is a happy go-lucky type of person in my classroom. He will answered us back always in a 'negative tone'. However, he at first doesn't show much interest towards the reading program. But, after two sessions, I felt that there are some changes in his attitude towards reading program. His seriousness could be detected at the third session. When he was called out to retell a story he could spontaneously tell out the story clearly though he did stopped at certain points to recall back what he had read."*

Another teacher also remarked that her students seemed to be more motivated to read as the term progressed. *"[Student name] frequently asks me if I have any more books to lend him. Although he doesn't read books as quickly as kids in the town schools, I think this is a great improvement for him. Before, he didn't seem to be interested in English. There are five other kids in my class who also read extra English books, but the rest...they find it difficult to read by themselves. That's why I think this program is a good idea. At least while they read they can ask me if they get stuck."*

A similar change in the students' attitudes towards reading in English was also reported by another teacher in her diary: *"I did notice some changes on the part of my students after I started the reading program. Though not all of them shows their interest very much towards this program at the beginning, they seemed slowly attracted by this program time after time".* She said that because of the weekly GER lessons, the students became used to the routine of reading books and retelling the stories, and many of them expressed to her how they looked forward to the next GER lesson.

Finally, the students' progress in reading could also be seen from the number of stories they read. By the end of the school term, the majority of the students had read about nine stories, while about four or five "exceptional" students from each class were able to read about 15 to 20 stories -- these were the students who had gone up to the teacher to borrow more books. While this may not seem to be very much, and while this does not seem to satisfy Day's and Bamford's (2002: 138) 4<sup>th</sup> Principle of extensive reading: *"Learners read as much as possible (a minimum of at least one book a week before extensive reading can have any benefit),"* we felt that in our particular context, where the students were learning English in difficult circumstances, this represented a significant improvement in their ability to read in English.

On the last day of the GER class, which we (the researchers) did not attend, all the teachers asked their students what they felt about the GER program. The reason why we did not attend the last class was to enable the students to discuss freely their feelings about the program and about reading with their teachers. Later, we learned about the discussion from the teachers' diary accounts. As narrated by one of the teachers, *"At the end of this session, after a few students presented their summaries, I asked other students about how did they feel about this whole project. Most of them mentioned that it was very useful for them. Many of them found it really benefits them, especially to improve their writing skills because they were exposed to so many*

*new words which had never come across before. Quite a number of them also said that the stories were quite interesting. One of the students, however, mentioned that it was quite boring for him".* The other teachers also noted almost the same thing. They stated that many students felt that the program was beneficial to them. They also described that quite a number of their students actually grew to like reading English books, although there were some that still seemed not to care about learning English or reading in English.

It should be pointed out, at this point, that the students' affirmative response to their teacher's question on whether they benefited from the program could have been due to their desire to please their teachers. In fact, we raised this issue to the respective teachers. The teachers, however, said that although a few students could have answered "yes" because they wanted to please the teacher, they felt that the majority were quite honest in giving their answers. The teachers said that many students were capable of saying "no" when they didn't like something, and one gave the example of how most of her students said "No" when asked if they liked to read English books at the beginning of the school semester. They also mentioned that the students perceived the reading program as the researchers' program, and not a program that was initiated by the teachers -- this was probably because in the introduction class the teachers had made reference to this fact. So they felt that the students were giving their honest answers, as they were "evaluating" the researchers' program in the absence of the researchers.

The teachers' explanation of their students' response seemed plausible to us, because they were corroborated by our own observations of their responses in the classroom and by the teachers' own perceptions of their students' reactions.

### **How the teachers felt about extensive reading**

At the start of this program, only one teacher really believed in the importance of extensive reading. The other teachers, although they had been briefed on the importance of extensive reading before the program commenced, were at first nonchalant about the value of extensive reading. This was reflected in how they had initially carried out the GER activities. However, as a result of collaboration with the researchers, these teachers soon came to realize the importance of the program in terms of the benefits it brings, as they could see the improvement in attitude and motivation in their own students. By the middle of the school term, the teachers were as enthusiastic about extensive reading as we were. This is because they began to see some improvements in their students' attitudes towards reading in English, as discussed in the previous section.

### **Testing rival explanations**

As we mentioned earlier, several steps were taken to enhance the credibility or trustworthiness of the findings. Among these was the testing of rival explanations. We considered the possibility that the students' reactions towards the GER activities could have been due to our presence in the classroom. As Patton (1990) states, this may create a halo effect so that staff [in our case, the students] perform in an exemplary fashion and participants are motivated to 'show off'" (p. 473).

However, although that could have been the case earlier on in the study, our prolonged engagement in the study allowed the students and the teachers to get used us. In fact, by the second or third session, most of the students treated us as they treated their class teacher. Our role as participant also helped to dispel any notion they could have had of us as "visitors", if not "evaluators".

## Discussion

The weekly visits to the four classes gave us an insight into the problems the students had in learning English. Motivation to learn English was high among these students, but they lacked certain language fundamentals to enable them to function adequately in the language. This often resulted in their having a low self-concept where their English ability is concerned, and this, in turn, often prevented them from participating in the English classroom. However, given a supportive, non-threatening environment, students will participate, as the results of this study have shown. It is thus important that teachers be sensitive to their students' affective state and conduct their English classes in a relaxed and supportive atmosphere, especially when it comes to extensive reading, which is aimed at having students read extensively for pleasure.

The major problem faced by students in rural schools in learning English is their lack of vocabulary. It is this lack of vocabulary that makes it difficult for them to express themselves in English, and it is also this lack of vocabulary that makes it difficult for them to guess the meanings of words in context. As emphasized by Nation (1990) and Laufer (1992), students need a vocabulary of at least 19 out of 20 words, or about 95% of a text before they can guess the meaning of a word from its context. In a more recent study by Hsueh-chau and Nation (2000), the researchers estimate that most learners would need to know around 98% of the words in a text for this to occur.

This is the reason why many students refer to their dictionaries for the meanings of words, making reading tiring and time consuming. This sometimes results in their losing interest in reading in English. On the one hand, it is important to recognize that dictionaries can greatly help students to understand new or difficult words, but on the other, to refer to each and every difficult word in the dictionary takes the pleasure out of reading. Thus, teachers have to strike a balance between teaching students to use the dictionary and helping them to guess the meanings of words in context.

It should also be mentioned that given the fact that many rural school students do not have even the most basic vocabulary in English, and given the difficulty they have in learning English, the change in attitude towards reading in English as shown by the students referred to by their teachers above, and many other students should be seen as a benefit of extensive reading. When one reads something that is full of difficult words, reading is extremely difficult and painful, and one gets easily discouraged. In fact, it is a major achievement for these students to be able to continue reading, to see the value of reading, and to develop a positive attitude towards reading. Hence, in the rural school situation, where students have a very limited ability in the language, and where several factors often serve to deter the students from learning the language, the



benefits of extensive reading cannot be judged purely from a gain in scores; that is, from a measurement perspective, as this would fail to take into account the complexity of the issue.

## Conclusion

The results of this study suggest that students in rural schools can and do benefit from extensive reading. The majority of the students in this study developed positive attitudes towards reading in English as the term progressed, although they were initially reluctant readers. However, whether extensive reading helped to increase their *proficiency* in English is something that cannot be determined conclusively by this study, given the fact that this study was conducted over a period of four months, and that the effects of extensive reading on the students' language proficiency can best be seen in the long term. The findings are also consistent with that of Krashen's (1993), who found that studies on free reading that last longer (especially if they are conducted for more than a year) show more consistently positive results on tests of reading comprehension. It is thus suggested that longitudinal studies be carried out to determine the effect of extensive reading on students' language proficiency. However, we argue that given the improvement in the students' attitudes towards reading in English and their motivation to read English books, it is very likely that their proficiency in English will increase in the long term if this reading is kept up.

The results of the study also suggest that the success of a reading program depends on several factors, among which are: How we are able to motivate the students to read; how the program is organized and implemented; and how their reading is monitored. It also depends on how teachers feel about extensive reading. Unless the teachers are of the view that extensive reading is beneficial in promoting English language development among their students, they are not likely to exert their efforts to make the program a success. Thus, these factors should be given careful consideration when implementing an extensive reading program.

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