

## **The effect of passage analysis on building English sentences**

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This study investigates the extent to which Monitored Extensive Reading (MER) can enhance L2/FL learners' sentence building. Sixty-nine Taiwanese students forming two intact classes participated in the study. One class comprised the experimental group and the other the control group. Both classes followed the MER programme, which required the learners to read one book per week outside the classroom and complete the related follow-up activities designed by the teacher. In addition, the experimental group were assigned an extra task to select a passage of four to five sentences to analyze and make five original sentences using the self-selected vocabulary words. Participants' sentence building was measured pre- and post-test, revealing positive gains for the experimental group, who outperformed the control group in building correct, simple, longer sentences. These findings suggest learners need to pay deliberate attention to the language and structure of reading material if they are to produce their target language, in this case English.

**Key words:** monitored extensive reading; intensive reading; sentence building; explicit attention; complex sentences; EFL; ESL; Taiwan

### **Introduction**

Intensive Reading (IR) and Extensive Reading (ER) are educational approaches that have been widely investigated in the field of second/foreign language (L2/FL) learning. IR refers to direct instruction where students intentionally and deliberately learn the material at hand (Brown, 2007). In IR, students usually work on short, difficult texts under time pressure with the guidance of the language teacher. In ER, students read at their appropriate level of the target language wherever and whenever they can access the reading material in print or online (Arnold, 2009). ER refers to reading a large amount of material at the learner's current level and engages learners in implicit, incidental learning of the L2/FL (Day, 2002).

This study investigates the effectiveness of Monitored Extensive Reading (MER), a newly implemented approach to language instruction that combines principles from both IR and ER to create an environment in which L2/FL learners engage with the target language from different, but complementary angles. Through this relatively rare approach, MER aims to help students both comprehend the content of the reading and explicitly study some of its linguistic and structural aspects. One of the many benefits of combining IR and ER is the opportunity it provides to acquire skills in building English sentences, which is the focus of this study.

The study is located within a university in Taiwan where a large number of Year-1 students consistently fall short of producing correct English sentences to complete a specific writing assignment or perform successful communication. Based on consultation with English instructors and students, and a review of previous students'

submitted work, poorly constructed sentences with many run-ons and fragments were identified as a recurrent issue.

### **Literature review**

Research indicates that vocabulary building is key to language learning in terms of receiving and producing the target language. An effective way to improve vocabulary gain is the implementation of ER in a language class (Horst, 2005). In ER programmes, learners are encouraged to focus their attention on comprehending and enjoying their reading. They are advised against looking up unfamiliar words but should make use of context to guess the unknown vocabulary. Waring and McLean (2015) suggest that for a reading to be done extensively, “only a tiny percentage of attentional resources” (p. 163) should be resorted to during the reading. Studies suggest that ER supports many language-learning benefits, such as grammar (Mason, 2004), reading comprehension (Yamashita, 2008), reading speed (Yen, 2012), spelling (Day & Swan, 1998), vocabulary building (Horst, 2005), and listening ability (Webb & Chang, 2015). In ER, the emphasis is on overall comprehension of the material. Nation (2015) argues this approach leads to learners’ incidental learning, which mainly enhances receptive vocabulary acquisition. However, while receptive vocabulary facilitates learners’ listening and/or reading comprehension, it does not guarantee they can produce the target language.

The objective of L2/FL teaching is to equip students with the skills to produce the language, not just comprehend it. An effective way to achieve this objective is through the integration of reading and writing skills. As reading is the basis of writing, it should be used to teach and learn writing (Horning & Kraemer, 2013). Reading involves the essential mechanisms that make messages meaningful, that is, orthography, grammar, lexicon, semantics and pragmatics. Ferris and Hedgcock (2005) claimed that combining reading and writing in the same activity trained students to use varied types of structures in their essays. Also, reporting on EFL college students, (Tsai, 2006) observes that reading and writing skills are complementary and should not be introduced to students separately. This is supported by Hafiz and Tudor’s (1989) ER study, which used graded readers to increase students’ language competency and reported positive improvements in learners’ reading and writing skills, especially the use of syntax, in the target language. Watson (2005) also advises learners to read a lot to learn new words and linguistic structure as a pre-writing step.

While the above studies address the effect of reading on vocabulary learning and essay writing, the current study investigates the effectiveness of reading and passage analysis on acquiring sentence structure. The study aims to answer the following research question:

Does the addition of passage analysis and original sentence building to an MER programme increase students’ ability to generate simple, longer English sentences (i.e., S+V+IO+DO; S+V+O+A; S+V+DO+OP)?

### **The Monitored Extensive Reading (MER) programme**

The MER approach trains students to utilize the principles of both IR and ER at the same time. It combines IR and ER in the same activity, so teachers can present complementary ways to develop learners’ language ability, such as the building of simple English sentences. MER involves learners reading a given piece of reading

material at their own proficiency level and completing required follow-up activities, with the three key players (learners, peers, and teacher) cooperating. MER holds learners accountable for their reading and focuses their attention on both comprehending the message of the text, and the explicit learning of some self-selected linguistic items from that text. For example, learners may choose some unknown or partially known words to look up and learn.

In MER, the reading and most follow-up activities should be completed outside the classroom, with only the book discussion done in class for 10 minutes per week. This part of the programme is significant in helping learners reinforce their knowledge of the self-selected linguistic and structural aspects and ensures students share some responsibility for their own learning, and that of their peers. In this session, students are divided into flexible groups to cooperatively check their completed assignments and share the lessons learned from their readings. During the discussion, students are to listen to one another, ask and answer questions, and provide feedback. The teacher monitors students by tracking their weekly reading, designing the weekly follow-up activities, checking completed assignment, supervising in-class book discussions, and guiding students. The role of the teacher and peers in an MER programme is likely to make learners feel obliged to complete their reading and assignments so they can participate effectively in the regular in-class book discussions. Learners are required to complete their assignments and come to class prepared, with completed tasks.

In an MER programme, learners read books at their appropriate level and with some degree of choice (selected from the books available in the classroom library). They are required to read a book per week and complete the related follow-up activities. Learners do not have total freedom to choose their books and are required to finish the books they self-select. The limited freedom of choice is partly governed by budgetary factors but also because allowing a completely open choice risks students struggling to find appropriate books to read; and because, as Webb and Chang (2015) note, beginner readers with little or no independent reading experience find it challenging to choose the right reading material in terms of difficulty level. There is no stop-reading option in the MER programme to train learners to complete tasks they have started. MER stipulates that once students select or exchange their books, they are to complete their reading because no matter how they view a given book, they may in one way or another benefit from their reading.

## **Methodology**

### ***Participants***

The participants were 69 eighteen-year-old Year-1 university students from two intact classes taking the *Freshmen English* course at a private university in northern Taiwan. The students were allocated to classes based on their scores on the university's annual mock TOEIC test (range of scores: 335-395; average score: 355). No differences were detected in the proficiency level of the two classes. The participants majored in different fields, somewhat equally distributed across the two classes, comprising 40% Computer Science and Engineering students, 25% Mechanical Engineering students, 20% from Arts and Design, 10% from Electrical Engineering, and 5% from Chinese Linguistics and Literature. All participants had learned English as a required subject for six years in high school. The participants had a two-hour English class each week, and the same teacher (the author) taught both classes. Based on an oral class survey, very few students (2.13%) had prior experience with MER in English, in or outside the

classroom. For the purposes of this study the classes were designated as an experimental group (EG) and a control group (CG). The EG comprised 35 students, 19 male and 16 female; and the CG comprised 34 students, 17 male and 17 female. While the total number of students was 74, two participants from EG and three from CG were excluded from data analysis due to frequent absence, non-completion of homework, and missing either the pre- or post-test. The study lasted 14 weeks; 12 weeks for the treatment and two weeks for the pre- and post-tests.

#### ***Administration of the MER in this study***

In Week 1, participants from both groups were informed that they would each read 12 graded readers during the semester and were also required to complete the teacher-designed follow-up activities, answering questions about the text. The exercises included matching words with their definitions, putting events in chronological order, and true or false questions. Participants were each asked to self-select five vocabulary items and explicitly learn them. The CG were required to copy the five sentences in which the chosen words were used. The EG were required to self-select a passage of four to five sentences and pay deliberate attention to its structure. The rationale behind independent selection is to develop students' natural curiosity and motivate them "to create their unique learning goals" (McCombs, 2014, p. 256) including the freedom to focus on different features of sentence structure. The participants were asked to analyze the selected passage to see how words were put together to form sentences, especially longer simple sentences. They were encouraged to look at word class, subject/verb agreement, collocation, and punctuation to help "get a 'sense' or 'feeling' for how the language works" (Waring, 2009, p. 107). The EG participants were also required to use their self-selected words to generate five original sentences.

In Week 2, the teacher brought an identical set of graded readers to each class. Each set had three copies of 12 different titles (36 graded readers in total). The teacher randomly distributed the selected graded readers to the students and gave them each a book record sheet that they had to keep throughout the study. The teacher then demonstrated how to rotate the books among the students and had them switch their books afterwards. After each book exchange, the researcher ensured students filled out the record sheet with details about: the classmate from whom they obtained the book, the title of the book, the date, and the time spent on each reading.

After informing the participants about the requirements of the course, the teacher conducted a word-familiarity survey. Based on some knowledge of the students' proficiency level and the assumption that the difficulty level of the graded readers was within their reading ability, 60 English words (five from each of the 12 readers) were projected on the classroom screen. The researcher informed the participants that a word should be identified as unknown to them if they (1) could not read it; or (2) could read it but did not know its meaning. The results of the word-familiarity survey were recorded on the whiteboard. Based on the two criteria, the participants from both groups recognized 52 items out of 60. Of the 52 words recognized, the researcher chose 48 of which 24 were used for the pre-test and 24 for the post-test. Familiar words were selected in order to not cognitively overload the participants and to investigate the extent familiarity of words facilitates sentence making.

Throughout the operation of the MER programme students of both groups were required to upload their assignments via a learning management system as well as to print them out each week for class discussion. A regular 10 minute in-class book discussion was scheduled for each class. The students were divided into flexible groups

of four. They cooperatively checked each other's completed homework and shared some of the information or knowledge they gained from their reading. The EG were further required to discuss the extra homework activity by sharing their self-selected passages and explaining how words were put together to compose short and long simple English sentences. After the discussion, they had a two- to three-minute period to exchange their books and fill out the necessary information on their book record sheets. It is worth noting that the teacher regularly logged into the learning management system to check students' homework submissions, and allotted students who did not submit their assignments on time, or who had not completed the assignment, an extra day to do so. As the reading and follow-up activities were a part of a credit bearing course, incomplete weekly assignments would affect students' course grades.

### ***Data collection***

In Week 2, after the book distribution and analysis of the word-familiarity survey the pre-test was administered to both groups to assess their ability to build simple English sentences. Participants were given 24 English words and asked to generate 24 English sentences (one sentence for each word), with the direction that longer sentences were preferred. All the words were known to the students, and they were given 50 minutes to complete the task. Week 14 was the last session for the treatment in this study, so in Week 15 the post-test was administered to both groups. The post-test took the same form as the pre-test but using a different set of 24 words to avoid students repeating sentences from the pre-test. Pre- and post-test scores were not part of the course grade.

### ***Grading system***

A short or long simple sentence was considered incorrect if it deviated from the conventional English sentence structure. For example, lack of subject/verb agreement (i.e., The husband and the wife \*was betraying each other.); lack of verb/tense consistency (i.e., The boy \*achieve his goal before his mom returned home last night.); not following the correct word order (no examples of this error were found in participants' answers); misspelling the key word (i.e., I learned to weigh the \*proes and conses of my decisions before acting.); incomplete sentences (i.e. \*When the director completed the task.); or incorrect use of capitalization and punctuation (no examples of this error were found in participants' answers). Note that the above examples were taken from both EG and CG participants' completed tests. The pre- and post-tests were marked by two recruited raters, both senior EFL instructors at the university where the study was conducted. The inter-rater reliability was  $\alpha = 0.91$ .

### ***Data analysis***

For the group comparison, an independent *t* test was run to analyze the results of the pre- and post-tests for the EG and CG. In addition, a paired *t* test was run to compare changes within each group.

### **Results**

Pre- and post-test results are classified into four categories, presented in Tables 1–4. Table 1 contains the total number of produced sentences, including correct and incorrect sentences. Table 2 shows the number of correct sentences including the following types: S+V+DO; S+V+IO+DO; S+V+O+A; S+V+DO+OP. Table 3 shows the total number of

the following three sentence types: S+V+IO+DO; S+V+O+A; S+V+DO+OP including both correct and incorrect sentences. Table 4 deals only with the number of correct sentences of the following types: S+V+IO+DO; S+V+O+A; S+V+DO+OP.

Table 1 shows the total number of sentences (both correct and incorrect) produced by EG and CG in the pre- and post-tests. The results show no difference between the two groups in language proficiency at the beginning of the treatment. They started the *Freshman English* course at the same level ( $t = 0.11, p = .915$ ). Both groups showed statistically significant improvements in their English sentence building over the 12-week period; however, EG scored higher than CG ( $21.29 > 19.88$ ). EG gained more than three points on average ( $t = 17.41, p = .001$ ), and CG gained exactly two points on average, ( $t = 14.28, p = .001$ ). The total score of the post-test reveals a statistically significant difference between the two groups ( $t = 2.28, p = .005$ ).

Table 1. Total number of sentences produced by EG and CG

	EG		CG		t	df	Sig
	M	SD	M	SD			
Pre-test	17.94 (N=35)	2.41	17.88 (N=34)	2.27	0.11	67	0.915
Post-test	21.29 (N=35)	1.71	19.88 (N=34)	2.31	2.88	67	0.005*

\*p<0.05

Table 2 shows only the number of correct sentences, including the following types: S+V+DO; S+V+IO+DO; S+V+O+A; and S+V+DO+OP. The group comparison shows no significant differences between EG and CG before ( $t = -0.29, p = .770$ ) and after ( $t = 0.89, p = .375$ ) the intervention. Nevertheless, both groups demonstrated statistically significant improvements in generating correct English simple sentences of the four-mentioned types over the 12-week period. EG gained more than 3.5 points on average ( $t = 31.13, p = .001$ ), and CG gained more than 2.5 points on average ( $t = 23.06, p = .001$ ).

Table 2. Total number of correct sentences produced by EG and CG

	EG		CG		t	df	Sig
	M	SD	M	SD			
Pre-test	14.43 (N=35)	2.71	14.62 (N=34)	2.64	-0.29	67	0.770
Post-test	18.06 (N=35)	2.54	17.5 (N=34)	2.64	0.89	67	0.375*

\*p<0.05

Table 3 reveals the number of simple longer sentences generated by the two groups in the pre- and post-tests. It covers the sentence types S+V+IO+DO, S+V+O+A, and S+V+DO+OP, and includes both correct and incorrect sentences. EG and CG started at the same level ( $t = 0.58, p = 0.564$ ) and both showed statistically significant improvements in producing simple longer sentences over the 12-week period. However,

EG scored a higher average than CG,  $14.34 > 9.85$  ( $t = 7.02, p = .001$ ), demonstrating a statistically significant difference between the two groups. EG gained more than seven points on average, from 6.8 to 14.34 ( $t = 24.3, p = .001$ ). CG gained more than three points on average ( $t = 22.98, p = .001$ ).

Table 3. Total number of simple longer sentences produced by EG and CG

	EG		CG		<i>t</i>	df	Sig
	M	SD	M	SD			
Pre-test	6.8 (N=35)	1.66	6.56 (N=34)	1.8	0.58	67	0.564
Post-test	14.34 (N=35)	3.01	9.85 (N=34)	2.23	7.02	67	0.001*

\* $p < 0.05$

Table 4 presents only the number of correct simple longer sentences: S+V+IO+DO; S+V+O+A; S+V+DO+OP. EG and CG started at the same level ( $t = 0.44, p = .659$ ). However, the results of the post-test indicate that EG performed better than CG ( $t = 3.83, p = .001$ ). EG outperformed CG in building correct simple longer sentences, with a large effect size (Cohen's  $d = .9$ ). Moreover, both groups showed statistically significant improvements in generating correct simple longer sentences over the 12-week period. EG gained more than 5 points on average ( $t = 17.01, p = .001$ ). CG gained exactly 3 points on average ( $t = 21.9, p = .001$ ).

Table 4. Total number of correct simple longer sentences produced by EG and CG

	EG		CG		<i>t</i>	df	Sig
	M	SD	M	SD			
Pre-test	4.8 (N=35)	1.66	4.62 (N=34)	1.76	0.44	67	0.659
Post-test	9.91 (N=35)	3.08	7.68 (N=34)	1.47	3.83	67	0.001*

\* $p < 0.05$

## Discussion

To answer the research question: "Does the addition of passage analysis and original sentence building to an MER programme increase students' ability to generate simple, longer English sentences (i.e., S+V+IO+DO; S+V+O+A; S+V+DO+OP)?", the post-test results show that both groups statistically improved sentence building over the 12-week treatment. When grading all four types of simple sentence, both groups completed the task successfully, with EG and CG producing an average of 18 and 17.5 sentences respectively. Therefore, reading a book and completing the follow-up activities both in

and outside class on a weekly basis was effective for both groups in this study. However, separating simple sentences into short (S+V+DO) and long (S+V+IO+DO; S+V+O+A; S+V+DO+OP) sentences, the results show that the EG participants produced more long sentences than the CG participants. In the pre-test, EG and CG each produced sentences of 5.5 words on average ( $t = .69, p = .492$ ). However, the post-test results revealed a statistically significant difference between the two groups, with EG and CG generating sentences of 8.5 and 6.5 words on average, respectively ( $t = 8.16, p < .01$ ).

This demonstrates that the additional analysis of a self-selected passage and generation of five original sentences on a weekly basis further increased the EG participants' ability to successfully compose short and long simple English sentences. The extra task allowed the EG participants to apply their gained knowledge of how words are combined to produce the target language correctly, in both short and long English simple sentences, which are key steps in both general and academic essay writing. These results suggest that overall, the MER activities designed for this study are likely to improve students' writing conception in terms of content, organization, vocabulary, language use, mechanics, and total number of words and this is consistent with the finding of Lee and Hsu (2009).

### ***Factors leading to MER success***

Positive results were achieved in this study through the following steps:

1. Students had to spend an average of 2.5 hours a week on reading their weekly readers and completing the related follow-up activities.
2. The reading and related activities contributed to the course grade. Students felt obliged to complete their weekly assignment to maintain their overall course grade.
3. Students had to analyze the language and structure of a self-selected passage to learn how to compose sentences. Students had to focus their attention on learning the techniques to produce meaningful and syntactically correct output.
4. The participants were not cognitively overloaded. Choosing a small number of words to learn is realistic and achievable, and can also be motivating. In the current study, both EG and CG completed the weekly five-word requirement without complaint.

### **Conclusion**

The current study shows that combining extensive reading with related follow-up activities provides an opportunity to increase learners' ability to generate both long and short correct, simple English sentences. To create a rich instructional environment for learners, some principles of both IR and ER educational approaches should be part of a language syllabus. Teachers have an important role to play in MER. They should consistently select books; design and implement related follow-up activities; supervise in-class book discussion; track learners' reading journey; track and check students' submitted assignments; and direct and guide students to monitor their own progress. In doing so, they can push their students to do extensive reading rather than just complete the set tasks of passage analysis and sentence building. As a result, teachers will produce learners who can comprehend language, read and listen to language, and produce spoken and written language. Peers also play an instructive role in an MER programme. As used in this study, MER is an effective method to train L2/FL learners to simultaneously do their reading extensively and intensively.

The limitations of the current study include its focus on quantitative data and sample size. Findings could have been enhanced by including qualitative data, such as interviews with participants about their perceptions of changes in their linguistic ability. Further, the findings would have been more reliable if additional participants with diverse language proficiency had been recruited. The relatively small sample size inhibits generalization of the results for all levels of English learners participating in an MER programme. In future studies, researchers could increase the sample size and diversify the range of proficiency levels of learners. Future research could also include a delayed post-test to examine whether learners retain their ability to generate correct, simple longer English sentences.

### About the author

Rachid Bezzazi is a language instructor at Yuan-Ze University and a PhD applicant in TESOL at National Taiwan Normal University, Taiwan. His research and instructional interests include Extensive Reading, Monitored Extensive Reading, Cooperative Learning, and Cooperative Teaching. He is also interested in the effect of CLIL in Taiwan.

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