

The Effects of Control for Ability Level on EFL Reading of Graded Readers

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Received: August 17, 2011

Accepted: September 26, 2011

Published: January 1, 2012

doi:10.5539/elt.v5n1p49

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5539/elt.v5n1p49>

Abstract

The study was aimed to examine how EFL learners of English reacted to graded readers in terms of reading strategy use, comprehension, speed, and attitude as well as motivation when control for ability level was determined. Eighty Thai high school students placed into their own reading level of graded readers by the scores gained from the graded reading-vocabulary size test (Wan-a-rom, 2010) participated in a six-week-extensive reading project. Through observations, semi-structured interviews, book journals, and post-reading questionnaires, it was found that both male and female participants increased the use of strategies. When moving through other graded readers at the same level the numbers of strategies utilized by males and females were different at the 0.05 level of significance and the time spent on reading decreased on average. Evidently, comprehension, attitude and motivation were cultivated. Interesting information about students' interaction with graded readers was found and discussed for pedagogical practice.

Keywords: Extensive reading program, Graded readers, Control for ability level, Graded-reading vocabulary size test, EFL

1. Introduction

Extensive reading (ER) has for many years been recognized as a very successful approach to second / foreign language education. It is defined as reading in relatively large amount of texts compared with what is called intensive reading, which usually involves a slower reading a small amount of materials and often with translation exercises. An extensive reading program is administered "to develop good reading habits, to build up knowledge of vocabulary and structure, and to encourage a linking for reading" (Richards and Schmidt, 2002: 193-194). The benefits of extensive reading have been widely documented in studies that range in scope from large-scale implementation across whole school districts (Elley, 1991; Lightbown, 1992) to case studies of single participants (Cho and Krashen, 1994; Parry, 1991).

Writing ability is claimed to improve as a result of extensive reading (Elley and Mangubhai, 1983; Hafiz and Tudor, 1990; Janopolous, 1986; Mason and Krashen, 1997; Robb and Susser, 1989; Tsang, 1996) as is spelling (Polak and Krashen, 1988). Reading extensively has also been reported to increase the motivation to read and the development of a positive attitude towards reading in the second language (Cho and Krashen, 1994; Camiciottoli, 2001; Constantino, 1994; Hayashi, 1999; Holden, 2003; Leung, 2002; Mori, 2004; Yamashita, 2004). Reading speed (Bell, 2001; Robb and Susser, 1989) and oral proficiency (Cho and Krashen, 1994) are said to have improved after reading large amounts of text. There are a number of vocabulary studies that contribute evidence for considerable gains in vocabulary from extensive reading (Day, Omura and Hiramatsu, 1991; Dupuy and Krashen, 1993; Grabe and Stoller, 1997; Hayashi, 1999; Mason and Krashen, 1997; Pitts, White and Krashen, 1989; Robb and Susser, 1989; Waring and Takaki, 2003).

Although all of this research has provided evidence to promote the need for extensive reading in foreign language learning contexts, the results of some extensive reading studies are questionable. Among the experimental procedures in treatments which can cause flaws in the design of extensive reading studies, the ability level of participants has been one of the factors weakening the results. In some studies, levels were controlled or matched with similarly performing pairs in other groups (Elley and Mangubhai, 1983; Renandya, Rajan and Jacobs 1999; Robb and Susser, 1989). In other studies ability levels were not controlled (Dupuy and Krashen, 1994; Lai, 1993). Horst (2005) stated that one of the problems reducing reliable measurement of vocabulary gains, when a measure of

vocabulary size was administered to participants, was that participants were not guided to choose extensive reading materials at the level of difficulty that offered more word learning challenges. This caused the results of incidental vocabulary learning to be misleading when pre-and post-test treatments were employed. The lack of control for ability level can have adverse effects on experiments. From a vocabulary perspective, Nation (1997), in addressing the language learning benefits of extensive reading, has argued that adequate control of text difficulty encourages participants to gain vocabulary incidentally through meaning focused reading of an appropriate text. In terms of ability level, participants of a specific level can match their prior knowledge with a word recognized in a text during reading, and then their knowledge will be enriched and strengthened by later meetings with the word. In other words, participants can pick up the words incidentally while reading for meaning. However, Nation comments that in some experimental studies on incidental vocabulary learning there have been flaws in research design. In experiments where the pre-treatment ability levels of the participants are not controlled for, or where participants of various ability levels read the same text, the results might not reflect what has really happened in the experiment. Controlling ability levels is crucial in getting reliable results. There are two reasons for control of ability levels. Firstly, if there are too many unknown words and participants lack motivation, then they will not make many gains (e.g., Lai, 1993). Conversely, if there is a lack of new input there will be few chances to learn and few chances to demonstrate learning. In other words, participants who are given materials that are too easy are not challenged and growth is hampered (Chall and Conard, 1991). To achieve its major goal of helping participants learn to read in the second language, extensive reading needs to be practiced with suitable reading material, that is, with the appropriate level of readability. Starting with the right level of reading leads to reading for enjoyment and eventually builds a habit of reading. To do this, second language texts, which are specially simplified with graded vocabulary and controlled linguistic features, are required. The most available material of this kind is graded readers.

In controlling ability levels, in the research literature, there is a validated test for placement for extensive reading as suggested in Wan-a-rom's study (2010). The test can measure learner's vocabulary size to fit in the reading schemes set up for graded readers series and to direct participants to their appropriate graded readers reading level. When appropriate placement is made, it is interesting to explore how EFL readers who are placed at their own reading level read graded readers as no research on this has been conducted because of the lack of appropriate placement measures in extensive reading with graded readers.

This study then involves graded readers exploited in extensive reading. It aims to look at how EFL learners of English react to graded readers when control for ability level is determined. In response to the major research question, specific research questions are addressed in this study:

- 1) How do EFL learners from different genders (males and females) read graded readers of their own reading levels in terms of reading strategies, comprehension and speed?
- 2) How do EFL learners react to graded readers of their own reading levels in terms of attitudes and motivations?

The study will allow teachers to more accurately understand how EFL learners read graded readers which leads to appropriate activities assigned when extensive reading is established. To some degree, it may also allow increased accuracy in research on extensive reading.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Extensive Reading

As practiced in a wide range of studies, the belief underlying extensive reading is that participants should learn to read by reading (Krashen, 2004: 37) and reading more makes reading better, faster and with fuller understanding (Nuttall, 1982: 168). Extensive reading has been used as an approach to teaching reading which can be achieved by reading large quantities of text. Quantity of reading means that the participants do not have time to look in depth at the reading or translate it, and have to learn how to read as they would in their first language.

Day and Bamford (1998) characterize extensive reading as the relatively fast reading of a large amount of longer, easy-to-understand material, with reading done mostly outside of the classroom and at each learner's own pace and level. There should be minimal or no use of a dictionary. Thus, participants are centered on experiencing pleasurable and useful reading. Towards this end, a number of scholars (e.g., Bamford and Day, 1997; Hill, 1997a, 2001; Nation, 2001) have pointed out that extensive reading can be part of a course in the following ways:

Extensive reading can be managed as the main focus of a reading course. Participants are given substantial time for in-class reading, followed by activities such as participants' oral book reports, and homework reading.

Extensive reading can be adopted as an add-on to an ongoing reading course. Extensive reading can be started off in class, but most will be done with participants reading self-selected books for homework.

Extensive reading can be exploited as an extra-curricular activity. This can be managed with a teacher guiding and encouraging interested participants who read books in their spare time and meet regularly to discuss them.

Despite being differently organized, the three approaches to extensive reading have the same end: participants are expected to gradually build up a habit of reading. In second / foreign language contexts, extensive reading can reach its ultimate goal when second / foreign language participants engage with a large volume of suitable reading materials. In practice, however, there is no agreement on the details of 'extensive reading' among researchers and practitioners. There are various points of view about the number of pages which should be read. Some say thirty pages an hour (Hill and Thomas, 1988), for instance. Others say 'a book' a week at the learner's ability level is an adequate amount (Nation and Wang, 1999). Alternatively, the time spent reading is used as a goal, such as the amount of 60 hours over three months (Hafiz and Tudor, 1989). Susser and Robb (1990) have argued that 'extensive' reading cannot be counted by the number of hours or pages. It varies due to type of program, level and other variables and more important than quantity is the teacher's and participants' perception that 'extensive' reading is distinguished from 'intensive' reading.

2.2 Graded Readers

Graded readers are books that have been specially written for language learners. Hill and Thomas (1988: 44) define a graded reader as a book 'written to a grading scheme,' whether it is a simplified version of a previously written work or an original work written in simple language. The aim is to develop the habit of reading by gradually stepping the learner through difficulty levels by reading meaningful, enjoyable and engaging material (Susser and Robb, 1990; Hill, 2001; Waring, 1997).

To achieve the aim, graded readers are written to make reading easy, motivating, enjoyable and accessible for the learner with a very careful control of grammar, vocabulary and other aspects of the language. The books can be fiction or non-fiction. Fiction includes drama, romance, thrillers, science, adventure, crime or classics of literature, while the non-fiction series include biographies, factual reports and profiles (Hill and Thomas, 1988; Hill, 2001). Typically, graded readers vary in length from a few pages to over a hundred depending on the level. Despite the difference in length, graded readers at all levels are written to look and read like the books that the language participants might read in their first language (Waring, 1997).

The levels of graded readers normally cover a range beginning at around 300-500 headwords (word families) and going to 2,000 to 3,000 headwords. According to surveys by Hill and Thomas (1988) and Hill (1997b, 2001), there are thousands of graded readers of different kinds available on the worldwide market. They appear in a large number of forms and the series they are in are not identical with each other in the number of levels, the amount of vocabulary at each level, and the vocabulary lists on which they are based.

However, one of the main functions of graded readers is to create a series of stepping stones for second language participants to eventually read unsimplified materials. A graded reading scheme is designed to form a set of stages, which consist of a series of vocabulary and grammar levels to control readability at each level of the scheme specially designed for each series (Wan-a-rom, 2008). A low proficiency learner would begin reading books at the lower level of the scheme, and when reading at that level was comfortable, would move on to books at the next level. Good graded reading schemes need to take participants close to unsimplified text at the highest levels of the schemes (Nation and Wang, 1999). The vocabulary in the schemes is usually grouped in wordlists as guidelines for writers and editors of the books. Graded reader publishers usually establish different levels for readers according to the number of headwords. Hill (2001) says that graded readers are assumed to help participants in four ways: 1) They motivate, 2) They help develop the skill of reading fluently, 3) They help language learning by providing a context for language that enhances and extends the participants' grasp of the lexis and syntax, and 4) They offer the most accessible source of exposure to the target language.

3. Research Method

3.1 Participants

A total of eighty high school students of English as a foreign language (EFL), including 40 males and 40 females, aged 16-18 years old, joined the study. Their mother language was Thai and all of them had never lived in English speaking countries.

3.2 Instrumentation

3.2.1 Background Questionnaire

In the first meeting, a background questionnaire was conducted to collect information about the participants' backgrounds, including their native language, the length of staying in English speaking countries, and experience

with outside reading.

3.2.2 Post-reading Questionnaire

After reading a graded reader, each participant also filled in a questionnaire in class. In total, each participant filled in three questionnaires, which contained the same questions and had the same format. The questionnaire consisted of four questions. The first question asked the participants to select the strategies they used among three strategies, namely the word meaning strategy, the sentence structure strategy, and the world knowledge strategy. Prior to the participant's filling out the questionnaire, the researcher informed the participants that they could choose one or more strategies to answer this question. The researcher provided the participants the Thai explanation of the three strategies. The word meaning strategy referred to using Thai definition of words. The sentence structure strategy referred to using grammatical rules to analyze the sentences, such as the subject, the verb, and the object, or the tenses like the present, the past and the future. The world knowledge strategy referred to using the participants' general world knowledge related to the content of the story. In developing the questionnaire, the researcher placed the emphasis on comprehension, which reveals a reader's resources for comprehending the text. The three strategy options were based on Block's (1986) taxonomy, which categorized strategies into two levels: general comprehension and local linguistic strategies. By following Block's (1986) strategy divisions, the word meaning strategy and the sentence structure strategy belong to local linguistic levels and the world knowledge strategy, general comprehension level. The second, third and fourth questions asked about why they used the strategies, why they did not use the strategies, and how much time they took to finish each graded reader respectively.

3.2.3 Book Journal

In a similar manner, the participants were asked to keep writing a book journal after finishing each graded reader at a time. A book journal is a great place for readers to react to what they read. The readers can find out exactly how they feel about the characters; the readers may gain insight about the theme and plot; and the readers can expand their overall enjoyment of the literature. In the present study, a book journal was used as: (1) a record of the words the readers might come across and thought were unknown to them when reading; (2) a summary chart of the story; and (3) a reflection paper of how the readers felt about what they read and how they dealt with the text.

3.2.4 Semi-structured Interviews

Each participant engaged in semi-structured interviews in Thai three times after they had finished reading each graded reader. This was used as another data source to provide solid evidence of how they read and understood each graded reader. The interviews were audiotaped and transcribed. The excerpts from the interviews introduced in the article were all translated from the original Thai by the researcher.

3.2.5 Observations

Observation was exploited as another way of collecting data about how readers reacted to the text. During a meeting session which was scheduled weekly for social interaction within a reading community, as one of the members for reading community, a researcher took fieldnotes on their behavior (e.g., asking a question, yawning, and laughing) and on their statements (e.g., how they enjoyed reading, how difficult the books were for them, and to what extent they understood the stories). The researcher also acted as a participant observer, read all the graded readers and often talked about the stories and characters with them in the meeting sessions. To interpret their thoughts and feelings and achieve an emic (insiders') perspective, the researcher attempted to have similar experience to all participants.

3.2.6 The Graded Reading Vocabulary-size Test

The graded reading vocabulary-size test developed by Wan-a-rom (2010) was used as a placement test to control readers' reading ability. The participants were assigned to sit the test and the scores were used to direct them into their appropriate level of reading graded readers as suggested by Wan-a-rom (2010). After that, the students were given a chance to choose a graded reader of their own reading level and to read at their own pace outside the class.

3.2.7 Graded Readers

In this study, an extensive reading project was conducted using graded readers as reading material. Throughout the project, the participants were asked to read three books selected from the Oxford Bookworms Series and Penguin Reader Series available according to the level each participant was assigned to by their test scores. To avoid a tight schedule, the duration for the participants to read each graded reader was two weeks as suggested by Nation and Wang (1999). They argue that second / foreign language learners need to read at least one graded reader every two weeks in order to get enough repetitions to establish substantial vocabulary growth through incidental learning.

3.2.8 Statistics

Simple statistics such as percentage, mean, standard deviation, and t-test were used to process the data gained from each research instrument.

4. Results and Discussion

In response to Research Question 1: How do EFL learners react to graded readers of their own reading level in terms of reading strategies, comprehension and speed?, both quantitative and qualitative data were used with explanations drawn from data gained from each technique employed to collect data in the study.

As shown in Table 1, from Book 1 to Book 3 of graded readers at the same level, both gender groups increased the use of strategies. The average number of strategies applied by males increased slightly; on the other hand, the positive trend for females' strategy use increased markedly at Book 3. The *t*-test results showed that the differences between the numbers of strategies utilized by males and females were not significant at Book 1 and Book 2 of graded readers at the same level, but the difference was significant at Book 3 ($t = -2.53, p < .05$). That is, based on the data gained, females used significantly more strategies than males to comprehend Book 3. With regard to all the data gained from the three graded readers at the same level, the results suggest that gender can be a factor influencing strategy application.

As we can see in Table 2, both gender groups reported similar tendencies of strategy use. The word meaning strategy was employed the most frequently, the sentence structure strategy, the second, and the world knowledge strategy, the least. Both genders mainly relied on local linguistic strategies. They tended to figure out the word meanings. Moreover, there was a significant difference in the word meaning strategy use between males and females; that is, females applied the word meaning strategy significantly more frequently than males. This can be attributed to females' high interest and motivation in reading and they would like to read the story in detail.

To illustrate what was found in Tables 1 and 2 qualitative data can be used, summarized, and interpreted. Data from observations and book journals revealed that the participants seemed very happy when they reported what they had read to friends. Each time they met one another they were interested to know how far each had moved with the assigned story. Questions about what the stories were like and what happened or continued to happen in the story were raised to exchange the ideas about the story. Some explained what they read with pictures they prepared or some tried to use a mind map technique to help others follow what they were telling. Observational data as a whole indicated that most of them understood the story quite well. In the first meeting, some of the participants seemed reluctant to get involved in questioning others and just listened to what they were told. In later meetings, most of them enjoyed questioning and predicted what would happen next in each other's story. Data gained supported the idea that most of the participants developed their skill in sharing ideas about their reading. It is likely that most of them could work well with the text and understood what they read. When words in book journals were checked, it was evident that in each graded reader most of them found few words which seemed unknown to them. Evidently, most of the words unknown to the participants included the words related to the topics or themes of the stories which writers could not avoid using when main issues were focused on in the story such as *exploded*, *client*, *criminal*, and *pornography* etc. However, when interviewed, most of them reported strategies used to deal with the unknown words and obtain possible meaning to gain understanding of what it meant as a whole. The reading strategy or technique they employed the most was a word meaning strategy through contextual guessing. Some said that they could evaluate their guesses from word repetition. In addition, some said that they could learn the unknown word from the context the words appeared in and their repetition or that they could learn how to guess with graded reader text and succeed in guessing word meanings more. The following interview excerpts support what were mentioned.

Through a whole story, I did not find many difficult words in my graded reader. I found a few words which looked unfamiliar to me in different contexts. Usually I like consulting a dictionary when I have difficulty understanding the meaning of a word. But for reading a graded reader, I felt relaxed and kept reading even when I came across the unknown word. I looked through whole sentences or phrases and tried to understand the words around the word that seems unknown to me. In reading a graded reader, I found that most of the words were familiar and easy to understand, so I could understand the content of the sentence which later could be a support clue for my guessing. Keeping on reading without looking up for word meaning, I enjoyed guessing the meaning of the unknown word I encountered because the context was so supportive. To gain more understanding of the word, what I did was consider whether the word referred to a human, an animal, a plant, food or an action. Sometimes I could tell which part of speech the unknown word was, but that was not important. Then, I tried to figure out its meaning by using a sense of what it could mean in sentences or phrases around. I think when we know more words around the difficult words it is very useful to get the meaning of such words for reading of this kind. And this helps me guess the

meaning of a word correctly. Most importantly, unlike looking up for words in a dictionary, guessing does not distract me from what I am reading which can decrease my enjoyment. (Somsak)

Regarding the same issue, one participant could add more explanation to what she benefited from guessing under supportive circumstances:

Actually, I prefer guessing to using a dictionary when I get stuck with the difficult word since it takes time and I am quite lazy. In general, I often find that it is hard to guess the meaning of a new word as I usually need to understand many words around the unknown words. But when I read a graded reader which I was assigned to, I found it different. I could guess the meaning of a new word more easily and I felt sure that I got it right in its circumstance. Most of the words appearing around the difficult words were familiar to me and I could make use of them to guess the meaning of the unknown word. This makes me realize that if I know most of the words around the unknown word, I will have a better chance to learn to know what the unknown word means. One more thing that I felt happy about reading a graded reader I was assigned to was I was not worried about the word which might be unknown to me when I could not guess its meaning. When I continued reading, I found that the same words reappeared many times in different contexts. So, even if I cannot guess the meaning of a new word, I don't worry if I understand the content of the sentence. This can be something helping me figure out the meaning the unknown word conveys in such contexts. Moreover, if I come across that word again and again in the book, the meaning will become more precise. It seems to me that reading a graded reader can be a lesson for guessing a word meaning and I can find the correct meaning after I encounter the word many times. So, I can check whether my guess is correct or not. (Saibua)

For more information, one of the participants mentioned how she happened to learn the unknown word when reading a graded reader at her own ability:

Reading a graded reader I was assigned to was enjoyable since I was given a chance to choose the title I like to read. The most important thing was I was sure that I could handle my reading task with a graded reader since I was assigned to my own level. So, I started reading this story with expectation and it did not disappoint me. I learned a lot from the story because I could understand the whole story without looking up for a word in a dictionary which I usually do. To me, most of the words in the story were familiar to me and there were few words I don't know and I could get the meaning from the content. More than that, I felt that I had a good opportunity to learn new words from the context. The familiar words seemed clearer to me when I met them again and again. Some words I thought I was not sure about what they meant but when they appeared again and again, I thought I could learn to understand what they meant in different contexts. Likewise, such familiar words helped me guess and understand the unfamiliar words. I feel like learning new words from reading a graded reader although I am not sure whether I can remember them or not when I happen to meet them again in other contexts. (Sirinya)

The suitable context which consists of words familiar to readers supports reading strategies particularly guessing from context. This emphasizes that controlled words in terms of graded reading vocabulary influence readability. The data from questionnaires and interview excerpts at the outset give a clear picture of the positive effect of a good match of student's vocabulary size and the controlled levels of graded reading schemes. For one, when participants are assigned to their own reading level of graded readers, there are not many unknown words and such words can be learned through assistance of the words they know as supportive context for successful guessing (word meaning and sentence structure). On the other hand, if they get started with the certain level of their own or the below one, few difficult words are found through a whole story and most of them can be understood by use of guessing from context and their repetition in sentences.

However, this might be only a partial explanation of use of sufficient vocabulary knowledge toward graded reading. It appears that an appropriate proportion of known words can boost readability in terms of reading comprehension. To clarify how vocabulary size enhances graded reading, how participants feel when they engage in reading at their own level and what speed they read at we need to look at the time spent on reading graded readers.

When book journals were read, it was found that some participants were worried about their reading before they got started with reading on their own. They thought that they would spend much time finding the meaning of difficult words as they usually did when reading unsimplified English texts and this often slowed their reading rate and made reading in English boring. Later, they found it enjoyable when engaged in reading graded readers as shown in the excerpts from their diary:

In my opinion, after reading a graded reader I was assigned to, I felt that I could read much faster than expected. In fact, I don't have any good background of English vocabulary. I don't like to read a long story either. So, I thought I had to spend much time rereading and interpreting the meaning of words in order to understand a whole text. This worried me when I was assigned to tell what I had read to friends when we met each week. I was afraid that I would be behind what was scheduled and I felt that I was unconfident in handling the reading task. I thought reading an

English book such as a novel was very difficult. I imagined I would not understand it because there might be lots of words I did not know. When reading this graded reader, I realized that I could read it faster than expected. I could recall the meaning of words in the book when confronted with the same words and that made me feel confident and happy. I think that I can learn some new words that seem unfamiliar to me as well as the words I have gained knowledge of. I also found that this book was written in easy English structures and used simple and easy words to narrate a story so that I did not get stuck with what the story was like and read without dictionary consultation. I can say that reading the English book like this can help me speed up my reading in the long run. (Supote)

Responding to the same situation, one of the participants stated the following:

I had fun reading this book since there were lots of basic words which enhanced my reading speed. Moreover, those words made the story understandable so that I had got enjoyment and felt like reading more and more. My story concerned crimes and detectives who investigated the criminal. Although the story seemed complicated, I could understand what happened in the story since simple words were used to narrate the story. The interesting plot and easy words could build my imagination about what would happen next and I wanted to continue until the end. There were some words I did not understand but I could interpret their meanings by guessing from what I knew in sentences. When I read this book, it seems to me that I am reading what I should read and I am happy if I happen to read another English book like this. (Suwakon)

Table 3 summarized the descriptive statistics. The results revealed that both males and females, on average, spent less time reading these graded readers when they moved through the texts at the same level. Both gender groups spent the least amount of time reading Book 3, and the most time, Book 1. It can be noted that when reading graded readers at the same level, the average time for males varied from 2.6 hours to 5.2 hours whereas females ranged from 3.1 hours to 4.5 hours. As a whole, female participants' time span was much shorter than that of males.

To answer the second research question: "How do EFL learners react to graded readers of their own appropriate reading level in terms of motivation and attitude?", more qualitative data were needed. The motivations and attitudes participants had were revealed through the data gained from the excerpts of journals and interviews. All participants began with their appropriate reading level and this increased readability. They became comfortable with what they were assigned to. Whether or not reading a graded reader at a certain level increases a positive attitude towards reading in English can be found in a journal excerpt from one of the participants:

Reading a graded reader which I was assigned to changed my attitude toward reading an English book. Personally, I like reading but usually read Thai books since I can understand them deeply. When reading an English book, I always feel sleepy and many words I don't know make me bored and confused, so I don't like reading an English book. One more thing is I am too lazy to consult a dictionary that I think wastes my time during my reading. After reading the English book like graded readers, I realize that I don't need to know every word in order to understand a story, but I can guess some word meanings and understand the content of sentences or what the author wanted to convey to readers. In this book, I found that there were not many difficult words and I was able to make sense of such words from the sentences they were in. This made me spend less time finishing each page. On the whole, I spend less time than expected to finish an English page. I think if I find another English book like this one I will be able to finish it easily. I promise myself that I have a plan to find another English book to read from now on. (Somchai)

According to the above excerpt, it could be said that control for ability levels helps the participants successfully manage reading texts at their own ability and they became comfortable with reading. As a result, understanding of the text being read could help participants gain more confidence and change their attitude towards reading graded readers gradually. Besides, it is quite obvious that a promise the participant made about further reading English books could be regarded as reading motivation which was influenced by interest and realization of achievement. In a similar manner, satisfaction with reading graded readers which leads to motivation was found in the interview with another of the participants.

I have enjoyed reading graded readers at my own reading level. I feel satisfied when I read English with no difficulty. I feel relaxed and the three books which match with my reading ability were interesting. This brought me a big surprise that I could understand an English story without looking up a word in a dictionary. I feel satisfied when I finish one book and would like to read another book. I just realize that my length of the reading sessions increased when I compared them after I had finished the three books. This is a good sign for me that I can survive reading an English book on my own for the first time since I felt nervous at the beginning. I will keep it as my good experience in reading English books and would like to read more when time allows. (James)

As found, reading confidence stimulated by reading at the appropriate level helps build positive attitude as well as motivation in reading. When motivation to read in English becomes very high reading for pleasure occurs. It means

that when readers are completely involved in reading while highly motivated or engaged, a full understanding of texts can lead to pleasure. From the two excerpts, it could be said that a positive attitude as well as motivation to read more resulted from successful reading at the appropriate reading level. However, a title or a story line could affect readers' motivation and a more challenging reading role is expected as seen in the interview with one of the participants.

I was assigned to read *Jane Eyre* and I felt satisfied with the story. I remember that I spent less time when compared with the other two stories since I like the characters and it seemed romantic to me. I think if I have enough time I will find another English book like *Jane Eyre* to read. Actually, I could read and understand the two stories, but most of the scenes were mysterious and I felt bored with them since I did not want to be serious about what would happen next and what the solutions would be like. I like the book which depicts the characters' emotions and the scenes in detail like in *Jane Eyre*. If possible, I will find the original work of *Jane Eyre* to read as I heard that the original one is more realistic. I will try it and see how much I can read original English in such a version. It will be challenging to me then. One more thing is reading of this kind should be done outside the class and a reading club would be good for this activity and students in school whenever possible. (Joy)

Another interesting point found in the participants' book journals related to what they thought about reading of this kind. Most of the participants viewed reading graded readers as not only encouraging them to move to reading more English books in the future but also expecting that there might be a reading community like the study created in the school as a form of a reading club. This point of view about extensive reading with graded readers indicated that reading graded readers at their own reading levels changed their attitude towards reading in English and they turned out to feel like reading more graded readers which implied a change in motivation as seen in the following excerpt of a book journal as a reflection on the project when the participant finished the three books:

I have never read English books like this because I think that I cannot understand its story and it is difficult for me to understand the contents in the book. More than this, I don't want to waste my time reading what I cannot understand for sure. When the teacher asked us to join the project, I felt reluctant at first, but followed my friends as they said it would be our new experience. I sat the test and was assigned to the level which the test scores indicated. The teacher chose me one book entitled "Gulliver's Travels" at Level 2 of Penguin Readers. I was not sure whether or not I could finish the book and I spent an entire week on it. The book was full of fantasy and imagination, but it seemed vivid to me because of many easy and simple words used to describe all incidents. It was not that difficult to understand the story as I expected. The first book challenged me a lot and I could make it especially when I told a whole story to my friend and I got it all. It would be a shame if I did not join this project. I noticed that I could read a bit faster when reading the other two graded readers. I think three books are of use for my start. It may be better if teachers in Department of Foreign Languages can set up a reading community in school such as a reading club and have all students read the English books of this kind. I think reading graded readers might be better than reciting the English vocabulary since word meanings in sentences sometimes vary depending on the context. At least, I think reading graded readers can help me remember more common words and learn how the words work in a sentence. (Rungrawee)

It is evident that a good match of learner's vocabulary size and the graded reading vocabulary scheme as control for reading ability can successfully foster reading speed and comprehension as well as cultivate positive attitude and motivation. This clearly gives a picture of how EFL learners read graded readers and data gained from various sources can be solid evidence to support the use of extensive reading with graded readers as an effective approach to reading for pleasure in an EFL context.

5. Conclusions

According to the data gained from all the research instruments, the results gave information about how EFL learners responded to reading graded readers when control for ability level was established. This furthered understanding of the relationship between vocabulary size and the readability of graded readers.

In terms of reading strategies, both gender groups reported similar tendencies of strategy use. The word meaning strategy was employed the most frequently, the sentence structure strategy, the second, and the world knowledge strategy, the least. Both genders mainly relied on local linguistic level strategy use. They tended to figure out the word meanings in order to understand what was being read. With regard to reading speed and comprehension, the results revealed that both males and females, on average, spent less time reading these graded readers as they moved from one reader to another. In terms of motivation and attitude, as a whole, the results revealed that reading comprehension fostered by reading at appropriate level stimulated confidence in reading which led to positive attitude as well as motivation in reading.

6. Instructional Suggestions and Implications

The study results indicate that extensive reading with graded readers is beneficial to EFL beginners, and the type of reading materials (graded readers) students read does have effects on development of reading speed and language learning as well as motivation and attitude. Graded readers of the students' appropriate levels generate students' reading strategy use for both comprehension and speed. They also build positive attitudes as well as motivation. This serves to indicate the success of the natural exposure and repetition of vocabulary as contained in graded readers, in learners' vocabulary acquisition. On the basis of the study results, pedagogical suggestions could be made as follows.

6.1 *Materials and Attitude and Motivation*

Regarding reading materials in extensive reading, there should be graded readers available at vocabulary levels that match the students' vocabulary knowledge. In order to cultivate the reading habit through positive attitude and motivation, students should be placed into their own appropriate reading schemes of graded readers. As found in the study, all participants regarded as beginners reading English texts since they have never read simplified stories of long novels in English before said that they felt satisfied with the level of difficulty where they were assigned and read the book with considerable speed when they moved to another graded reader at the same level. The results remind teachers that starting with the appropriate reading level of difficulty can successfully foster reading strategy use as well as build a positive attitude and motivation toward reading in English which can bring them confidence in reading English texts. However, after they become familiar with their own reading in English, for those who might feel like reading some English texts beyond their ability, teachers should introduce them to challenging or authentic texts which allow them to learn to understand the content using other reading strategies such as consulting a dictionary and word glossaries which might be presented in class. This means that teachers can help students accumulate their vocabulary for actual reading of real materials since vocabulary gained from reading graded readers are not sufficient for reading authentic texts (Nation and Wang, 1999).

The selection of graded readers needs particular attention. As found in one of the participants' book journal, the title of a graded reader or its content should be taken into consideration when fostering the reading habit. She reported that reading graded readers was fun since the story was fun and interesting. Students can stop reading a graded reader whenever they want to and feeling bored with the story line or content would be one of the causes of unfinished reading. Teachers should be aware of this and individual preferences should be respected and supported. As Leung (2002) suggests, provision of interesting materials at an appropriate level of difficulty is one of the key factors that contribute to a learner's motivation to read in L2.

6.2 *Reading Strategy Use*

According to the results, most of the participants in the study were found to use similar reading strategies and they relied on bottom-up processing rather than top-down processing in order to gain a full understanding of words and sentences. It is possible that since students may not have acquired skills, they were unable to exercise other strategies which were necessary for extensive reading even with graded readers, and may have relied only on the bottom-up decoding approach they learned in normal English lessons. Inevitably, the more books they read the more difficulties they may have encountered. One way of improving this is to have several lessons aimed at facilitating essential strategies for extensive reading before the introduction of an extensive reading activity (e.g., Day and Bamford, 2002), so that students are able to use strategies whenever and wherever necessary. If students could detach themselves from their experience, they would be more likely to exercise their reading ability and to experience reading for meaning and pleasure. While students receive grammar-translation based instruction in most of their normal English lessons, teachers have to address this and encourage students to use new skills in their reading. With respect to strategy, teachers should be flexible by allowing students to employ different strategies including even an intervention of L1 language in order to gain more understanding as they try to achieve their goal for reading graded readers at a time as scholars in the field (e.g., Gardner, 1990; Sheorey and Mokhtari, 2001) have noted that the success of second language reading relies mostly on the application of strategies and readers who are able to use reading strategies or have learned reading strategies may have few problems with comprehension.

6.3 *The Adoption of Extensive Reading in the School Syllabus*

By and large, the results of this study provided support for the importance of adopting extensive reading in the school syllabus. As found in one of the participants' book journals, extensive reading should be added to extra-curricular activities such as a reading club in school. If it is not possible to incorporate extensive reading with normal teaching and learning activities in school, extensive reading should be practiced as a reading approach. Authorities who focus mainly on one traditional teaching approach, as is the case in Thailand and countries in Asian contexts, should realize the benefits extensive reading can bring to language learning, and should encourage their

learners to read extensively outside the classroom. As a new practical reading approach suggested by Day and Bamford (1998, 2002), if intensive and extensive reading can support each other, learners are more likely to benefit and can discover the treasure of reading for themselves.

6.4 Activities Encouraging Reading Environment

No follow-up activities were used in this study. Although the intervention such as a book journal could be used to see whether reading books for interest only had any positive impact on students' attitude toward learning English and reading, it seemed necessary to employ activities which could encourage students' participation and foster their motivation. In practice, these activities might include book reading reports (Leung, 2002; Hayashi, 1999; Lai, 1993), short summaries (Elley and Mangubhai, 1983; Renandya, Rajan and Jacobs, 1999), creating reading materials and discussion (Constantino, 1995; Elley and Mangubhai, 1983; Elly, 1991), role play or retelling (Elley and Mangubhai, 1983), wall charts (Lai, 1993), and games (Elly, 1991; Lai, 1993).

The study aimed to examine how EFL learners react to graded readers when control for ability level is indicated. The present study provides more solid evidence to support the notions of learners' proficiency and vocabulary size. This also gives a clear picture of how EFL learners handle graded texts when assigned to their appropriate level of difficulty. However, access to a variety of interesting materials is essential for learners to gradually become competent readers and develop a healthy reading habit. Thus, teachers should also be aware that the level of difficulty of the materials might discourage the students from associating English reading with a pleasurable activity. Moreover, although students were pleased to see the teacher's role in the modeling of reading, with no stimulating activities, reading itself might remain tedious. Adding all these points together, the more of these conditions are met in an extensive reading program, the more benefits students are likely to get, in terms of language development, love of reading, and life-long habits. And all seem to exist as a product of extensive reading with graded readers if control of ability level is applied.

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Table 1. Different numbers of strategies used by different genders

Graded readers	Male (n=40)		Female (n=40)		t	p
	M	S.D	M	S.D.		
Book 1	1.76	0.75	1.80	0.61	-0.21	0.81
Book 2	1.79	0.70	1.95	0.71	-0.99	0.32
Book 3	1.84	0.75	2.25	0.67	-2.53	0.01*

* $p < 0.05$

Table 2. Overall strategies used by different genders with the three books of graded readers

Strategies	Male (n=40)		Female (n=40)		t	p
	M	S.D	M	S.D.		
WM	2.32	0.81	2.83	0.38	-3.58	0.00*
SS	2.00	0.96	2.10	1.10	-0.43	0.67
WK	1.08	0.97	1.08	0.99	0.02	0.89

* $p < 0.05$

Table 3. Time spent reading three graded readers of the same level

Graded readers	Male (n=40)		Female (n=40)		t	p
	M	S.D	M	S.D.		
Book 1	5.19	3.88	4.50	1.86	1.02	0.31
Book 2	3.65	2.25	3.22	1.32	1.01	0.32
Book 3	2.62	1.35	3.11	1.77	-1.38	0.17

Unit of time is hours * $p < 0.05$