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Reading and Vocabulary Knowledge Development: Sustained Independent Reading (SIR) Among Malaysian Tertiary Students

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ABSTRACT

Language educators and researchers frequently advocate two things in language acquisition: vocabulary learning and reading for pleasure. Vocabulary knowledge plays a crucial role in language mastery and extensive reading is deemed extremely fitting for vocabulary learning. For one, it is considered a pedagogically efficient approach as both reading and vocabulary acquisition can occur simultaneously. Sustained Independent Reading (SIR) is a vocabulary knowledge development intervention based on the belief that self-selection motivates readers to read, broadly and independently, over a sustained period of time. The present study was carried out in a public university in Malaysia over the course of one semester, involving two groups of 25 Malaysian participants each. The first group (Experimental) experienced 10 weeks of SIR while the second group (Control) did not. The participants were enrolled in the same remedial English proficiency course at the university and were matched in terms of vocabulary size. Results from the pre-, post- and delayed post-tests show greater lexical gains for the Experimental group with respect to vocabulary size, indicating that SIR is an effective method for motivating English language learners to read (broadly, independently and over a sustained period of time) and more importantly, for vocabulary knowledge development. This study's findings are relevant to stakeholders of English language education, specifically with regards to promoting extensive reading at the tertiary level, shaping Malaysian ESL policy in higher education, and providing direction for future related research.

Keywords: ESL/EFL, learner autonomy, Malaysian tertiary learners, motivation to read, Sustained Independent Reading (SIR), vocabulary knowledge development

INTRODUCTION

There is no doubt that English language teaching and learning has evolved over the years, distinguishing varied trends in the course of its history. Interestingly, vocabulary has been the highlight in recent decades despite it being an undervalued and often overlooked component in the earlier stages (Tan, 2016). This reorientation is reflected in three areas: classroom practices, education-related policies, and second/ foreign language acquisition research. This permits us to make a fair conclusion as to the central importance of vocabulary knowledge in language mastery, and in turn, literacy development as well as overall academic achievement.

There are two broad approaches to vocabulary learning. The first is incidental learning, which occurs via the process of inferring word meanings when the learner encounters unknown or unfamiliar words during reading and listening. The second is intentional learning, which relies on explicit vocabulary study or instruction (e.g., the use of vocabulary worksheets and dictionaries). Another element that helps to separate the two is the element of focus. The difference between intentional and incidental learning, as highlighted by Ellis (1999), is based on the distinction between focal and peripheral attention. Ellis explained that "intentional learning requires focal attention to be placed deliberately on the linguistic code (i.e., on form or form-meaning connections)" whereas "incidental learning requires attention to be placed on meaning (i.e., message content) but allows peripheral attention to be directed at form" (pp. 45-46).

Reading or extensive reading is a method that largely draws on incidental learning and although scholars have yet to come to a conclusive position as to whether reading, extensive or otherwise, can necessarily result in substantial vocabulary knowledge development, the general consensus is that vocabulary knowledge is important and that reading can be useful if students are, in the first place, motivated to read in the target language. In fact, students themselves regard vocabulary knowledge to be of chief importance and are of the opinion that many of their difficulties in terms of language use result from inadequate vocabulary knowledge (Nation, 1990), in tandem with British linguist David Wilkin's assertion that "without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed." (Wilkins, 1972, p. 111). As for the benefits of reading, perhaps no one puts it more aptly than language acquisition scholar Stephen Krashen who stated the following:

"Reading is good for you. Research supports a stronger conclusion, however: Reading is the only way, the only way we become good readers, develop a good writing style, an adequate vocabulary, advanced grammar, and the only way we become good spellers." (Krashen, 1993, p. 23)

More recently and closer to home, calls are emerging for extensive reading programmes to be carried out in universities in Malaysia, highlighting the lack of such programmes in Malaysian tertiary-

level ESL/EFL settings. According to Azmuddin et al. (2014), extensive reading is "particularly absent in tertiary education in Malaysia" (p. 109), stressing that it is time to make extensive reading a part of English language courses at the tertiary level.

It is also worth noting that research advocates learner independence or autonomy with respect to vocabulary learning. This is because it is impractical to expect students to learn, and teachers to teach, all the vocabulary needed to master a target language; there are simply too many words to learn and a certain level of autonomy and accountability on the learner's part therefore becomes essential (Tan et al., 2017). In addition, Luu (2011) noted that autonomy does not only afford students the fundamental skills necessary for long-term learning but also the motivation to pursue a task with sustained interest.

In light of the importance of vocabulary knowledge and the supposed advantages of reading in the target language independently and substantially, it is fitting to study the effects of such a reading programme (i.e., SIR) on the lexical development of Malaysian tertiary-level English language learners, a cohort that has been reported to suffer from a serious lack of vocabulary knowledge and in turn, proficiency in the English language.

Problem and Aims

Consistently, Malaysian graduates' prospects of employment have been adversely affected by their lack of proficiency in English (Malaysia Budget 2015). Time and again, studies have reaffirmed that Malaysian graduates fall short of industry standards with one of the central and oft-quoted themes being their incompetency in the English language (Lim, 2011; Pandian & Ghani, 2005).

According to Yuksel and Kavanoz (2010), extant studies have revealed vocabulary size and overall language proficiency to be significantly correlated. Indeed, various correlation studies have documented the reciprocal relationship between vocabulary size and proficiency in specific language skills. For instance, between vocabulary size and reading comprehension (Beck et al., 2002); and writing ability (Llach & Gallego, 2009); and spoken communication (Oya et al., 2009); and listening comprehension (Milton et al., 2010).

Various studies conducted over the years within the Malaysian context have demonstrated lexical paralysis among local tertiary students (e.g., Mokhtar et al., 2010; Mohamed et al., 2008; Sankaran et al., 2004). Kaur et al. (2008) underlined the severity of this predicament, classifying lexical paralysis as a primary contributor to students' inability to read, write, listen and speak competently in English.

The present study has two broad aims. The first is to estimate the English vocabulary size of Malaysian tertiary-level English language learners, and the second is to examine the effectiveness of SIR, an extensive reading approach aimed at improving English vocabulary knowledge. It is hoped that the findings of this study

provide better direction for policy-makers, instructors and course designers with regards to the feasibility of implementing SIR or any other reading programme similar to it.

Research Questions

The present study is guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: What is the initial English vocabulary size of Malaysian tertiary-level English language learners?

RQ2: To what extent is Sustained Independent Reading (SIR) effective in terms of vocabulary knowledge development among Malaysian tertiary-level English language learners?

RELATED LITERATURE

Vocabulary Size and Reading for Vocabulary Knowledge Development

Over the years, numerous studies have focused on language learners' vocabulary size in view of the positive effects that vocabulary knowledge has on language proficiency and overall academic achievement. It is useful to know a learner's vocabulary size and how much vocabulary learning is needed in order for him or her to reach a level necessary for comfortable language use. As pointed out by Nation (1993), vocabulary knowledge enables language use and language use in turn enables one's vocabulary knowledge to grow.

Another primary reason for measuring learners' initial vocabulary size rests in emerging suggestions that while extensive reading is useful for vocabulary knowledge development, it may not necessarily be a suitable method for those with a vocabulary size of below 3,000 word families. This is because without a relatively sizable word knowledge base, lexical inferencing – the process of guessing word meanings from contextual clues – can be difficult and fraught with uncertainties. Take, for instance, the following example:

"The filthy vagrant sprawls himself on the curb, utterly dazed to the world, unable to grapple with the severity of the transgressions that surround his being. His vagabondish lifestyle over the years having finally caught up with him, he feels incomprehensibly powerless and comes to the realisation that life is eccentric – almost grotesque – and often a confusing entwinement of hope, humour, absurdity, fear, and chastisement." (Tan et al., 2016, p. 21)

The text above is likely to be comprehensible to learners with a good vocabulary size because even if they were to encounter several unknown words, they would possess sufficient existing vocabulary knowledge to successfully infer the meanings of these words. In contrast, it is unlikely that learners with a small vocabulary size would be able to comprehend the text, let alone experience lexical development as the text is simply too dense with words unknown to them.

In essence, although some lexical gains are certainly acquired incidentally via extensive reading, there are researchers who believe the method to be ineffective

for those with a relatively small vocabulary size. According to Davidson et al. (2011), for instance, it seems fairly conclusive that 3,000 word families are the minimum that a learner needs in order to be able to read effectively in a language other than their mother tongue. Nation and Meara (2010), meanwhile, pointed out that the first 2,000 to 3,000 most frequent words might be best dealt with thorough explicit instruction.

Extensive Reading

Extensive reading has been defined in various ways by both educators and researchers. The first known person to apply the term 'extensive reading' in second/foreign language pedagogy was Harold Palmer, a prominent applied linguist in British twentieth-century language teaching and learning (Richards & Rodgers, 2003). Palmer defined extensive reading as the reading of book after book, whereby the reader's attention should ideally be on the meaning of the text (Day & Bamford, 1998).

The crux of the approach is straightforward – a lot of reading. More specifically, it involves reading in large quantities over a continual and sustained period of time. Day and Bamford (*ibid.*) underscored that the main aim of extensive reading is "to get students reading in the second language and liking it" (Day & Bamford, 1998), and identified the features found in successful extensive reading programmes:

1) Students read as much as possible;
2) A variety of materials on a wide range of topics is available;

3) Reading materials are well within the linguistic competence of the students;

4) Students select what they want to read;

5) Students read for pleasure, information and general understanding;

6) Reading is individual and silent;

7) The reading rate or speed is usually faster;

8) Reading is its own reward;

9) The teacher is the role model of a reader, an active member of the classroom reading community;

10) Students are oriented to the programme's goals, given guidance, and their progress tracked.

Extensive reading is fundamentally an approach set against the backdrop of reading for pleasure. Students are encouraged to select their own reading materials and read for pleasure instead of reading to achieve specific goals. Even when reading materials are provided, they should cover a wide range of topics to suit different interests and should be well within the students' comprehension levels so as to not turn the experience into a burdensome decoding task.

Self-Selection

One of the working definitions of extensive reading is that students get to choose the materials that they want to read. However, there is to date no consensus as to how far the extent of self-selection should extend. Day and Bamford (1998) highlighted what students really enjoyed about extensive reading was self-selection. In fact, students were even encouraged to stop reading

anything that they found uninteresting or too difficult.

However, while self-selection is ideal, it is worth noting that absolute self-selection is perhaps impractical if an extensive reading programme is meant to achieve specific linguistic developments. For instance, absolute self-selection can be problematic when it comes to lexical development because students may opt for reading materials that are too easy for them. Progress cannot be achieved if students are constantly reading materials with a very low lexical load, a process which promotes reading speed and fluency instead of vocabulary acquisition. Krashen (2009, 1982) noted that progress could only be achieved when learners were exposed to input that was slightly beyond their current level.

Within the context of the present study, the participants of the Experimental group were encouraged to select their own reading materials, but were advised to not opt for overly easy ones. Also, they were given guidance in terms of selection and their chosen materials were checked throughout the treatment period.

Learner Autonomy

It is widely proposed that learner independence or autonomy is largely the ability to put one's own study into effect. Barillaro (2011) was of the opinion that defining the term 'learner autonomy' was no simple task as there was little consensus on its precise meaning and it had been defined in many ways over time. For instance:

" ... a capacity and willingness to act independently and in cooperation with others, as a social, responsible person." (Dam et al., 1990, p. 102)

" … Autonomy is a capacity – for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action ... The concept of autonomy ... implies that the learner enjoys a high degree of freedom. But it is important to insist that the freedoms conferred by autonomy are never absolute, always conditional and constrained." (Little, 1991, pp. 4-5)

"Learner autonomy means taking responsibility for someone's own learning ... the learning process can be more effective when learners take control of their own process of learning, because they learn what they are ready to learn." (Lazăr, 2013, p. 460)

Luu (2011) explained that learner autonomy actually provided great relief for students in terms of vocabulary learning as, apart from catering to the individual needs of learners at all levels, it also affords them the following:

1) Enhancement of motivation which leads to more effective learning;

2) Provision of more opportunities in terms of language communication;

3) Mastery of the basic skills necessary for long-term learning.

Cotterall (2000), in her study of two short courses which incorporated measures aimed at fostering learner autonomy, concluded that not only was motivation enhanced, but that students were also found to possess the ability to manage their

learning in ways which contributed to task performance.

Motivation

Drawing on the Expectancy-Value theory, Day and Bamford (1998) emphasised the use of comprehensible texts as well as reader enjoyment. It is postulated that the more students see the likelihood of being able to understand a text and take pleasure in the reading process, the more likely it is that they will continue reading, thus allowing learning to take place. In this context, self-selection is therefore pertinent as students are often likelier to comprehend and take pleasure in self-selected materials.

Positivity towards reading is also achieved when students see the value of the task in terms of importance, usefulness and enjoyment. For example, students who want or need to possess better English proficiency will be motivated to read in English if they perceive that by doing so their command of the language will improve.

John Atkinson first developed the Expectancy-Value theory in the 1950s in efforts to understand motivation and achievement. The theory was expanded by Jacquelynne Eccles in the 1980s to specifically include the field of education. Broadly, the theory suggests that proper task performance is determined by one's expectancy of success as well as how one perceives the task at hand. *Expectancy* refers to how confident an individual is with respect to being able to succeed in a task while *Value* refers to how important, useful or pleasurable the individual perceives the task to be (Eccles, 1983). Figure 1 offers a summary of the theory.

METHODOLOGY

The present study employed a quasi-experimental design, utilising the pre-, post- and delayed post-testing approach. The delayed post-testing was a triangulation measure to confirm the results obtained from the post-tests. Two groups (Experimental and Control) of 25 participants each were involved in the study, and purposive sampling was used with random assignment of groups. It is important for studies that
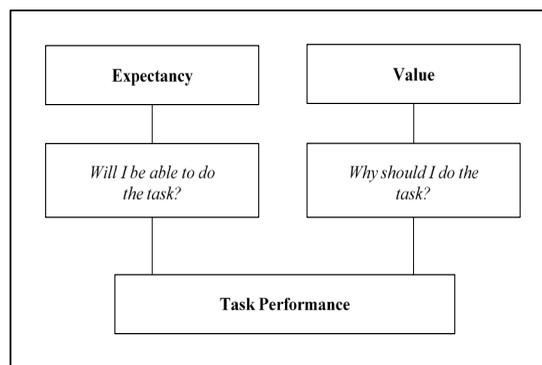

Figure 1. Summary of Expectancy-Value Theory

employ the pretest-posttest design to ensure that involved groups are of adequate and comparable size; according to Hogg and Tanis (2005), any sample of 25 and greater is considered suitable.

The participants, composed of Malaysian undergraduates enrolled in the same remedial English language proficiency course (coded EL101) at a public university in Malaysia, were matched for English vocabulary size using Nation and Beglar's (2007) Vocabulary Size Test (VST). Initial results indicated that the participants were at the same baseline level and were suited for independent extensive reading with scores well above 3,000 word families each.

The intervention period covered approximately 10 weeks and pre-, post- and delayed post-testings were conducted using the VST to measure for vocabulary knowledge development. Figure 2 shows some sample items from the VST. The online version of the test can be accessed at: https://www.lextutor.ca/tests/levels/recognition/1_14k/

In terms of procedure, the participants of the Experimental group experienced a dual-factor approach: Sustained Independent Reading (SIR) for 10 weeks while undergoing EL101. The participants of the Control group, meanwhile, underwent a single-factor approach: EL101. Both groups were subjected to all three testing tiers (pre-, post- and delayed post-testing) at the same time and participants of the Experimental group were asked to complete a brief questionnaire at the end of the

First 1,000

1. SEE: They **saw** it.

a. cut
b. waited for
c. looked at
d. started

Fifth 1,000

1. DEFICIT: The company had a large **deficit**.

a. spent more money than it earned
b. went down in value
c. had a plan for spending that used a lot of money
d. had a lot of money in the bank

Tenth 1,000

1. AWE: They looked at the mountain with **awe**.

a. worry
b. interest
c. wonder
d. respect

Fourteenth 1,000

1. CANONICAL: These are **canonical** examples.

a. examples which break the usual rules
b. examples taken from a religious book
c. examples that are regular and widely accepted
d. examples discovered very recently

Figure 2. VST sample items

semester. Figure 3 illustrates the research procedure and timeline.

With regards to SIR, the participants were encouraged to bring their own English reading materials and read independently in class for 30 minutes each week. They were guided in terms of selection to prevent the use of overly easy materials, and were also encouraged to read on a variety of topics. Their materials were checked throughout the 10-week intervention period. It is to be noted that the treatment was not implemented as a compulsory activity and the students were
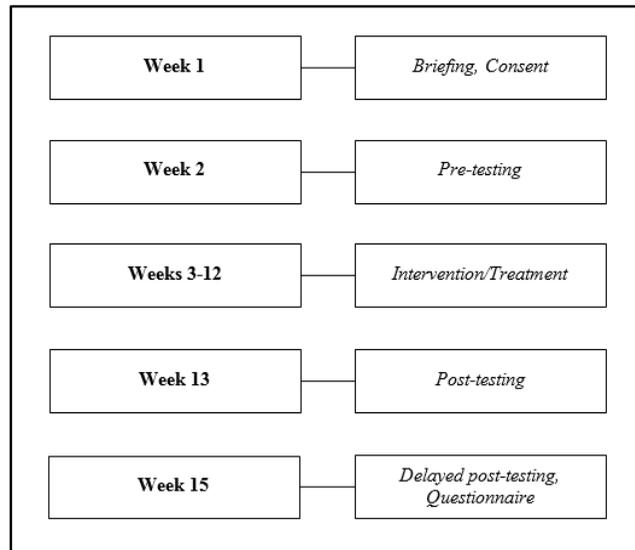
Figure 3. Research procedure and timeline

free to refrain from participating at any point of time. However, via observation, all the participants of the Experimental group demonstrated fidelity to SIR throughout the intervention period.

FINDINGS

Pre-Testing

This section reports on the pre-test results of both groups, Experimental and Control, and addresses the first research question (RQ1: What is the initial English vocabulary size of Malaysian tertiary-level English language learners?).

Table 1 shows the pre-test (VST) scores of the Experimental group as a whole and indicates that on average, the vocabulary size of the participants was, at the initial stage, approximately 4,000 word families with a mean of 3,928 word families ($SD = 320.83$). As mentioned earlier, although extensive reading is a useful method for lexical development, it may not be suitable for those with a vocabulary size of below 3,000 word families. The results in Table 1 demonstrate independent extensive reading to be a feasible method for the participants of the Experimental group.

Table 1

Pre-test results: experimental group

Participants	Total Score	Mean	SD
n = 25	98,200	3,928	320.83

Table 2 shows the pre-test (VST) scores of the Control group as a whole and indicates that on average, the vocabulary size of the participants was also approximately 4,000 word families at the initial stage with a mean of 3,988 word families ($SD = 410.61$). The results demonstrate baseline similarity between both groups.

Post-testing

Table 3 shows the post-test (VST) scores of the Experimental group as a whole and indicates that on average the vocabulary size of the participants, post-treatment, was approximately 4,700 word families with a mean of 4,752 word families ($SD = 568.71$).

Table 4 shows the post-test (VST) scores of the Control group as a whole and indicates that on average the vocabulary

size of the participants at Week 13 was approximately 4,300 word families with a mean of 4,304 word families ($SD = 488.6$).

Table 5 compares the pre- and post-test (VST) scores of both groups. At the pre-test level (Week 2), each group started off with an approximate mean of 4,000 word families, indicating baseline similarity. Their total pre-test scores were also found to be similar with each group clustered within the 95,000 to 100,000 range (Experimental = 98,200 and Control = 99,700).

At the post-test level (Week 13), the Experimental group achieved a total score of 118,800 while the Control group garnered a total score of 107,600. In terms of lexical development, the Experimental group clearly outperformed the Control group with

Table 2

Pre-test results: control group

Participants	Total Score	Mean	SD
$n = 25$	99,700	3,988	410.61

Table 3

Post-test results: experimental group

Participants	Total Score	Mean	SD
$n = 25$	118,800	4,752	568.71

Table 4

Post-test results: control group

Participants	Total Score	Mean	SD
$n = 25$	107,600	4,304	488.6

Table 5

Increase in Lexical Gains: experimental and control groups

Group	Total Pre-Test Score	Total Post-Test Score	Increase (%)
Experimental *n* = 25	98,200	118,800	21
Control *n* = 25	99,700	107,600	7.9
			Sig. = 0.004

an increase of 21% in vocabulary size. The Control group managed an increase of 7.9%. With regards to statistical significance, a *p* value of .004 was achieved ($p < 0.05$), indicating that the disparity between scores could not have occurred by random chance.

Delayed Post-testing

As reflected in Table 6, the Experimental group as a whole achieved a total VST score of 120,100 with a mean of 4,804 word families ($SD = 525.58$) at the delayed post-test level.

As shown in Table 7, the Control group as a whole achieved a total VST score of 108,300 with a mean of 4,332 word families ($SD = 519.39$) at the delayed post-test level.

Table 8 shows the sustainability of lexical gains for both the Experimental and Control groups. At the post-test level (Week 13), the Experimental group achieved a total VST score of 118,800 and at the delayed post-test level (Week 15), the total score increased slightly to 120,100. This indicates that the gains recorded at Week 13 were sustained through to Week 15. Also, the *p* value garnered, at $p = 0.738$ ($p > 0.05$), indicates no statistically significant differences between the scores, thus denoting sustainability of lexical gains.

Table 6

Delayed post-test results: experimental group

Participants	Total Score	Mean	SD
n = 25	120,100	4,804	525.58

Table 7

Delayed post-test results: control group

Participants	Total Score	Mean	SD
n = 25	108,300	4,332	519.39

Table 8

Sustainability of Lexical Gains: experimental and control groups

Group	Total Post-Test Score	Total Delayed Post-Test Score	Sustainability	Sig.
Experimental *n* = 25	118,800	120,100	Evident	0.738
Control *n* = 25	107,600	108,300	Evident	0.845

Meanwhile, the Control group achieved a total VST score of 107,600 at the post-test level and the score also increased slightly to 108,300 at the delayed post-test level. This indicates that the gains recorded at Week 13 were sustained through to Week 15 as well. The *p* value garnered ($p = 0.845$, $p > 0.05$) indicates no statistically significant differences between the scores, which denotes that the lexical gains were indeed sustained.

Questionnaire

The participants of the Experimental group were also subjected to a brief questionnaire in Week 15. The five-point Likert scale questionnaire was administered after delayed post-testing and the results are as follows:

As evident from Table 9, all the participants of the Experimental group enjoyed Sustained Independent Reading (SIR) with 16% agreeing and 84% strongly agreeing with the first item/statement. The participants also indicated that they enjoyed being able to select their own reading materials (Agree = 16%, Strongly Agree = 84%), and 100% indicated that they always

brought something to read in each session. This is in tandem with what was observed during the reading programme whereby each participant demonstrated fidelity to treatment by bringing English reading materials to each session of SIR throughout the intervention period.

As for motivation, responses to the fourth and fifth items clearly indicate that the participants felt more motivated to read in English (Item 4) and that they wanted to continue reading because the task was not too complex or overwhelming for them to manage (Item 5). With regards to Item 4, 12% agreed and 88% strongly agreed. As for Item 5, 16% agreed and 84% strongly agreed. Many of the participants also indicated that they liked the calm setting of SIR (Agree = 16%, Strongly Agree = 80%) and that they felt more relaxed when reading (Agree = 16%, Strongly Agree = 84%).

In terms of vocabulary, 68% of the participants strongly agreed with the statement 'I find that I understand more words after going through SIR' while 24% agreed, 4% disagreed and 4% remained neutral. As for the ensuing statement (I find that I am better at figuring out word

Table 9

Questionnaire results

Item	1 (%)	2 (%)	3 (%)	4 (%)	5 (%)
1. I enjoy Sustained Independent Reading (SIR).	0	0	0	16	84
2. I like it that I get to choose my own reading materials.	0	0	0	16	84
3. I always bring something to read in each session.	0	0	0	0	100
4. I feel more motivated to read in English.	0	0	0	12	88
5. I wanted to continue reading because it was not too difficult for me.	0	0	0	16	84
6. I like the calm setting of SIR.	0	0	4	16	80
7. I feel more relaxed when reading.	0	0	0	16	84
8. I find that I understand more words after going through SIR.	0	4	4	24	68
9. I find that I am better at figuring out word meanings.	0	4	4	20	72
10. I will definitely read more (in English) in the future on my own.	0	0	8	44	48
11. I believe SIR can improve students' English.	0	0	0	0	100
12. I think more students should experience SIR.	0	0	0	0	100

1: Strongly Disagree; 2: Disagree; 3: Neutral; 4: Agree; 5: Strongly Agree

meanings), 72% strongly agreed, 20% agreed, 4% disagreed and 4% remained neutral.

The majority of the participants also indicated that they would definitely read more in English in the future (Agree = 44%, Strongly Agree = 48%). With respect to the last two items, all of the participants strongly believed that SIR can improve students' English and that more students should experience it.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

On the whole, the researchers found that Malaysian tertiary students enjoyed

Sustained Independent Reading (SIR) and that those engaged in the programme did not merely experience motivation to read – and continue reading – in English, but also enjoyed sustained lexical gains.

As mentioned, the participants of the Experimental group demonstrated fidelity to treatment by bringing English reading materials to each session of SIR throughout the intervention period, which indicates that they favoured SIR and were interested to continue participating in the programme despite it not being made a compulsory activity. In addition, the participants indicated that they enjoyed being able to select their own reading materials, wanted to continue reading because the task was not too difficult for them, and strongly believed that SIR can improve English proficiency. This is in line with the Expectancy-Value theory whereby pleasure, doability and task importance result in task performance. In other words, the students found SIR to be enjoyable, feasible and useful, and were thus motivated to continue participating in the programme. In fact, 92% of them were certain that they would definitely read more in English in the future; this is both interesting and encouraging, coming from remedial English language learners, and presents scholars with a promising platform to further explore the Expectancy-Value theory specifically in relation to autonomous ESL/EFL reading.

In terms of lexical gains, the participants of the Experimental group experienced vocabulary development after 10 weeks of SIR. At the post-test level, the Experimental group clearly outperformed the Control group with an increase of 21% in vocabulary size as the latter only managed an increase of nearly 8%. It is also important to note that the gains were sustained over time as the delayed post-test results do not demonstrate any lexical knowledge erosion.

Although the two-week interval between post-testing and delayed post-testing was relatively short, it was established due to time constraint (imposed by academic term durations) and because course groups do not advance to the subsequent semester as an intact cohort. In this regard, the present study replicates the design of similar research concerned with vocabulary learning. See, for example, Liu (2011) and Pauwels (2012).

The findings of the present study are largely consistent with the reports of previous research (e.g., Cohen, 1999; Herda & Ramos, 2001; Pilgreen & Krashen, 1993; Von Sprecken & Krashen, 1998), specifically with regards to recreational reading and the development of reading motivation. However, there are reports that suggest otherwise. For instance, a comprehensive review by Dwyer and Reed (1989) noted that the approach might not necessarily result in positive outcomes; some students had reported negative perceptions, leading to concerns about providing a conducive environment as well as a sense of purpose for reading (i.e., students experience linguistic gains). The current study's findings demonstrate the provision of both elements. Also, in terms of lexical development, the study's findings

support those of past research (e.g., Elley & Mangubhai, 1983; Guo, 2010; Rosszell, 2007). It is noteworthy, however, that Guo's study involved adapted reading passages and Rosszell's experiment utilised graded readers whereas the current study had no such specifications or restrictions. These avenues could perhaps be explored in future research within the Malaysian context and at the tertiary level.

The present study has produced encouraging findings which indicate that Malaysian tertiary students enjoy Sustained Independent Reading and can gain positive effects from it, specifically in terms of lexical development and motivation to read. Also, SIR appears to have generated in them the interest to continue reading in English in the future, sans supervision or monitoring, which also indicates their enjoyment of learner autonomy and their ability to manage their own long-term learning via exposure to reading.

SIR is a practical learning method that is both cost- and time-effective; a substantial amount of reading materials can now be accessed for free online, and SIR is essentially an independent approach that does not require extensive contact hours. As mentioned earlier, extensive reading is "particularly absent" in Malaysian tertiary education (Azmuddin et al., 2014, p. 109) and it is perhaps time to initiate a change.

It is hoped that policy makers and course planners would formally implement SIR in efforts to enhance our students' English proficiency, in tandem with the Malaysian government's emphasis on English language mastery for better employability.

In essence, SIR represents an option that adult learners in particular can continue to pursue independently in the long run, and is also a fitting accessory to the government's initiatives to encourage reading among Malaysian students as part of its efforts to become a fully developed nation.

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