Voices from Korean EFL Teachers Who First Experienced Extensive Reading: A Case Study

Dong Ook Kim · Heyoung Kim
(Chung-Ang University)


This qualitative case study looked into seven Korean EFL teachers’ perceptions on extensive reading (ER) in response to their firsthand experiences of ER. The research context was the ER Book Review Project in one graduate TESOL course in Korea. Data were mainly collected from in-depth interviews, which were audio-recorded, transcribed, coded, and analyzed to glean significant themes that captured participants’ perceptions on ER. Other documents, book reviews and weekly journal entries, were also compared and analyzed in order to increase the trustworthiness of the study. The results revealed mixed responses towards the ER paradigm. Yet, the participants generally acknowledged the value of ER with regard to affective benefits. One of the most strongly emerging themes was a change in the reading attitude for participants; they began to develop a whole new perspective on the texts written in English, seeing them as something to be personally treasured. The major barrier was the unfit status of ER deeply rooted in the mainstream intensive reading (IR) paradigm. Other barriers included the dilemma between EFL learners’ cognitive and linguistic gap and the ambiguities of the authentic ER books meant for native speakers of English.

Key words: Extensive Reading (ER), Korean EFL teachers’ perceptions, reading attitudes, case study

I. Introduction

Ever since Smith argued that reading should make sense to students who “learn to read by reading” (Smith, 1985, p. 88), much research has
confirmed the value of extensive reading (ER) in language acquisition in regard to enhancing not only reading fluency but other language skills and general language proficiency, as well. From Williams’ (1986) principles of teaching reading to Grabe’s (1991) analysis of the entirety of reading research, the inclusion of ER is generally considered a norm for meaning-focused fluency development along with language-focused learning in any well-rounded reading curriculum. There only seems to be an issue with the degrees of implementing content-oriented ER in balance with form-oriented intensive reading (IR). Some research conducted with Korean EFL learners also reports the significant value of ER and advises the implementation of ER in input-deprived EFL situations (Kim & Hwang, 2006; Kwon, 2010; Lee, 2007; Lee & Kim 2007; Seo, 2008; Lim, 2012; Youn, 2015). Those researchers also point out the prevailing resistance against ER and the difficulty of its application in Korea.

This study begins by calling attention to the current tendency of Korean EFL practitioners to heavily rely on IR. A quick visit to any typical secondary EFL class in Korea will reveal the dominance of the intensive reading paradigm which encompasses laborious studies of short, decontextualized, and difficult texts with the aid of dictionaries, grammar points, drills, and teachers’ lectures. One easily identified reason has often been attributed to the exam-oriented stringent school curriculum (Byun, 2010; Kim & Hwang, 2006; Seo, 2008). In Korean EFL contexts, ER is often awkwardly positioned as an insignificant extra in some after-school programs or out-of-class formative assessments.

The paramount role of a teacher in a reading class has often been proposed in research (Anderson, Wilson, & Fielding, 1988; Methe & Hintze, 2003). Day and Bamford (2002) similarly emphasize the teachers’ role in ER practice. According to their list of the top ten principles of practicing ER, teacher’s careful guidance (the ninth) and modeling (the tenth) play a pivotal role in the successful implementation of ER into language curriculum. The enthusiasm and positive attitude of a teacher is
likely to influence student attitudes in adopting new reading practices in ER. (Campbell, 1989; Rose, 2004) Furthermore, from her ER study, Yamashita (2004) finds the affective domain more significant than the cognitive domains or language proficiency levels in L2 reading achievement.

When considered together, this study supports the assumption that the teachers’ reading attitude would significantly affect students’ actual engagement in ER and the development of good reading habits. This study, hence, attends to the perception and reaction of English practitioners who experience ER for the first time themselves. Similar studies have been conducted by Cho (2004), Cho and Krashen (2001), and Byun (2010) who had investigated Korean EFL teachers’ perceptions on ER. Yet, Cho’s participants engaged in a single two-hour session of ER, and Byun’s participants could not fully engaged in ER practice due to time restraints to barely finish the set reading target of seven graded readers squeezed during two weeks of their professional development program; the findings might not fully reflect the teachers’ perceptions on ER based on substantial amount of ER.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore and understand the Korean EFL teachers’ perceptions and reading attitudes based on their own EFL readers’ experiences of engaging in ER. As for this topic, this study tried to capture the emic voices of seven Korean EFL practitioners, who are also seasoned EFL learners, as well as TESOL graduate students equipped with the theories of ER. The contribution of this qualitative methodology is to add one more layer toward gaining insight into the possibilities and limitations of ER implementation in Korean English education. Thus, this qualitative study has developed the following research questions:

1. What are the Korean EFL teachers’ individual perceptions and attitudes toward ER?
2. What are the common changes in the Korean EFL teachers’ perceptions and attitudes after experiencing ER?
3. What are the Korean EFL teachers’ perceived barriers to ER on their personal and professional levels?

II. Theoretical Background

1. Extensive Reading (ER)

Palmer (1921) coined the terms extensive reading (ER) and intensive reading (IR) in L2 pedagogy. Palmer described ER as reading one book after another with the reader focusing on meaning, not language. In contrast to ER, L2 learners in the IR paradigm should focus on language study and involve constant comparing, analyzing, and translating to prepare for tests.

Research reports that ER often promotes a great deal of benefits—some significant improvements in all four skills of language as well as vocabulary, grammar, motivation, attitudes, and so on (Bell, 2001; Cho & Krashen, 1994; Elley 1991; Elley & Mangubhai, 1983; Hafiz & Tudor, 1989; Hayashi, 1999; Janopoulos, 1986; Leung 2002; Mason & Krashen, 1997; Nation, 2009; Pigada & Schmitt, 2006; Robb & Susser, 1989; Tsang 1996). Nuttall (1996) studied the facilitative role of ER in the virtuous circle and debilitative effect of IR in the vicious circle. She found that enjoyment, speed, comprehension, and quantity of practice in the virtuous circle are all closely linked with one another. Reading a large amount of easy and interesting texts helps a reader to be seized with the “flow” experience (Johnston & Allington, 1991), which involves losing oneself through immersion in the pleasure of reading, which serves a capturing role in the virtuous circle of ER.

As for EFL learners, however, the limitation of vocabulary may be one important barrier in engaging in pleasure reading; likewise, research proposes that a new word should be encountered ten or more times in
meaningful contexts in order for that word to turn into sight vocabulary, which involves automatic recognition of words (Day & Bamford, 1998). In addition, research reveals that ER only occurs when the density of familiar words reaches 98 percent (Hu & Nation, 2000; Nation, 2006). Even for native speakers of English, a density of 99 percent is preferable for ER (Carver, 1994).

In terms of applying ER into practice, Day and Bamford (2002) propose ten principles to clarify the common characteristics of successful extensive reading programs, which serves as the guiding principles of implementing ER to Korean EFL learners in this study: particularly, 5) “reading is its own reward”, 9) “Teachers orient students to the goals of the program”, and 10) “The teacher is a role model of a reader (p. 78)”. The last two principles deal with the practitioners’ attitude, guidance, and modeling, suggesting the significance of this study.

2. Extensive Reading and Reading Attitude

The positive influence of ER on the L2 reading attitude has been reported in much research (Cho & Krashen, 1994; Elley 1991; Hayashi, 1999; Lao & Krashen, 2000; Robb & Susser, 1989). Research reveals that language learners’ reading attitude is shaped by many variables and sources under the individuals’ unique environments and experiences. As for L2 learners, Day and Bamford (1998) propose four possible sources for the L2 reading attitude: L1 reading attitude, previous L2 reading attitude, attitude to the L2 and the related culture and people, and L2 classroom environment. The positive reading attitude and intrinsic motivation to read both in L1 and L2 correlate with the amount of ER that occurs (Takase, 2007; Yamashita, 2004).

Judge’s (2011) two and half years’ longitudinal case study highlighted the significance of the non-cognitive factors, affect and personal attributes, in examining avid EFL readers through the two and half year ER program.
Among five attitudinal variables, Yamahita (2003) found that ER had greater positive influence on affective domains (Comfort and Anxiety) than on cognitive domains (Intellectual Value, Practical Value, and Linguistic Value). Yet research also shows the discrepancies between the positive attitude toward ER and actual engagement in ER. In Crawford Camiciottoli’s (2001) study, EFL learners’ positive attitude toward ER did not necessarily foster the actual increase of reading time. Additionally, Kok & Loh’s (2009) study on the EFL teacher modeling of ER revealed that teachers’ beliefs about the importance of reading did not increase their teacher modeling.

As for the practitioners’ attitude towards ER, some researchers repeatedly point out the need for students to model their teachers’ positive attitude toward ER and actual reading (Campbell, 1989; Day & Bamford, 2002; Krishnan, et al., 2009; Rose, 2004). Regarding a starting point for bringing ER into EFL curriculum, Macalister (2010) suggested raising awareness and training among practitioners and school administrators. Cho (2004) and Cho and Krashen (2001), in their study of Korean EFL teachers’ experience of ER, found that nearly all participants became interested in using ER in their profession as well as reading more in English in their own leisure time. Byun (2010) also studied Korean EFL teachers’ perspectives on ER upon experiencing ER firsthand and revealed the mixed feelings of Korean EFL teachers towards ER: favorable attitude to ER but hesitancy to implement ER into Korean mainstream curriculum. However, there is a scarcity of qualitative research on the topic of the EFL teachers’ attitude toward ER, which provides insight into the important need for this study.

**III. Method**

The nature of this case study called for adopting a post-positivist
perspective and a qualitative inquiry that does not attempt to control or manipulate variables. (Mackay & Gass, 2011) This study attempts to preserve the spirit of open inquiry, aiming to induce and reconstruct the participants’ lived experiences and their emic views and perceptions through in-depth interviews and journal writing.

1. Research Context: the ER Book Review Project

This study was inspired by the ER Book Review Project in a graduate course, titled “Studies in Second Language Reading.” Principles and theories of ER had been one of the focused study areas in this course. Below is shown a part of the Project.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Publisher</th>
<th>Word</th>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Genre</th>
<th>Fun (4-6)</th>
<th>Intrigue (4-6)</th>
<th>Comment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The story of Toilets, Telephones &amp; other useful inventions</td>
<td>Kate Daynes</td>
<td>Usborne Young Reading</td>
<td>2091</td>
<td>5th or 6th grade in elementary school</td>
<td>Science</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bare and Rabbit FRIENDS FOREVER</td>
<td>Julia Norwich</td>
<td>SCHOLASTIC</td>
<td>1200</td>
<td>middle school students</td>
<td>Family</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Incredible Present</td>
<td>Harriet Castor</td>
<td>Usborne Young Reading</td>
<td>2166</td>
<td>3rd or 4th elementary school students</td>
<td>fiction, family drama</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The purpose of the project was first to put theories into practice through experiencing ER directly and secondly to start building a library of critiqued ER books for future pedagogical resources and references in Korean EFL reading contexts. Every student had been assigned to read and review thirty ER books—five ER books per week during six weeks. The book selections were made according to the principles of fun and diversity of ER books. The books consisted of a range of various reading levels, from graded
readers to authentic novels, in varying topics. Ninety ER books were reviewed in total, and each and every book was read and reviewed by three different participants to showcase the taste of individual differences. The ER Book Review Project, as shown in Figure 1 above, included individual critiques and many critical aspects such as genre, page numbers, head words, suggested age level, and so on. Additionally, the participants rated on a five-point scale in terms of the level of enjoyment and level of difficulty.

2. Participants

The participants of this study were seven Korean EFL practitioners who had joined the ER Review Project, which provided them with a chance to experience ER firsthand in practice. They were all majoring in TESOL, and their teaching experience ranged from two to fifteen years in both public and private sectors. Their ages ranged from mid-twenties to late thirties. Their students were mostly Korean secondary EFL students except Lim’s students who were young Korean EFL learners. Table 1 below briefly profiles the seven participants, whose names are all pseudonyms.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Major</th>
<th>Degree Pursuing</th>
<th>Teaching (Tutoring) Experience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yoo</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>TESOL</td>
<td>M.A.</td>
<td>(2 Yrs.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lim</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>TESOL</td>
<td>M.A.</td>
<td>(4 Yrs.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Park</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>TESOL</td>
<td>M.A.</td>
<td>2 Yrs. (3 Yrs.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kwon</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>TESOL</td>
<td>M.A.</td>
<td>(5 Yrs.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lee</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>TESOL</td>
<td>Ph.D.</td>
<td>15 Yrs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Song</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>TESOL</td>
<td>M.A.</td>
<td>(5 Yrs.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kim</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>TESOL</td>
<td>M.A.</td>
<td>(2 Yrs.)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Two researchers in this study were active participants (Spradly, 1980) in the ER project. One of them was the instructor, the main agent in the
course who had administered the project and guided all participants throughout the course. The other researcher was an enrolled doctoral student who also participated in the project and initiated this interview study by conducting all interviews with other participants.

3. Data Collection

1) Interviews

Fourteen open-ended interview questions were created by researchers. This study also incorporated some spontaneous follow-up questions to capture the informants’ emic perspectives whenever necessary. According to Seidman (2012), at the root of the practice of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience.

First of all, two pilot interviews with two EFL practitioners outside of this study had been conducted to try out the value of each interview question, to study possible results, and to measure the time necessary for the interview. The pilot interviews lasted about thirty minutes with some probing processes. Some of initial research questions were edited, and the content and order of interview questions were altered.

Next, the actual interview was conducted with each of the seven informants for about thirty to forty minutes in quiet settings at a convenient time for each interviewee. Many of the interview questions were open-ended: for example, “Would you tell me about your reading experiences in L1?”, “Based on your firsthand experience of ER, please tell me about the benefits and drawbacks of ER”, and “If you implement ER into your curriculum, how do you want to implement in and outside of your own classroom?” The interviews were recorded and then transcribed in order to turn them into data feasible for repeated analyses. The entirety of interviews and transcriptions were conducted in Korean, and the excerpts in
this study are the results of researchers’ translation.

2) Other Documents: Book Reviews and Journal Writings

Data were also collected from multiple sources, which could counteract one another in order to increase the trustworthiness of the study. First of all, the actual entries filled in the ER Book Review Project were reviewed. Each participant’s reviews and comments for thirty books showed clear responses to ER books and revealed the individual’s attitude towards ER on personal and professional levels. Secondly, weekly journal writings were retrieved and analyzed. Each week, a student discussion leader created and posted questions in response to each week’s reading assignment on the discussion board of the instructor’s e-class. All participants wrote their opinions reacting to the posted questions in the form of weekly journal entries during fifteen weeks. The journal writings were printed and each participant’s postings were sorted to make an individual collection of each participant’s journal entries.

4. Data Analysis

For data analysis, the constant comparison method of the grounded theory was adopted and used to reduce the data and glean meaning from it. The initial open coding of line-by-line analysis was conducted, which allowed the next steps to find categories and meaningful concepts. Instead of more traditional axial coding system of the grounded theory to build a theory, this study adopted Charmaz’s (2006) focused coding system to find meaningful concepts in order to overcome the limitations of small participant numbers. A total of eighty-seven items under seven categories was found in the initial open coding. The key words in these seven categories were, respectively: “reading attitude,” “benefits of ER,” “barriers to ER,” “ER texts,” “strategies for ER,” “ER in teaching profession,” and “future applicability of ER.” The
data were read, compared, and analyzed cyclically in order to reconstruct the emic perspectives of informants and to glean some focused findings grounded in the data. Significantly salient findings were isolated and discussed at the end. The findings and results were shared with and approved by all participants for the member check, which has increased the trustworthiness of this study.

IV. Findings

1. Individual Perceptions on ER

The participants’ perception and attitude on ER varied after altogether experiencing the collaborative book review project. Three participants, Yoo, Lim, and Park, had displayed positive attitudes toward ER. Two participants, Kwon and Lee, had developed from negative to more or less neutral attitudes, and two participants, Song and Kim, maintained a negative attitude.

1) Yoo: “I am thrilled to reclaim my childhood memories of the secret garden of reading.”

Yoo cherished her childhood memories of visiting the local library with her mom, and also experienced some positive aspects of ER in an ESL immersion program in the U.K. However, she had never developed the reading fluency for English texts because she had associated them with difficulty and pain. It was her cherished childhood memories of ER in Korean that played a role in leading her to enjoy the “flow” experience during the ER Book Review Project. She finally discovered her long overdue joy of reading in English, as stated below:
I want to keep spreading this good news of ER as a self-claimed evangelist of ER myself. Why am I so into this? Learning is often considered boring. Yet with ER, you enjoy them and learn a lot at the same time. Isn’t that super cool? (Interview, turn 50)

2) Lim: “The magical powers of ER were unleashed in my students’ lives!”

Lim owed her excellent childhood L1 reading experience to her mom. However, during many years of staying in the U.S, she could never read through any thick ER novels intended for native speakers of English in American elementary and secondary grades.

I moved to America in my 5th grade, and I was shocked for the required ER books for my grade, those thick, thick books. Looking back now, those books were never at my appropriate level to develop the reading habit. (Interview, turn 28)

The end result was a developing hostility towards the idea of reading English texts. Later in Korea, however, when she taught first graders at a private institution, her teaching principles in reading involved undoing her own failures in her school days and lowering young students’ reading anxieties. The result was quite fruitful, and she witnessed almost instant improvements in her students’ abilities.

I had brought bean bags and cushy chairs and turned the classroom into the magical secret garden of reading. Then, ta-ra, my kids at the institution, after three months of ER, improved so much, almost magically, in many areas including writing and even creative thinking abilities. (Interview, turn 14)

3) Park: “The principle of 98 percent sight vocabulary surely works for me.”

Like all the other participants, Park’s experience and perception of
English texts had been mostly negative initially, displaying the signs of a weak reader in the vicious circle of reading (Nuttal, 1996).

As I reflect on my reading habits in English, I have always tended to focus on short texts for, say, trying hard to learn native-like expressions. Yes, it was studying rather than reading. (Journal entry, week 3)

Park had gone through the most dramatic changes to an avid book lover through the ER Book Review Project. He became a believer in the magic number of 98, a principle of selecting an ER book with 98 percent or more sight vocabulary. Right upon finishing the ER Book Review Project, he had actually purchased and finished a rather thick ER book of his own in his hectic schedule. He decided to always carry his ER book with him and stated with an emphatic tone that he had literally reaped marked improvements in his writing and speaking, almost instantly.

Believe it or not, through developing a reading habit, I have gained significant improvements in all areas of English. I used to be a thinker, not a speaker. But, now that I speak so fluently in English, my tongue sometimes cannot keep up with my flowing words. It’s a personal miracle for me. (Interview, turn 22)

4) Kwon: “Now I love to read children’s books, but in the privacy of my home, though.”

While living in Canada as an undergraduate and graduate student for seven years, Kwon had encountered many failures in reading through any so-called bestselling English novels, which she had always desired to conquer. Her selection of English books was transferred from the way she had chosen L1 books. Through the eye-opening experience of the ER Book Review Project, she had finally discovered the reason for her chronic
failures of reading in English and found a remedy as simple as reading children’s books with beautiful pictures and captivating stories. Yet, her new found joy had brought a new dilemma, which became the index of her mixed attitude towards the ER paradigm.

I love those oversized colorful books for children. However, I still find it somewhat embarrassing to be spotted with those books in my hands. You know what? I am a professional teacher of English! Therefore, I have decided to remain as a closeted children’s book lover for now until I find other suitable book genres I may feel more proud of. (Interview, turn 64)

Boosted by her conviction that children’s books could read so well and work magic, Kwon even introduced those same children’s books she had read to one of her high school tutees, an underachieving student in English. The result was a huge success. Kwon and her tutee shared a love for children’s books, giggling, and having fun.

5) Lee: “Well, I now acknowledge that ER could be considered as a hobby.”

Being a secondary public school teacher of EFL for more than fifteen years, Lee was a valuable source for looking into perspectives of a seasoned EFL practitioner. She had developed a thoroughly professional mentality that it should be her duty to tackle English books analytically for the improvement of her teaching expertise. She had not been reading any books for pleasure because she had found no reason to do so. Therefore she did not budge much throughout the ER Book Review Project, finding ER to be an unrealistic luxury under the burden of the current educational schedule. Her reading in English had been often limited to EFL learners’ textbooks, so she felt unpleasantly surprised and challenged when she came across authentic English texts. Nevertheless, she came to realize that the fun aspect
Voices from Korean EFL Teachers Who First Experienced Extensive Reading

of ER might complement IR in terms of affective benefits for lowering language anxiety.

The most positive side of ER is the possibility to reduce the affective pressure toward English. The good storyline will lead you into the “flow” experience when there is no comprehension test waiting in the end. It’s nice for me to realize ER can be a new hobby that is suitable for killing time. (Interview, turn 22)

6) Song: “I suffer from the discrepancies between my cognitive and linguistic levels.”

Song had been a true book lover in Korean with a good habit of visiting the library that had developed in her childhood. Her natural love for reading in L1 had never been transferred to her reading in English. English texts in her secondary school days were considered horrible enemies to conquer. Even though she witnessed the benefits of ER as a teaching approach when she was ordered to help her EFL tutees to read ER books, she had an insoluble dilemma on the personal level, torn between her limited proficiency in English and her high cognitive ability to look for intriguing contents.

As a matter of fact, I would never engage in ER in English. One major reason should be that I find many ER books such as graded readers too childish and too simplified. I have difficulty finding appropriate level of ER books that match both my language proficiency and my intellectual level. (Interview, turn 30)

7) Kim: “I am not tolerant to ambiguity, and I find ER ambiguous after all.”

Kim was the one who responded the most negatively to ER. He had
never been truly engaged in any pleasurable activities associated with any aspects of reading, even in his childhood. He called himself a visual type person rather than a reader. He also claimed that he was an analytic learner who strived for perfection and could not stand ambiguities of ER texts that were filled with unknown words. According to Kim, he had no basis to form any positive attitudes on ER in English. Besides, he believes that his dislike of reading was reinforced by the IR paradigm in the Korean mainstream EFL curriculum. He failed to see much value in ER because he had to look up “unnecessarily informal and therefore bothersome” words, constantly stopping to use a dictionary. He proposed that he would not encourage the use of ER for his own children in the future.

If you claim that ER entails easy and interesting reading materials, I don’t agree with you. Many words and expressions in ER books were rather unfamiliar to me. Those colloquial expressions rarely appear in the language learners’ textbooks. I had to look up a dictionary so often, which I didn’t enjoy. (Interview, turn 26)

2. Common Themes in the Participants’ Perceptions on ER

1) Reading Attitude Grounded in the Lived Experiences of the Past

One clear theme obtained from the data is that the reading attitude is the result of many varied and intertwined variables in the lived experiences of individuals. Most distinctively, their past reading experiences, either in Korean, English, or both, seem to work as a possible source of the change agent. First of all, their L1 reading attitudes seemed to affect their perceptions on ER in L2. Much research (Takase, 2007; Yamashita, 2004) generally accepts the transfer of reading attitude between L1 and L2. Yoo mentioned several times in her journal entries and interviews that she owed her reading speed and competencies in Korean to the reading habits she had
developed in her childhood. Most participants had cherished their experiences reading in L1. For instance, Lim’s following remarks show her gratitude to her mother for allowing her a rich L1 reading input.

My mom was enthusiastic about broadening knowledge through reading. She always took me to a library and used to provide me with an endless supply of books. (Lim’s interview, turn 6)

On the other hand, Kim, who showed the most negative attitudes toward ER, had a negative L1 reading attitude, saying, “My whole impression was that reading was boring and exhaustive.” (Kim’s journal entry, week 3) When they were deprived of the formation of L1 reading habits from their childhood, it seemed tougher for them to discover the value of ER in their adulthood.

My reading in my younger years was limited only to the required books for study. I have never actually engaged in pleasure reading in any language. As for ER, I know they are good in theory, but I never apply them into practice. (Kim’s interview, turn 2)

Second, regardless of their L1 reading practices, past L2 reading experience also remarkably influenced their attitudes to ER. On the onset of this study, all participants revealed that their reading in English had long been practiced mostly through the framework of intensive academic L2 reading targeted at achieving high scores in evaluative assessments. For most of them, the carefree nature of pleasure reading sounded foreign, and their reading skills had been developed for intensive reading.

As for reading in English, I tended to translate laboriously word for word, looking up the dictionary, caught up in the “study” mode of IR. (Yoo’s journal entry, week 1)
I love to read L1 books, but I find books written in English too difficult to be appreciated. I always read English texts thoroughly and intensively. I have the pressure to get into the study mode and then check any unknown vocabularies and study synonyms, antonyms, and parts of speech. (Song’s journal entry, week 3)

Yoo and Song’s reactions likely represent the majority of EFL practitioners who somehow succeed in the strict Korean EFL curriculum focusing on language forms and valuing the results of language tests. Deeply entrenched in the IR paradigm in Korea, Song and Kim could not reach a positive attitude regarding ER, and Kwon and Lee had mixed feelings. Meanwhile, Yoo, who had an experience in a study-abroad program as an ESL student in U.K. showed a positive attitude toward ER.

In this ER Book Review Project, I was extremely delighted to come across those same books I had read in the U.K. You know, looking back now, I think I had tasted some aspect of ER then. I hold good memories with those books and the special teacher in that reading course. (Yoo’s interview, turn 14)

In contrast to Yoo’s reading experience in the U.K., Lim’s reading experience in the U.S. was extremely negative. Yet, Lim cleverly used her failures in the past as a lesson not to impose too difficult texts on her young students in her application of ER in class. Therefore, the newly gained positive or negative attitude towards ER often attributes their changes to the underlying factors formed in their past experiences.

2) Affective Benefits of the Noncompetitive Nature of ER

All participants acknowledged some degrees of positive benefits to bringing comfort and reducing anxiety in a reading class regardless of the varied degrees of accepting ER on personal or professional levels. Except
Song and Kim, five participants were pleasantly surprised at the simplicity of ER, which coincides with Day and Bamford’s (2002) fourth principle, “Reading is its own reward.” All participants’ experiences and perceptions of ER shared a new discovery that English books could be considered as a source of personal joy, not as something to be learned and followed by comprehension tests. For example, several pieces of Judy Blume’s young adult literature earned rave reviews from all participants.

The main characters are children with childish topics. Yet the story is so captivating that this book may be recommended to everybody. During reading, I sometimes forgot the language aspects and was captured in the flow experience. (Song’s book review comment to “Tales of the Fourth Grade Nothing”)

The book reviews reveal that if participants are seized with the flow experience, they experience a lowered reading anxiety and increased comfort level which had never been experienced in their previous IR paradigm.

*Blink*, written by Malcolm Gladwell, initially seemed challenging, but I chose and finished the book and also enjoyed the reading process. That experience was truly liberating. (Park’s interview, turn 18)

I love the fact that I was finally free from the pressure to prove anything to anybody when you engage in free voluntary reading. (Yoo’s interview, turn 32)

Therefore, ER might be able to provide some antidotes to the rigid and anxious learning atmospheres in Korean EFL classes. Even though Lee, a seasoned EFL practitioner in the public sector, did not fully accept ER personally and indicated the difficulty of implementing ER in the current condition, she was convinced of the heuristic aspect of good storylines and felt inclined to complement her reading class with the affective benefits of
I think that the undeniable strength of the ER paradigm lies in the potential to alleviate the sense of distance towards the English texts. (Lee’s interview, turn 14)

3) A Whole New Lens in the ER Paradigm as a Change Agent

First of all, participants who experienced a distinct change in reading attitude were the ones who truly experienced the “book flood” (Elley & Mangubhai, 1981) and encountered the pleasure of reading on a personal level. ER did help some participants to be seized with the “flow” experience (Johnston & Allington, 1991), which involves losing oneself through immersion in the pleasure of reading. Their weekly logs and interviews often showed the progressive changes in attitude toward ER, moving from doubtful and negative toward positive. As seasoned EFL learners and professional EFL practitioners, the participants found this change tremendously significant. For example, Park and Yoo state:

For me, I would not call it the change of beliefs. It seems to me that I am introduced to a whole new way, the best way to learn and teach reading. Now that I’ve experienced ER firsthand, not in theory but in action, I came to possess a conviction for ER which did not exist before in my world. (Park’s interview, turn 10)

The biggest change for me is that I find myself enjoying English books. I even like the simple fact that I carry my treasured ER books with me. ER has become such a new found source of joy in my everyday routine. You know, reading time can be exclusively for me and me only, not for exams or anything else. Isn’t that special? (Yoo’s interview, turn 26)

Second, their choice of books changed. They were not swayed by...
Voices from Korean EFL Teachers Who First Experienced Extensive Reading 95

recommended reading lists for the intellectually challenged; they were proud of carrying children’s picture books in public. Park boasted his newly adopted guideline of Nation’s (2006) 98 percent sight vocabulary. Yoo’s following journal entry shows the moment of enlightenment regarding the reason to go for easy reading texts.

*Mr. Putter and Tabby*, one of my ER books, did magic to me. I was floated away into a different time and place. I felt what Mr. Putter must have felt. “Is this written for children?” I doubted. This book truly gave me insight that using simple texts, which I often neglected, may be necessary in fostering ER. (Yoo’s journal entry, week 8)

Some well-written children and young adult literature, such as Mary Pope Osborne’s Magic Tree House series and Roberta Edwards’ Who Is series, were welcomed by many participants in that they found values of ER books to be very promising resources for personal and professional growth. In addition, visual aspects in many children’s books appealed to visual learners like Yoo, Lim, Park, and Kwon. For instance, Lim demonstrates her positive reaction to the book:

This book surely blows away my prejudice that nonfiction is rather boring. I finished this book in one seating. I think I was so enthralled in the story and captured by graphics that I hardly blinked during reading. I would recommend this book for all grade levels and definitely consider using this book in my teaching. (Lim’s book review comment to “Who Was Steve Jobs?”)

Third, the newly gained ER paradigm brought changes in ways of reading books for many participants. Simply put, having fun without any need to apply any skills and strategies was one of their metacognitive strategies.
Participants’ reading skills and strategies in ER included having fun without any pressure, avoiding any linguistic analysis and translation, guessing meaning with the help of contextual clues like pictures, and even giving up inappropriate books after reading a few pages without second thought.

The so-called skills and strategies such as skimming or scanning do not seem to fit in the ER mindset. During ER, I only seek pleasure of following the storyline as it unfolds. I don’t consciously try to find main ideas. (Lee’s interview, turn 38)

3. Perceived Barriers to ER

1) Deeply Rooted in the IR Paradigm

Many barriers to ER have been identified in this study, yet most of them seem to derive from the deeply rooted IR paradigm. Initial coding of barriers to ER reached a list of twenty one items. To some participants, applying ER into current Korean secondary contexts remains a formidable struggle due to exam-oriented school curriculum. Their views seem to come from lived experience in the IR paradigm where they had to prove their linguistic knowledge through exam scores. After all, all the participants were brought up in the current value system that preferred grammar translation and audio-lingual methods in EFL classes. Even if they find ER beneficial in the long run, the IR paradigm incurs feelings of doubt and uncertainty regarding the short-term effects of ER. The following journal entries from Park and Kim reveal their reading attitude and reading strategies deeply rooted in the IR paradigm:

There is a Korean saying, “A novice shaman may kill a person in performing an exorcism,” which can be paraphrased as “A little knowledge is a dangerous thing” in English. Therefore, I have
developed a habit not to skip any unfamiliar words and instead study those words in the dictionary. (Park’s journal entry, Week 2)

In my case, difficult vocabulary is the most hindering thing when I read English. Since I am not that tolerant to ambiguity, whenever an unknown word appears, I have to look up the dictionary. (Kim’s journal entry, week 2)

It should be noted that all the participants in this study—seasoned EFL practitioners—have already been successful EFL learners and teachers in the current IR paradigm, which means that it should not be easy for them to change their reading attitude through experiencing ER for a short period of time. Therefore, Kim could never follow all the guidelines of ER including the principle of 98 percent of known words.

2) Dilemma of Cognitive and Linguistic Gaps for Adult EFL Learners

Taking into consideration the dilemma of cognitive and linguistic gaps for adult EFL learners, all those difficulties of book selection seem to hold enough reasons to seem to discourage and disregard ER. There surely exists the unsoluble dilemma between language learners’ limited proficiency in language and their mature cognitive inclination to look for intriguing contents. Those thick novels intended for native English speaking adults often limit language learners’ engagement in reading, as displayed in Lim’s remark below.

I was influenced by my own myth that everyone except me had already read “Harry Potter,” not just once, but several times. However, I had to stop after reading a few pages. Oh, no, no. Actually, I stopped after I got tired of looking up vocabulary in the dictionary. (Lim’s interview, turn 50)
Yet, some participants, including Song and Kim, confessed that they had never developed any liking for graded readers in English because they had always considered them below their proficiency levels and therefore unfit to be excited about. Therefore, linguistically simplified literature or graded readers may also impede mature learners’ continued reading if they found the material too childish or dry to find any worth, as displayed in Song’s remark below:

I have not developed any liking for graded readers in English because I see nothing to be thrilled about. They do not ring my bell. Yet, my English is not proficient enough to read authentic novels. (Song’s interview, turn 30)

3) Unfamiliarity of the Authentic ER Books Meant for Native Speakers of English

Regardless of the degrees of linguistic simplification of ER books, authentic English texts written for native speakers of English may contain many varied elements of difficulties and ambiguities for EFL learners who are not often exposed to such texts. Many participants struggled with unfamiliar informal and colloquial expressions in dialogue-rich ER texts on top of the lack of cultural schemata. Lee, Song, and Kim found ER texts problematic in a Korean EFL class where an exact translation into Korean was required. Therefore, in order to somehow enjoy ER books, some participants had to change their whole mindset in order to not analyze the texts, but to trust in the principle of “Sit back and enjoy.”

The main barrier to my reading in English is vocabulary including colloquial expressions in authentic reading materials. I need to be more exposed to English culture. (Lee’s journal entry, week 3)

The flow experience did not come right away, though. I had to resist
my urge to look up the dictionary when I met unfamiliar onomatopoeic or imitating words. Well into the end of six weeks of ER Book Review Project, I was pleasantly surprised that I was trying to focus more on meaning in relation to the protagonists’ stories in the book rather than trying to figure out unfamiliar vocabulary. (Park’s journal, week 12)

Lee was unpleasantly surprised at her lack of cultural schemata in English culture. However, culture-bound expressions are an integral part of language, which should be understood, or at least tolerated, in order to participate in meaning-focused communication. Park’s remark shows his increased level of tolerance toward the unfamiliarity and ambiguity of English as he progresses in his practice of pleasure reading.

V. Discussion

1. What are the Korean EFL Teachers’ Individual Perceptions and Attitudes on ER?

First, it seems noteworthy that the firsthand experience of enjoying thirty ER books brought about, more or less, an element of surprise for all participants, which may signify that many Korean EFL practitioners are deprived of the chances to actually experience ER firsthand on a personal level. Without ever engaging in ER personally, Korean EFL practitioners would never understand the possibility and applicability of ER in their professions. Second, many have come to believe the power of narratives written in English. One of the unanimously agreed upon benefits perceived by all participants was the affective aspect of ER. The self-regulated nature of ER may open the possibility to boost language learners’ comfort levels and raise the intrinsic motivation to read, which is worthy to be considered
as one possible answer to the stressful language-learning situation in Korea.
Third, although many came to acknowledge the value of ER in their
professions, they still think that it will not be easy to implement ER into
the exam-oriented school curriculum in Korea, which is corroborated in
Byun’s research (2010). They are more willing to incorporate some positive
aspects of non-threatening ER along with the traditional IR, which they
hope will complement each other. Additionally, the participants expressed
many issues with the ER materials and the difficulty of book selection in
terms of balancing EFL learners’ low linguistic and high cognitive levels.
The participants favored young adult literature and some well-written graded
readers, which are believed to fall in the middle ground of simplification
and authenticity.

2. What are the Common Changes in Korean EFL Teachers’
Perceptions and Attitudes After Experiencing ER?

The lived experiences encompassing some aspects of pleasure reading in
the past, either in Korean or English, are transferred to current ER
experiences. Yoo, Lim, Park, and Song all shared wonderful memories of
visiting local libraries in childhood which were guided by their mothers
who thought highly of reading. Three participants, Yoo, Lim, and Park
broke away from the IR paradigm in Korean EFL contexts and changed
their attitude about reading in English. It seems that these participants
opened up more toward the promises of ER because they had already
experienced the joy of reading in L1 and experienced its entailing benefits.
Park showed the most dramatic change, revealing his plan to transfer his
newly gained ER approach and heightened zeal for reading to move forward
as a better reader. On the contrary, Lee and Kim had no or limited
experience of pleasure reading in L1; and, it is likely that they find it
difficult to relate with the flow experience easily because they lack some
Voices from Korean EFL Teachers Who First Experienced Extensive Reading

basis for ER to build upon in their lived experiences. It seems that this change in reading attitude comes only when there is a turning point to personally encounter the flow experience, which results in questioning their current IR paradigm. Many called their flow experiences truly eye-opening. For example, Kwon could finally diagnose the reason for her chronic failures in reading. Her newly gained lens of ER allowed her to deal with her seemingly hopeless problem of being unable to finish best-selling English novels. Taking into consideration her inclination to an extremely visual input, her remedy was to read colorful children’s books.

3. What are the Korean EFL Teachers’ Perceived Barriers to ER on Their Personal and Professional Levels?

Many participants mentioned that the foremost barrier to ER for them on the personal and professional levels is the current Korean educational environment. Many also blamed the lack of time for pleasure reading, the lack of ER books to match both their linguistic and cognitive levels, or difficulty of colloquial and informal languages in ER books. Yet, this study proposes that all these perceived barriers are deeply rooted in the current mainstream IR paradigm in Korea. Therefore, when seen through the lens colored by the IR perspective, ER is a far too romantic approach entailing a lot of ambiguities and tolerance.

On the onset of the Extensive Reading Review Project, all participants shared their difficulties in the mainstream IR paradigm in Korea. There are some prejudices, problems, and dilemmas stemming from the IR perspective. For instance, all participants used to suffer extreme confusion about English book selections and repeatedly gave up on reading. Nation (2006) highlights that reading turns into reading pain when the sight vocabulary reaches 90 percent or less. Yet, in the IR paradigm, many participants were lured to enjoy *Harry Potter* only to fail, in turn
contributing to the vicious circle (Nuttall, 1996) of avoiding reading in English.

Most barriers to ER seem to be rooted in the reading attitude in the IR paradigm, which regard English as a tool from extrinsic motivation. Many participants shared the problem of inappropriate book selection; and, only through experiencing ER firsthand could achieve enlightenment on the nature of their problem, as well as the remedy for it. The participants of this study showed that the barriers to ER could be tackled once they realized that reading could be its own reward. If ER is properly implemented with the mindset of the ER paradigm, language learners may overcome many formidable barriers because ER can be used for everybody and does not assume any particular level of the language learners’ proficiency (Day & Bamford, 1998).

VI. Conclusion

One of the strongest themes in this study is that a paradigm shift to ER may result from gaining a whole new perspective on the texts written in English as something to be personally treasured. EFL teachers’ reading attitudes are quite paramount. If Korean EFL teachers fully accept the joy of reading in the ER paradigm, their reading attitudes may be transferred to students’ reading attitudes, and eventually to Korean EFL curriculum. Nevertheless, the place of IR in Korean EFL contexts cannot be easily challenged outright when so many practitioners are totally entrenched in the IR paradigm. Three participants out of eight in this study still did not buy into the principles of ER on either personal or professional levels, even after they experienced ER in theory and practice for one semester.

Still, three participants, Lim, Kwon, and Song, reported the huge success in practicing ER in the private sector, which may add one more reason to
the necessity for implementing ER in the public mainstream EFL curriculum in Korea. Lee, with fifteen years of teaching experience in the public sector, suggested that the most ideal possibility would be to combine ER with IR. All participants believed that ER could be implemented easily into extracurricular activities instead of into the mainstream curriculum, which is also corroborated by previous research (Byun, 2010; Cho, 2004) in Korean EFL contexts.

Therefore, one implication of this study is that Korean EFL teachers should be educated about the value of ER in the first place. When the participants in this study engaged in true ER for the very first time in their lives, some of their fixed views and myths were challenged and replaced. Therefore, more and more practitioners need to fully experience ER firsthand and develop whole new insight that we learn to read through reading itself. Voices in this study came from only seven EFL practitioners, which suggests the need for more future qualitative studies, short-term or longitudinal, that may reach as many as voices from EFL practitioners and allow them to encounter and truly engage in ER. Only through firsthand experience of ER, will EFL practitioners be able to see the need to problems of the current IR paradigm and understand Cho and Krashen’s advice to build more English libraries in Korea (2015).

References


Voices from Korean EFL Teachers Who First Experienced Extensive Reading


Dong Ook Kim
Dept. of English Education, Chung-Ang University
84 Heukseok-ro, Dongjak-gu, Seoul, Korea
Phone: +82-10-2063-2696
Email: mydngk@gmail.com