

TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF IMPLEMENTING FREE VOLUNTARY READING TO SUPPORT ENGLISH LANGUAGE ACQUISITION IN SECONDARY CLASSROOMS IN SRI LANKA

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ABSTRACT

In many contexts Free Voluntary Reading (FVR) has been found to be an effective approach of second language teaching and acquisition. Despite this proven success, careful scrutiny of available literature revealed a paucity of research in this area specific to Sri Lankan school contexts. This paper aimed to explore teachers' understanding of FVR, to support students' English language acquisition, in secondary classrooms in Sri Lanka. A qualitative research approach is employed where the data was collected through a questionnaire administered to a purposeful sample of 21 secondary school ESL teachers. Findings of this show that all the teachers perceived reading in the broader sense as an effective approach to students' second language acquisition yet do not practice this systematically in their classrooms. While revealing a degree of possible benefits of FVR program, this paper also identified the challenges to the implementation of such a program in Sri Lankan schools, including teachers' lack of awareness of FVR programs and the paucity of suitable reading materials in classrooms. However, clear evident in the responses analyzed was the teachers' willingness to trial a systematic in class FVR program given the appropriate time, resources and support.

INTRODUCTION

Reading has been extensively researched as an effective mode of language acquisition. It is widely accepted that children who are introduced to books early in their lives are more prone

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to develop their language skills and are in turn usually better in reading comprehension, compared to children who are non-readers or reluctant readers (Loh, 2009). The more children read, more they gain in language ability and reading comprehension. The more children gain in their language ability and reading comprehension, more they learn (Krashen, 2016). Reading thus provides opportunities for children to develop cognitively as well as linguistically. Interestingly McQuillan (2019) claims that many studies have outlined that the future success of all students hinges upon their ability to become proficient readers.

The research literature recognizes 'reading' as subconscious facilitator of language acquisition through the prolonged passive exposure to language (Krashen, 2016). Many countries in the world have implemented systematic reading programs as an integral part of their second language lessons and they have resulted improved student performances. Several free reading programs such as the *Victorian premier's reading challenge*, *Sustained Silent Reading (SSR)*, *shared book programs*, *book-flood*, etc., are being practiced around the world with research evidence to indicate they are effective in improving student's overall language acquisition.

Among many second language acquisition approaches, Free Voluntary Reading (FVR) has been extensively researched as an effective mode of language acquisition (Krashen, 2016; McQuillan, 2019 & Sugiharto, 2009). It is defined as 'reading for pleasure'. FVR involves reading out of personal interests without any accountability to a teacher or other authority figure (Krashen, 2004). Sri Lanka also has piloted a similar free voluntary program, *books in school* in 1990s (Kuruppu, 2001). Yet it has not implemented systemically despite it being found to strengthen students' language comprehension.

Given the importance of reading as a mode of English language improvement, a study is designed to gather preliminary data to assist in the design and development of effective reading programs in Sri Lanka to strengthen the English language learning outcomes of students. This paper uses the questionnaire data from a purposeful sample of secondary school ESL teachers to cast light on ascertaining the teachers' understanding of 'free voluntary reading' as an approach of improving English language comprehension in students of Sri Lankan secondary classroom. It is anticipated to use the outcomes of this study as an initiative in designing and developing effective reading programs in Sri Lanka to strengthen English language learning outcomes in the future.

EVOLUTION OF ENGLISH AS THE LYNCHPIN OF GLOBALIZED EDUCATION IN SRI LANKA

Although English education was not given prominence in the early years in Sri Lanka, with latter political paradigm shifts that emerged with the introduction of the open economy in 1977 people began to feel that they have been deprived from accessing to better jobs and vast sources of knowledge available globally. As a result, ‘English’ started to regain its vitality in the Sri Lankan school system. This realization has led to teaching English as a second language (ESL) as a compulsory subject in Sri Lankan education system (Prasangani, 2014).

Yet unfortunately, despite the vast investment and emphasis made to English education in Sri Lanka, the overall students’ performance are relatively below average (DOE, 2019) particularly because of the lack of competent English teachers, resources and the lack of funds (Baldsing, 2013).

‘Reading’ in Bridging the Learning Difference between L1 and L2

It is undeniable and unavoidable that there is an obvious difference in L1 and L2 acquisition due to many controllable and uncontrollable reasons. Available literature on different pedagogical approaches has shown that authentic and excessive exposure to a second language is the most sustainable L2 acquisition method (Elley, 2004).

Reading has increasingly been the critical focus of many empirical and theoretical investigations in L2 acquisition (Crowley, 2014). Reading is regarded as one of the most effective processes of conscious and subconscious learning. According to Merga & Mat Roni (2018), reading determines the extent and accuracy of constructing information. It is more commonly regarded as an interaction between the reader and the text. Further, psychologists view reading as a cognitive process that requires readers to read with their prior background knowledge and constantly make predictions of its meaning (Alyousef, 2005).

FREE VOLUNTARY READING (FVR)

Amongst the plethora of contemporary literature that identifies various reading approaches, Free Voluntary Reading approach (FVR) has been recognized as a tool for second language acquisition as it is the most researched and accepted form of reading in a second language contexts like Sri Lanka. When the reading approach is free and voluntary, it lowers the anxiety levels of the reader which in-turn enhances sense of self-confidence and motivation (Krashen, 2016). Sugiharto (2009) summarises the crux of FVR approach as, ‘. . . a radical variant of traditional reading approaches. It is easy and comprehensible. Further, it is entirely voluntarily and self-selected done with no accountability with no tests or reports, done for the pleasure of the reader’s own sake, not for reward’ (p.9)’. Many researchers have found that FVR has a substantial impact on developing vocabulary, syntax fluency, reading comprehension and writing (Waring & Takaki, 2003; Hitosugi & Day, 2004; Krashen, 2004; Lee, 2005; Liburd & Rodrigo, 2012).

The research literature also recognizes the impact of systematic in-school reading programmes (in different forms- such as *Shared Book*, *Free Voluntary Reading*, *Sustained Silence Reading*) on students’ English language development. The *Shared Book method* which was introduced to Niuean-speaking Grade 3 students in Niue in 1970s resulted in great success after one year of its implementation (De’Ath, 1980). The students in the research group performed better than the students in the normal audiolingual classroom in reading comprehension, word recognition and oral comprehension in English as a second language. Post-test results in Elley and Mangubhai’s (1983) ‘*Book Flood*’ study, of 380 Fijian and Hindi-speaking pupils in Fiji, revealed that the pupils exposed to many stories improved in reading ,listening comprehension and language skills at twice the normal rate. This was confirmed by the similar results after two years of implementation. The project implemented to assist English language skills in the forty weakest schools in Singapore (*REAP* program), succeeded in improving the target schools’ English Language pass rate above the national average (Davis, 1995). The South African *READ* program which allowed students to read freely at their pace has shown that students have gained largely in the areas of reading and writing in L2 (Elley, 1998). The ‘*Books in School*’ program which was conducted among 40 Sri Lankan schools has also resulted in similar improved writing, listening and attitude to reading as well (Kuruppu, 2001). It is also interesting to note that all of these studies recognises the importance of teacher’s

intervention, acceptance, reception, attitudes and beliefs in orchestrating of the programs to reap maximum results particularly within the quantitative realm (Tomlinson & Jarvis, 2006)

IMPORTANCE OF TEACHER PERCEPTIONS IN LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

The teacher plays a crucial role in determining the student's success in the classroom. It is the responsibility of teachers to select appropriate teaching techniques, media and materials that enhance student performance. Squires and Bliss (2004) claim that "decades of research on the connection between teachers' perceptions and their practices yield a common theme: all teachers bring to the classroom some level of beliefs that influence their critical decision making" (p. 756). Further, teachers' perceptions of students' motivation of reading in class has been researched to be correlate significantly with students' own perceived level of reading achievement. Understanding how teachers view reading is critical to dealing with the development of a systematic reading program and creating a positive attitude among students.

METHODOLOGY

The key research questions discussed in this paper are,

1. What are the perceptions of L2 teachers about student reading as an approach of second language acquisition?
2. What reading practices do teachers implement in their classrooms?
3. What is the teachers' knowledge/ perception of Free Voluntary Reading programmes?
4. What are the possible challenges that would be encountered in practicing/ implementing a Free Voluntary Reading programme in Sri Lankan secondary classrooms?

A sample of 21 ESL teachers from the secondary classes of Sri Lankan schools were selected as the research participants in this study. This sample was purposefully selected for the convenience of data collection and which has a potential to provide a comprehensive

perspective, yet representing a cross-section of urban, semi-urban, rural and state schools in Sri Lanka.

A qualitative research approach was used which showcase how people construct meaning through interpreting the data gathered in order to find a substantive meaningful patterns or themes particular to the phenomenon (Patton, 2015).

Questionnaire method was used to data collection which was intended to address this central phenomenon of the study and to gain in-depth details of the set research questions outlined earlier in the proposal. The closed questions were designed to channel the participants' responses, through which a snapshot view of teachers' perceptions of the research questions could be captured. Open ended questions were designed to given the participant teachers an opportunity to given more complete and comprehensive responses of their opinions, perceptions, practices and beliefs on the research topic

FINDINGS

Demographic profile of the participants.

The introductory section of the questionnaire was intended to explore the demographic data of the participants, their years of experience, level of educational qualifications and grade levels that they teach.

Figure 1 details the number of years of teaching experience of the 21 participants of this study which is categorized in intervals of 5 years. Data shows that 7 participants out of total of the 21 have 20-25 years of teaching experience, while 4 have 15-20 years and another 4 have 5-10 years of teaching experience. 2 teachers each have 0-5, 10-15 and more than 25 years of experience.

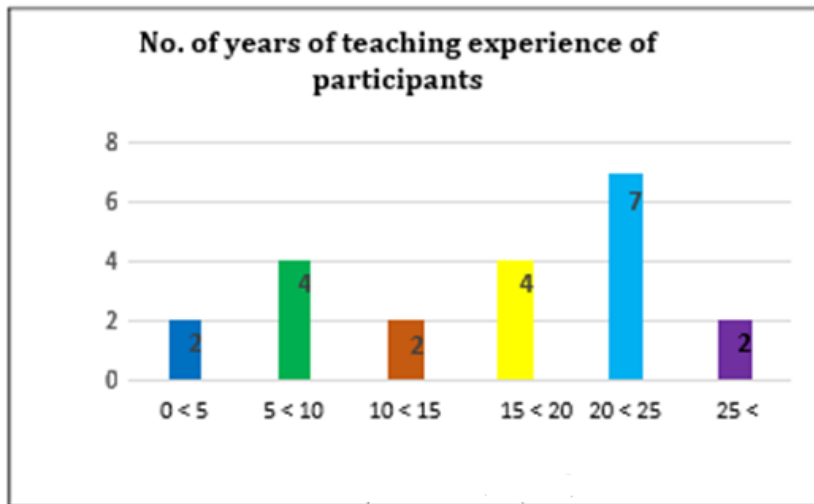


Figure 1: No. of years of teaching experience of participants

Participant teachers' level of qualifications is reported in *Figure 2*. Nearly an equal number of participants ($n=6$ and $n=7$) have either a MA in Linguistics or Dip. In TESL, 05 participants had G.C.E (A/L) qualification. The remaining 03 participants had MA (TESOL), B.Ed. and G.C.E (O/L) qualifications respectively.

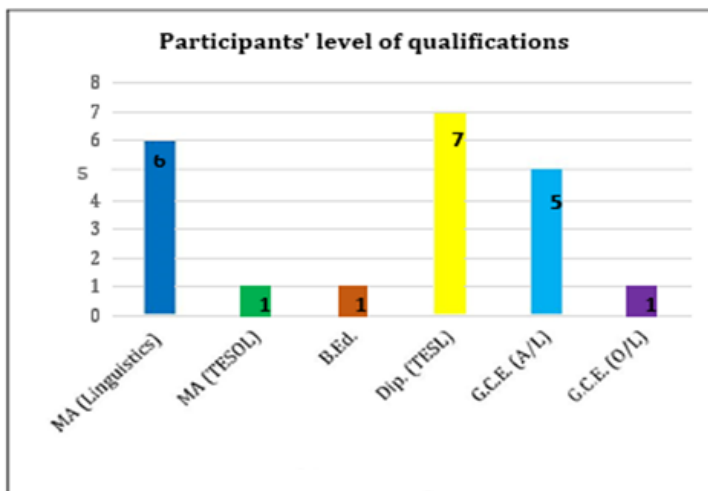


Figure 2: Participant's level of qualifications

The different grades that the participant teachers teach English as second language subject is graphically presented in *Figure 3*. In general, all the participants teach in grades 6-11 (i.e. secondary level), while 8 each teach the primary grades and G.C.E. (A/L) as well.

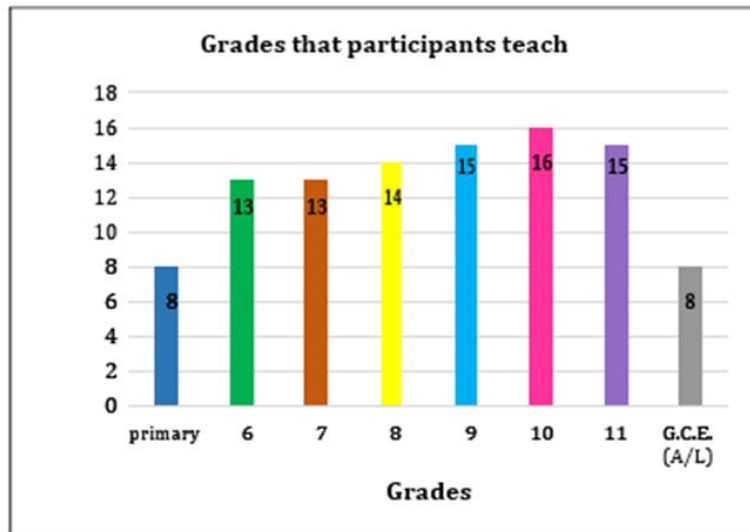


Figure 3: Grades the participant teach

Teachers' perception on reading as a second language acquisition approach.

Section I of the questionnaire targeted the first research question of the study and was intended to explore the participant teachers' general perception and acceptance of 'reading' as an approach of L2 acquisition among students.

Accordingly, the participant teachers were asked whether they agree that reading improves students' second language learning. *Figure 4* shows their level of agreement. The data shows that all the participants agreed that reading is important in L2 acquisition while majority of teachers (n= 13) strongly agree.

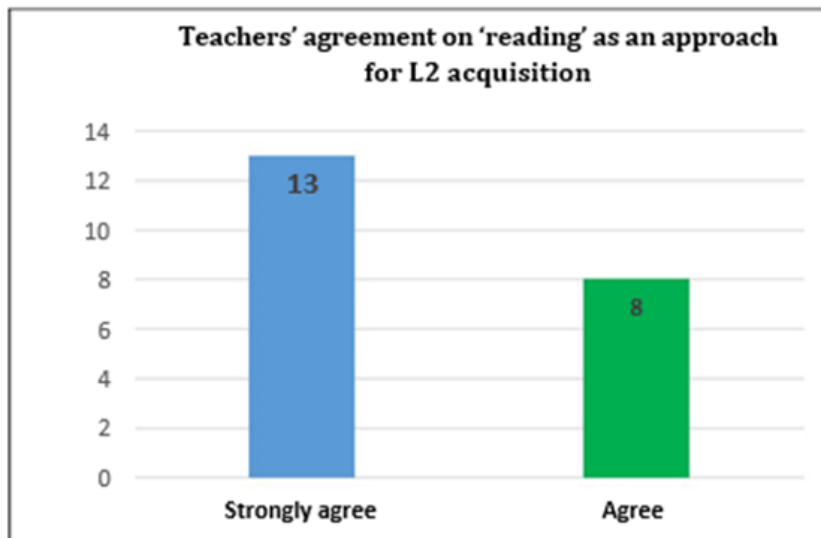


Figure 4: Teacher's agreement on 'reading' as an approach for L2 acquisition

In addition to exploring the participants' level of agreement on 'reading' as a L2 acquisition approach, the questionnaire explored their in-depth understanding on the same. Participants were asked to elaborate on how they believe 'reading' improves students' L2 acquisition. Figure 5 summarizes the responses, where most participants (n= 10, n=11) state that they believe reading improves student vocabulary and language forms. A further n=9 participants believe reading provides exposure to authentic language which results in language improvement. Fewer number of teachers also noted that reading improves grammar (n=5), spellings (n=3) and students' writing (n=2).

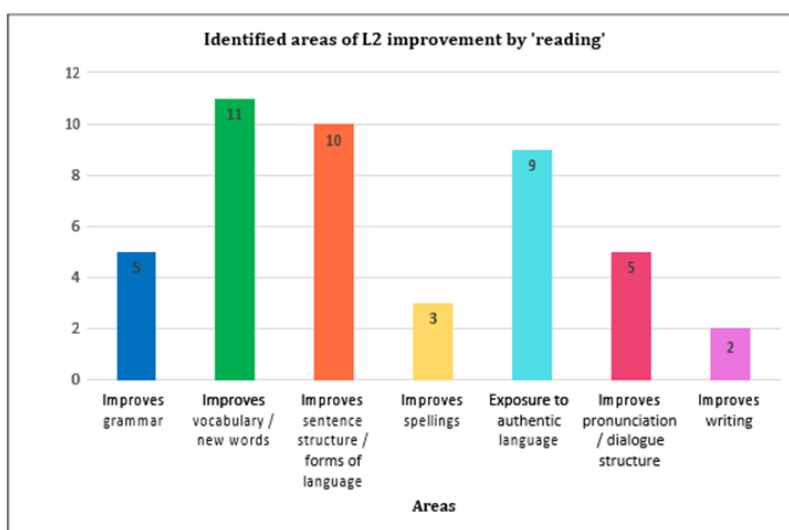


Figure 5: Identified areas of L2 improvement by ‘reading’

To further validate and explicate the above assumptions participants were asked to list the English books, materials and other sources that they encourage students to read both in class and out of class hours. *Figure 6* reports on the sources used in class. Interestingly, the text book was the predominant source of material used in class (n=17), followed by story books (n=12). Other materials such as newspapers, exam papers, notices, poems, magazines and articles were also recorded as text selections.

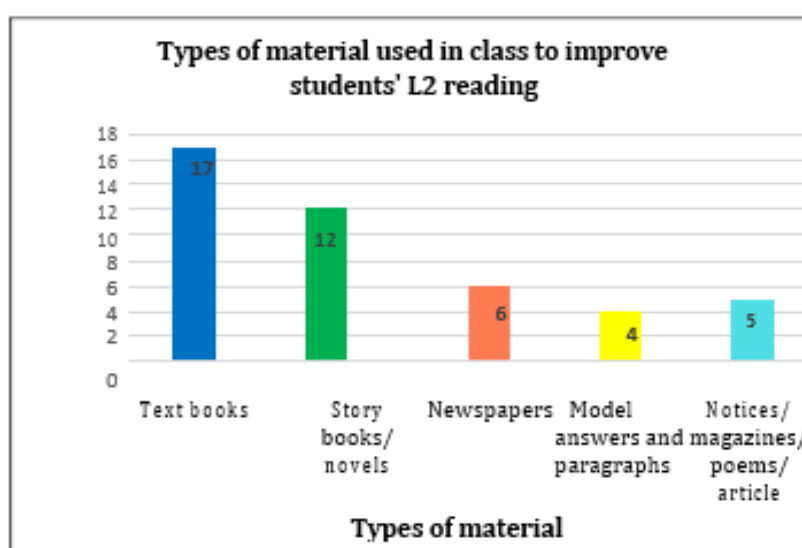


Figure 6: Types of material used in class to improve students' L2 reading

The same question was posed to gather information on the material participants used to encourage students' L2 reading in out of the class hours. Data obtained is reported in *Figure 8*. Almost all the participants have stated that they encourage reading story books (n=19), while newspaper reading is also a text of choice. Articles, advertisements, notices sign boards, cartoons, subtitled films and emails are the least considered reading material used in out of the class hours.

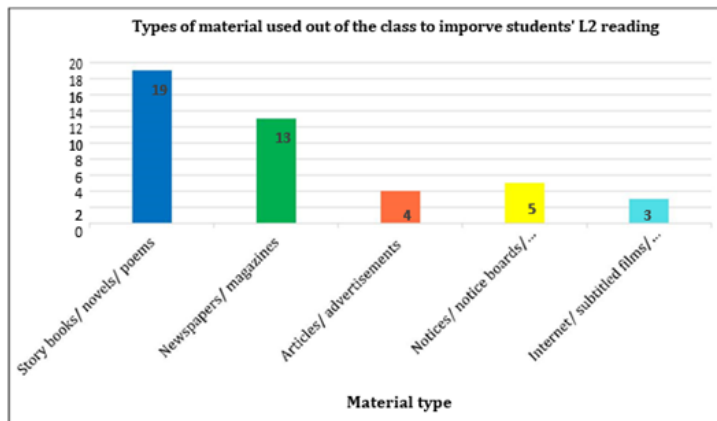


Figure 7: Types of material used in class to improve students' L2 reading

Current in-school reading programmes

Section II of the questionnaire was intended to probe the second research question of the study, namely the nature of participant teachers' in class reading practices.

Participants were given the opportunity to select reading practices that they use in class from a given list; *Figure 9* summarizes their selections. The most popular practice was practising specific skills on how to read (n=15), and maintaining a class room library (n=13). While setting aside daily reading time, reading aloud and book discussions were of equal interest (n=9), the least favoured practice was setting aside a reading time in-class (n=6).

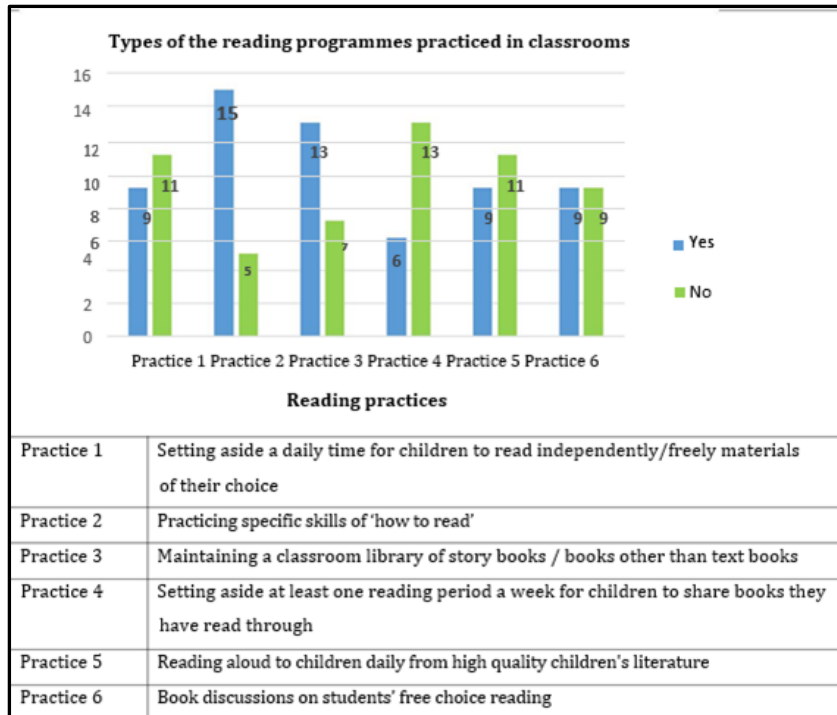


Figure 8: Types of the reading programmes practiced in classrooms

Table 1 details the data on the participants' knowledge and implementation of reading programs based on their years of experience and qualifications. Participants with 0<5 years of teaching experience were aware of the *Extensive Reading* programme, but implemented *Books in School* reading approach in their classrooms. Teachers with 5<20 years of experience have shown a similar trend in their knowledge and practice of reading programs. While most of them were familiar with reading *Books in School* program some have indicated that they are unaware of any systematic reading program as such. Same category of teachers are further reported to encourage students to read extra reading materials while few of them practice *books in school program* with their students and read aloud to their students. Interestingly participants with 20<25 and 25< have reported to practice various reading approaches including encouraging students to read, have books discussions, *Shared Book* approach and reading aloud to students. Yet in this category also there were a few number of participants who were unaware of any systematic reading program.

Table 1: Participants' knowledge and implementation of reading programs based on their experience, qualifications and grades that they teach. (* practices as mentioned in figure 8)

No. of years of experience	Education Qualifications	Grades	Reading practice used	Knowledge of a systematic reading programme	Reading practice implemented in the class
0<5	G.C.E A/L	6-11	Practices 2,4	Extensive reading programme	<i>Books in School</i>
5<10	Dip. TESL	3-11	Practices 1,2,3,5,6	Book in School, Not aware of any	Encourage students to read
10<15	G.C.E A/L	3-11	Practices 1,2,5	Book in School, Not aware of any	Read aloud, Books in School
15<20	G.C.E A/L	3-13	Practices 1,2,3,5,6	Book in School, Not aware of any	Encourage students to read, Books in School
20<25	G.C.E (O/L), G.C.E (A/L), Dip (TESL) M.A (Linguistic)	6-13	Practices 1,2,3,4,5,6	Book in School, Basal Reading, Not aware of any	Encourage students to read, Book discussion, read aloud, not aware of any programme
25<	G.C.E (O/L), M.A (Linguistic)	3-13	Practices 1,2,3,4,5	Book in School, Basal Reading, Shared Book Programme	Encourage students to read, Book programme

TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS ON FVR AS AN APPROACH OF SECOND LANGUAGE IMPROVEMENT

Section III of the questionnaire focused on the third research question of the study which explored the participant teachers' awareness / knowledge and understanding on the contemporary in-class systematic reading programmes practices, specifically focusing towards Free Voluntary Reading (FVR). The first part of this section measured the participants' current knowledge of the existing reading programmes. Participants were asked to select the programs familiar from the list provided. Responses obtained are displayed in *Figure 9*.

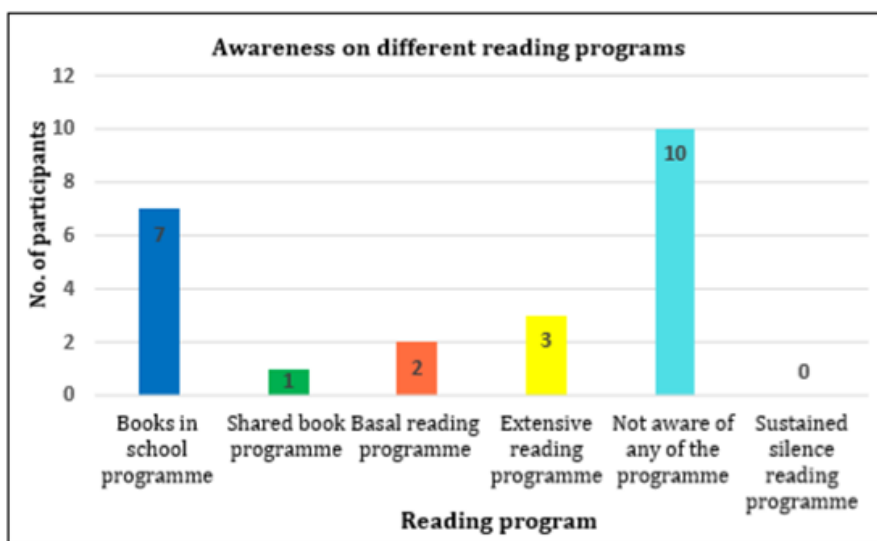


Figure 9: Awareness of different reading programmes

The second part of this section gathered data on teachers' current in-class reading programmes /approaches practiced in Sri Lankan English as a second language classroom settings in Sri Lanka. Participants were requested to identify the reading approaches that they practice during their lessons. The results are displayed in Figure 10.

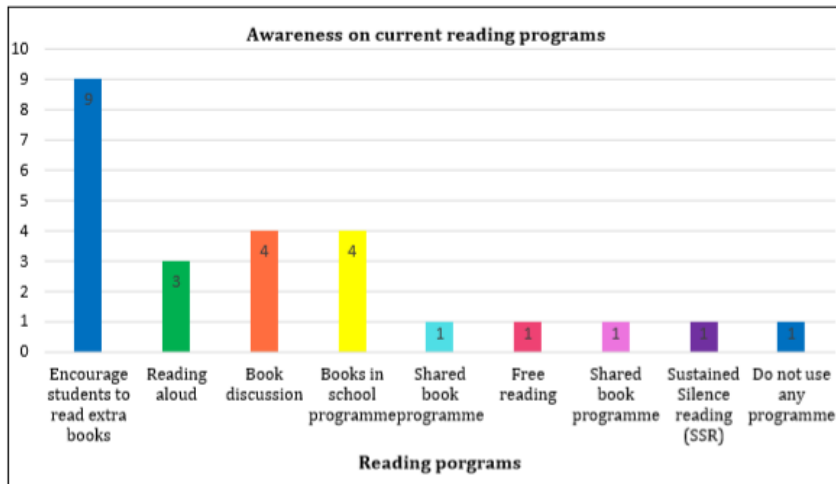


Figure 10: Awareness on current reading programmes

The third part of this section explored the core of this small-scale study to probe the participants’ knowledge on FVR. It focuses on gauging participant teachers’ understanding and use of Free Voluntary Reading during their English as a second language lessons and out of class hours as well. Figure11 summarizes the data obtained. The majority of participants indicated that they encourage FVR in class as well as out of class hours (n=16). Yet there were other participants who indicated that they do not practice FVR in class or out of class hours (n=5).

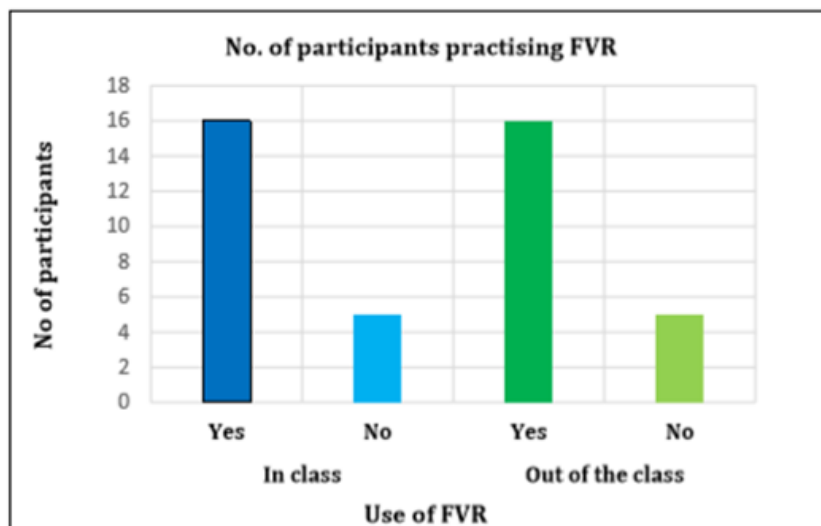


Figure 11: No. of participants practicing FVR

Possible challenges in implementing in school FVR program. The final section of the questionnaire was designated to ascertain the perceptions of the participant teachers on the possible benefits and challenges in implementing a FVR program in Sri Lanka. Figure 12 summarizes the perceptions of participant teachers regarding the challenges that might be encountered when implementing a FVR program in the Sri Lankan school context. An equal number of participants (n=8) have stated that lack of time, lack of material and students' low language proficiency as the main challenges in implementing an in-class FVR program. A lack of awareness of the importance of this type of reading program, lack of support from higher management and breadth of the syllabus were also identified as possible challenges (n=5). In addition to the issues mentioned, inadequate teacher training and other factors such as lack of motivation, students' lack of focus and/or over attending for reading texts outside of those set by the curriculum were indicated as areas of concern.

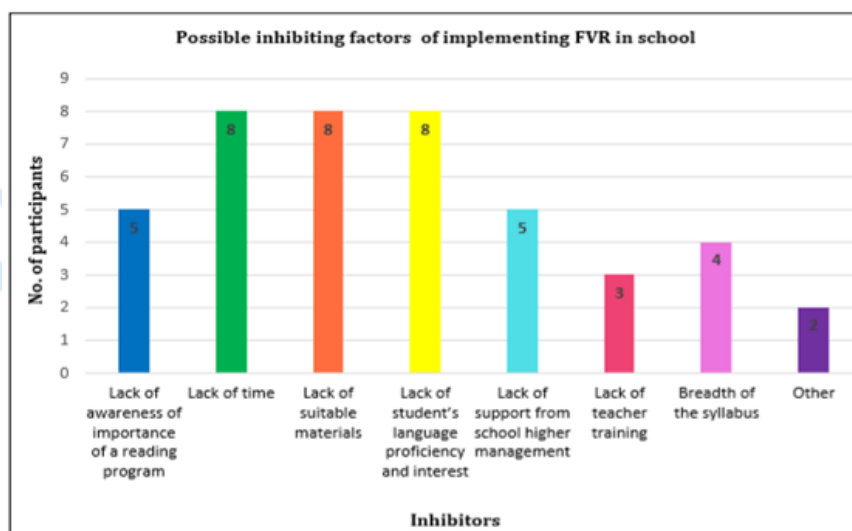


Figure 12: Possible inhibiting factors of implementing FVR in school

The final question focused on exploring participant teachers' perceptions regarding the possible benefits of devising a FVR program at Sri Lankan secondary school level. Summary of the data obtained is presented in the Figure 13. According to the responses the majority of participants believed that a FVR program would improve students overall language proficiency and grammar (n=18). A considerable number of respondents (n=10) believe that an in-class FVR program would create an enjoyable, stress-free learning environment alongside other

benefits such as developing lifelong reading habits (n=5) and improving students' creativity (n=3).

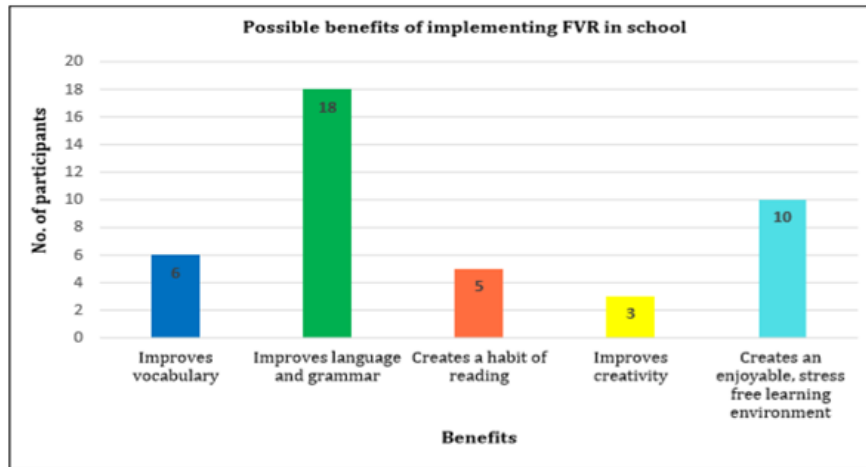


Figure 13: Possible benefits of implementing FVR in school

Teacher perceptions on reading based on their experiences, qualifications and grades that they teach. Table 2 provides a summary of the data showing participants' perceptions and how they think reading helps in L2 learning and the type of materials they use to promote student reading both in class and out of class hours. In general, irrespective of the number of years of experience most participants acknowledged the impact of reading on vocabulary acquisition and improving grammar. Participants with more than 15 years of experience indicated the impact on student writing and the creation of an enjoyable learning environment. Almost all the participants stated that the use of the text book as the main class reading material, where story books were also valued as having considerable importance. During out of class hours, story books predominates while newspapers and other books make up the minority of read text.

Table 2: Participants' perceptions on how they think reading helps in L2 learning and the type of materials they use to promote student reading both in class and out of the class.

No. of years of experience	Educational qualifications	Teaching grades	Perceptions on ' how reading helps L2 development'	Materials use for reading	
				In class	Out of the class hours
0<5	G.C.E. (A/L)	gr.6-11	Improves vocabulary, improves syntax structure	Text books	newspapers, story books
5<10	Dip. (TESL)	gr.3-11	Improves vocabulary, improves syntax structure , enjoyable learning environment	text books, story books	newspapers, story books
10<15	G.C.E. (A/L)	gr.3-11	Improves vocabulary, improves syntax structure	text books, story books	newspapers, story books
15<20	G.C.E. (A/L)	gr. 3-13	Improves pronunciation, improves vocabulary, improves grammar	newspapers, story books	newspapers, story books

DISCUSSION

This paper sought to analyse the perceptions of Teachers' of implementing Free Voluntary Reading to support English language acquisition in secondary classrooms in Sri Lanka. The data shows that there is unanimous agreement among teachers on the notion of reading as an appropriate approach to second language acquisition. This is an endorsement of the views presented by many theorists on second language acquisition (Krashen, 2004; Dornyei, 2005). Yet there was noticeable variation amongst the participants on 'how' reading promotes students' L2 acquisition. The majority of respondents agreed that 'reading' improves vocabulary while introducing many new words to the reader. Incidental vocabulary acquisition through reading has been much researched (Waring & Nation, 2004), and the results of this study affirm this view. Findings also indicated that reading provides exposure to authentic language use, which enables the students get more opportunities to improve on structures and forms of their language. Professional literature refers to this as comprehensible input that providing more exposure to the second language through FVR also boosts the language acquisition process (Krashen, 2016). Data from this study confirms that the participants lack confidence in FVR's impact on their aspects of language learning. Further interrogation of data based on the grades shows that while the teachers of higher grades show more concern about the improvement of students' grammar, vocabulary and language proficiency, teachers of the lower grades are more interested in creating an enjoyable learning environment. One of the unexpected findings of this study is that only participant teachers with over 15 years of experience mentioned the effect of reading on improving students' grammar and writing in L2. The researched literature considers reading and writing as two intricately interwoven, complementary processes (Wu J, 2010). Krashen (2004) argues that '...it is reading that gives the writer the 'feel' for the look and texture...' (p. 20). Reading builds the knowledge base for writing texts and indeed equips the L2 learners with language which includes grammatical constructs and discourse rules for writings as well. The results of this study stress the necessity of making teachers aware of the relevance and the importance of 'reading' in promoting effective writing, as a benefit of a systematic reading program. The questionnaire also gave important insights into the participant teachers' practical uses of reading by listing the types of texts that they promote in class and out of class. Interestingly, participants' responses to the type of material that they use to promote second language, shows an interesting

trait. Participant teachers who have fewer years of experience said that they use the ‘text book’ as the main source of reading, while an increasing number of participants shifted towards other materials such as story books, novels and newspapers corresponding with an increase in number of years of teaching experience. This may reflect the realization of participants’ understanding of free/pleasure reading gained through experience. This dominance of the text book could be the result of a tight syllabus which is also noted as one of the inhibitors of promoting free reading in classrooms. General scrutiny of the text books used at secondary levels (from grade 6 -11) in Sri Lanka shows that each lesson comprises four basic modes of language learning- reading, writing, speaking and listening. Lesson activities under these components consist of pre-determined exercises. Such activity-oriented reading sparsely promotes the basics of FVR. The identification of text books as the predominant reading material does not necessarily facilitate FVR among students. Further, a very low number of responses reported that they promote the reading of newspapers, story books, model answers and notices in class. Hence the teachers’ notion of the text book as a source promoting FVR need to be reconsidered. With regard to out of school hours reading, irrespective of the number of years of experience almost all the participants mentioned that story books are the main source of out of the class reading material. This may be due to the fact that this material could be more easily accessed in these circumstances. Participants have also indicated that they encourage students to read novels, newspapers, notice boards and other second language sources as well. This substantiates the teachers’ belief that free reading is important although they cannot practice it systematically in class due to many reasons.

The questionnaire inquired as to whether the participant teachers used any forms of reading practice or programs during their lessons. From the responses obtained it is evident that the reading practices employed are not well organized or systematic. This shows that, new teachers’ (with 0<5 no. of years of experience) used practices confined to the specific skills on ‘how to read’ and promoted shared book experiences and the maintenance of a classroom library noted as the most favoured approaches. Interestingly, these practices stem from more detailed reading approaches ranging from in-class book discussions, setting aside classroom reading time, and reading aloud – yet emphasis on student independent reading was rarely prioritized. However, it is both controversial and naive to consider these approaches as helpful in promoting life-long reading habits or in stimulating the language acquisition processes.

Abundant reading opportunities have been proven as a powerful predictor of vocabulary, comprehension, general knowledge and cognitive structure (Elley, 2004; Krashen, 2004). Setting aside daily time for reading or setting aside at least one reading period per week are reported as the least favoured reading practices in this study. This could be the obvious result of the highly examination oriented syllabus. Reading is not a solitary activity. In fact the social aspects of reading such as discussion with peers can be a powerful motivator. Hence encouraging informal book reading and discussion opportunities, which ensure free and safe expressions of opinions is pivotal if the reading is to be productive and aspire language acquisition (Yamashita, 2013). Therefore as the data implies, either mere maintenance of class room libraries or practicing skills on how to read or tasks such as reading aloud or book discussions would not be very effective in promoting FVR if the students are not given any free reading opportunities. The questionnaire specifically tried to explore the teachers' understanding and knowledge on the existing reading programs and their applications of such. Overall 50% of the participant teachers reported they were not aware of the in-class reading programs listed in the questionnaire. This highlights the need for the teachers to gain exposure to novel teaching learning approaches beyond the traditional, rote teaching methods. Teachers' lack of knowledge of such systematic reading programs is a clear hindrance to implementing these in their lessons. It also would impacts on them realizing the importance and usefulness of reading as an effective approach of L2 acquisition. Further the new teachers were aware of the more recent programs such as the 'extensive reading program'. While the teachers with extended experience were aware of well-established programs such as 'Basal Reading Programs; only 7 teachers out of total number of 21 participants mentioned being aware of the 'books in school' program, a programme which was piloted in Sri Lanka in late 1990s. Out of these 7 teachers 6 had over 15 years of teaching experience. Hence it can be assumed that they were a part of this pilot study. Yet interestingly, of those 7 teachers only 2 teachers continue to use this program. Hence it can be assumed that the pilot Books in School project has not been actively supported, or has not given endorsement to continue in the system. This has implications for policy makers and practitioners and suggests they examine the factors that prevent teachers from using such a reading program which was piloted as successful in improving student outcomes. It may further prompt the necessity of an in-depth consideration of the essential features of a systematic reading programme to be implemented in the school

system in the future. This data also suggests the need to maintain a periodic monitoring and awareness program in order to rejuvenate and continue the interest in novel introductions to the education system. However, the actual reading programs that the teachers practice during their lessons did not show much variation, as the vast majority only encourage students to read. Hence it could be concluded that irrespective of the experience, systematic reading practices could not be implemented effectively as experience effects are complex and depend on a number of factors (Boyd et al, 2009). Further analysis of the type of in-class reading programs implemented by the participants indicated that nearly 50% of the Teachers do not have a systematic approach to reading, rather they merely encourage students to read. However, the level and intensity of this encouragement varies and is a seemingly vague approach, where most students are not compelled or motivated to read, and where teachers fail to realize the importance of 'reading' for language acquisition purposes . In a learning environment like in Sri Lanka where the exposure to the English language is limited, students' competency in L2 is insufficient and where the education system is examination oriented, it is crucial to understand that a systematic approach would be suitable and viable (Carrell, 1998) Vague encouragement alone is insufficient to yield the expected development and improved outcomes. This study also intended to probe the participant teachers' actual FVR practices in class and those promoted out of the class. A total of 16 out of 21 participants mentioned that they do exercise FVR in class, where 10 participants indicated that they practice FVR both in class hours and out of class hours as well. Yet, when compared to the earlier responses given to describe their reading practices these teachers neither set aside daily reading time nor a weekly reading period. Hence their notion of FVR is mainly confined to the maintenance of classroom libraries, reading aloud to students and book discussions. This contradicts the fundamental meaning of FVR and indicates that teachers need further professional support on the actual intention of FVR and implementation process. There is now sufficient research evidence to show that systematic use of reading activities in the classroom, especially in the early instructional years positively correlates with the students' successive language and literacy development (Krashen & McQuillan, 2007).

The final section of the questionnaire targeted to the pragmatics of implementing a FVR program in Sri Lankan secondary schools. Participants' perceptions on the possible benefits of such a program and the challenges that could be incurred during the actual implementation of

such a program have been taken into account. Amongst the positive feedback on the benefits of a systematic FVR program, teachers predicted that such a program would improve students' overall L2 language competency in areas such as grammar. As suggested by this data set, participants' belief regarding FVR's positive impact on L2 acquisition may be an indication of their readiness to try-out a systematic reading program in class. Teachers' also agreed that FVR may create an enjoyable, stress-free learning environment. This view has been researched and confirmed by Krashen (1993) in instances where the pleasurable environment is created by free reading where students are given the sole authority of their selection of reading materials according to their personal interests (Krashen & Von Sprecken, 2002). Hence the findings of this study concur with the literature that shows that FVR may create an interesting reading environment for the reader, through which to ensue L2 acquisition. Additional benefits that have been identified by the research participants includes improved vocabulary, creating a reading 'habit' and improving creativity. Although a higher priority was given to reading programs that improved vocabulary, paradoxically the same concern received comparatively low responses with regard to general reading programs. This could be mainly due to participants' greater emphasis on the 'free' nature of the FVR program. However, responses also highlight the reasonable concerns of the teachers. The lack of class time and the enormity of the current syllabus were cited as the main concerns of the participants. According to the respondents the current school syllabus is highly examination focused and does not permit any additional activities. However, a systematic top down intervention would address this concern. A program like FVR could be practiced even in a tightly scheduled timetable. This highlights another concern—the participants' lack of awareness. The importance of an approach like FVR to improve L2 among students should be discussed in the system, in order to create an awareness of all the relevant stakeholders. This includes policy makers, higher authorities, school managements, teachers, students as well as the school community. Fler and Hedegaard (2010) states "... each institutional collective has its own practice tradition...how a child engages and participates in these programs influences how a child develop" (p.149-150). Hence, selecting effective and productive programs in order to strengthen students' performance is a responsibility of the relevant authorities and at the same time it is the responsibility of the school administration and teachers to ensure efficient administration of such program at ground level. The introduction of a practical reading program such as FVR

should call for a continuous commitment, approval and acceptance at all levels. In addition, as the participant teachers have correctly identified, facilitating and channeling reading materials in to the schools would be a definite challenge. Notwithstanding the challenges identified by the participant teachers, their responses show a general trend and willingness to implement FVR.

CONCLUSION

Generally, teachers, school administrators, higher authorities and school communities individually believe it is important to have systematic reading programs in English as a second language, yet it seems they seldom reinforce this. Adding to the limited levels of awareness and documented proof of the benefits, it seems that Sri Lankan school reading programs are limited or lack knowledge of the use of reading programs for the development of English knowledge. This paper discussed that, factors such as the school environment, and available resources overshadows the participant teachers' qualifications or the experience. Hence this study also discloses the necessity of revisiting and adjusting the system as a whole to harness the maximum advantage of the teacher qualifications and experience when it comes to program implementation. Hence this study also reveal the necessity to revisit and adjust the system to harness the maximum advantage if the teacher qualifications and experience. Teachers play a major part in influencing young people and stimulating voluntary reading. Yet, even if an early reading programs was involved, the development and continuing interest on the favourable attitude towards FVR reading should be of prime concern.

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