The Impact of Extensive Reading (ER) on Student Reading Interest

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Abstract

This research project explores the impact of Extensive Reading (ER) on student reading interest. Drawing from research on extensive reading and qualitative data gathered from surveys administered to student and teacher participants, this project examines the school's attempt to build a reading culture through ER (extensive reading) and considers how insights from reading and library data can inform teachers to frame their reading instruction in responsive ways. The findings of this study suggest that access to classroom and school libraries, the freedom to choose books and the validation of choice are the factors that affect reading interest.

Introduction

In recent years, much effort has been made to woo and encourage Singaporeans to read more. The push came amid survey findings that showed low rates of reading among Singaporeans. In schools, various forms of reading programmes have been introduced to inculcate the habit of reading.

Prior to this project, the approach to reading in Meridian Secondary School (MSS) was intensive. It involved the use of texts to equip students with specific reading skills and strategies. Due to the amount of concentration and thinking this approach required, students often did not get to experience the element of joy while reading. As reading extensively helps students to do well in intensive reading (Renandya, 2016), teachers need to find ways of generating interest in reading. This led us to explore extensive reading – an approach which involves reading as many books as possible for pleasure.

The project began with teachers participating in a professional learning programme facilitated by ELIS on extensive reading to help them understand its principles, the benefits and the role of the Extensive Reading (ER) teacher. It aims to examine how ER (extensive reading) strategies can lead to an increase in student reading interest and the amount of books they read. This project is also in line with the National Reading Movement, a five-year campaign launched in 2016 by the National Library Board to encourage Singaporeans to not only read more, but also read widely.

Literature Review

The literature on extensive reading (otherwise termed as leisure or free voluntary reading) indicates that there are many benefits that can be gained from this approach. When students read extensively, they self-select and read large quantities of reading materials for general understanding and enjoyment (Carrell & Carson, 1997). As students choose their own books, they are reading something

different, and in their own 'comfort zone'. This enables them to feel motivated to read and develop more knowledge of the world as well as a better understanding of other people. Repeated exposure to massive quantities of written texts has been found to help readers acquire reading fluency (Renandya, 2007).

The link between extensive reading and the improvement of writing skills has also been documented (Hafiz & Tudor, 1989). Krashen (2003) reported that free voluntary reading is in fact 'the only way' students become good readers and develop good writing styles. These findings have shown that students will not only develop positive attitudes towards reading through ER but also enhance their overall language proficiency (Day & Bamford, 1998; Renandya & Jacobs, 2002).

Extensive reading can provide a positive experience for students and produce positive motivation for reading (Grabe, 2009). To exploit the potential of extensive reading, teachers need a good understanding of its principles and characteristics. The following characteristics are key indicators of an effective extensive reading programme (Day & Bamford, 1998; Renandya & Jacobs, 2002):

1. Students read as much as possible.
2. Students choose what they want to read.
3. Reading materials vary in terms of topic and genre.
4. The materials students read are within their linguistic competence.
5. Students usually take part in reading activities.
6. Teachers are the active, reading models for students.
7. Teachers and students keep track of students' reading progress.

These practical and effective features will encourage teachers to consider their beliefs about how best to help their students become interested readers.

Research Questions

The studies reviewed suggest that ER has great potential in developing student reading interest. Given the low rate of reading among our students, there is a need to study the impact of ER on student reading habits and interest. Specifically, this project sought to answer the following questions:

1. Would access to classroom and school libraries improve student reading interest?
2. Would the freedom to choose books sustain student reading interest?

Methodology

The research methodology for the project included the following:

Research tool	Number of participants involved	Period
Pre: Student Survey	218 student participants	May 2017
	A mix of Secondary 1, 2 and 3 students.	(Start of research project)
Pre: Staff Survey	15 English Language teachers	May 2017
Post: Student Survey	202 student participants	August 2018
	Secondary 1 students.	(End of research project)
Library user data	Student participants across all levels and streams	Jan 2017 to Aug 2018

In the initial phase of the project, a total of 218 Secondary 1 to 3 students and 15 teachers were administered the pre-surveys after a Professional Learning Programme on Extensive Reading was completed by the teachers. The surveys included items using a 5-point Likert scale of 1 for 'definitely not', 2 for 'probably not', 3 for 'possibly', 4 for 'very probably' and 5 for 'definitely' and open-ended questions. The pre-survey for students was used to find out their personal areas of interest and to ascertain the state of reading for pleasure among them. The pre-survey for teachers was administered to understand teachers' perceptions of their student reading habits and abilities. Preliminary findings developed from the data analysed were used to inform the design of the extensive reading programme and activities for the incoming 2018 Secondary 1 cohort and to ensure that the objectives were realistic and purposeful.

Post-Survey

At the end of the project, a post-survey adapted from Reis et al. (2005), 'Reading Interest-A-Lyzer', was administered to a total of 202 Secondary 1 students. Specifically, the survey was used to evaluate the adequacy of the reading programme and to determine the extent to which student needs were met. This survey included Likert items on a 5-point scale and open-ended comments.

Results

Pre-Survey Findings

According to the pre-survey findings, 35% of the students read only one book for pleasure in the past 12 months (see Figure 1). A much lower proportion of students (18%) read three or more books in the year. Among the students, 76% either hardly ever or never borrowed books from the school library (see Figure 2). This was a much higher proportion compared to those who borrowed books from the library either once a week (5%) or once a month (7%). This was despite 60% of the students agreeing that reading enabled them to improve their English Language, and 62% believing that reading improved their general knowledge (see Figures 3 & 4).
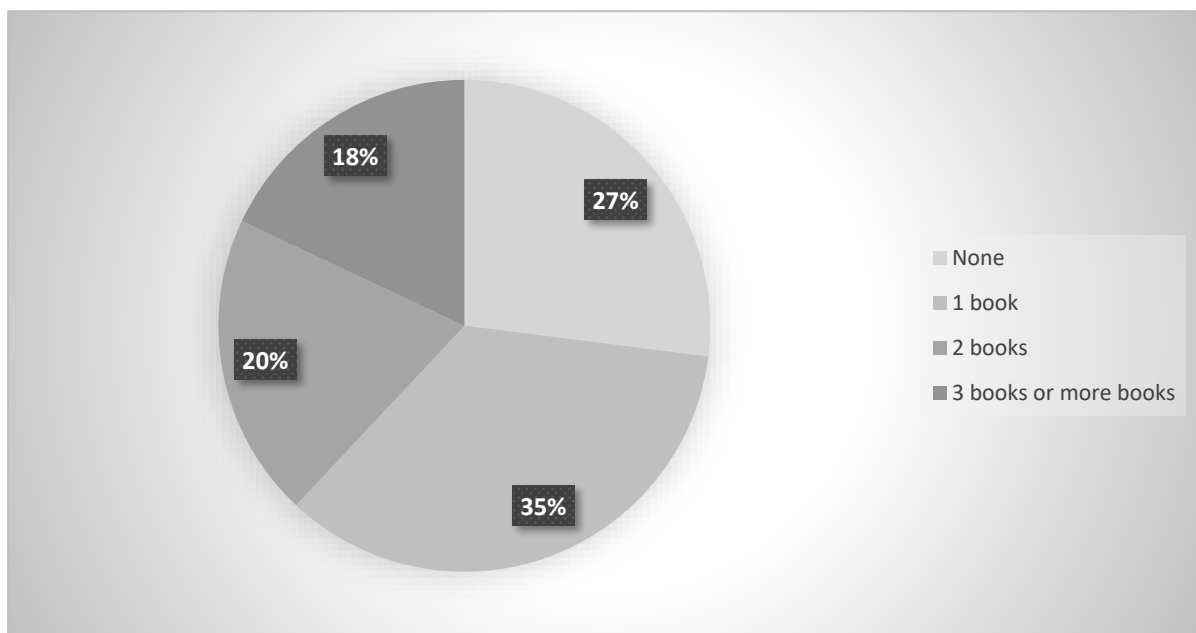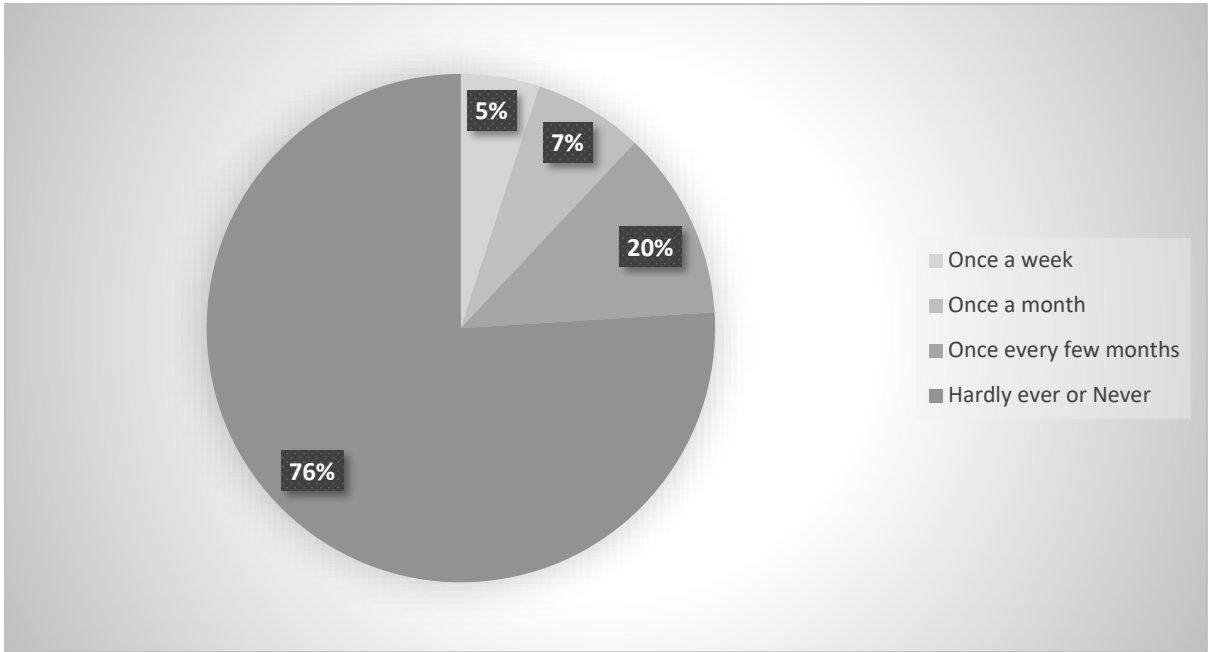

Figure 1. Number of books read in the past 12 months

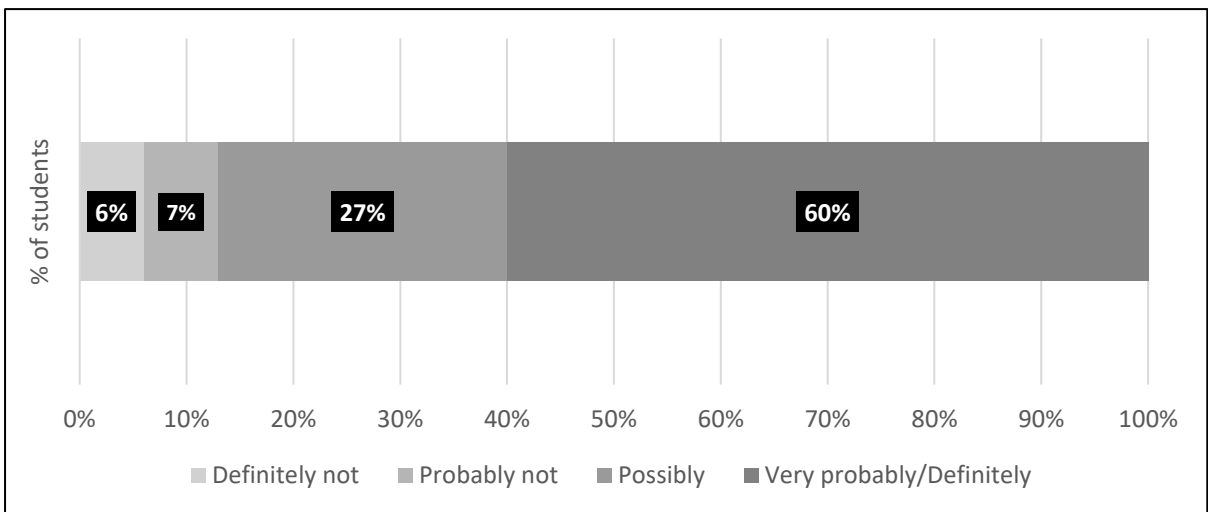*Figure 2.* Do students borrow books from the school library?

Figure 3. Percentage of students who agreed that reading would improve their English Language
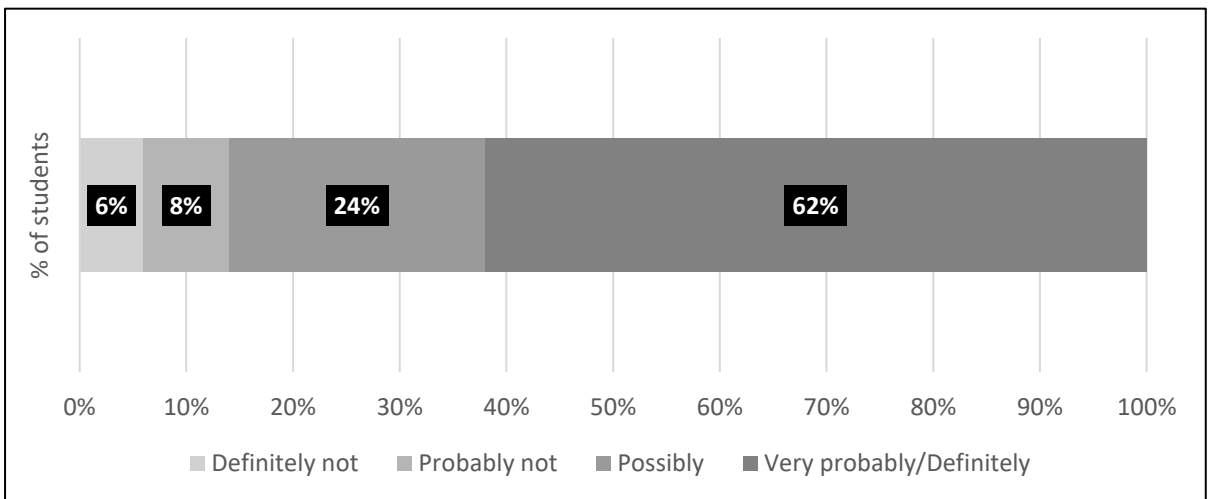

Figure 4. Percentage of students who agreed that reading would improve their general knowledge
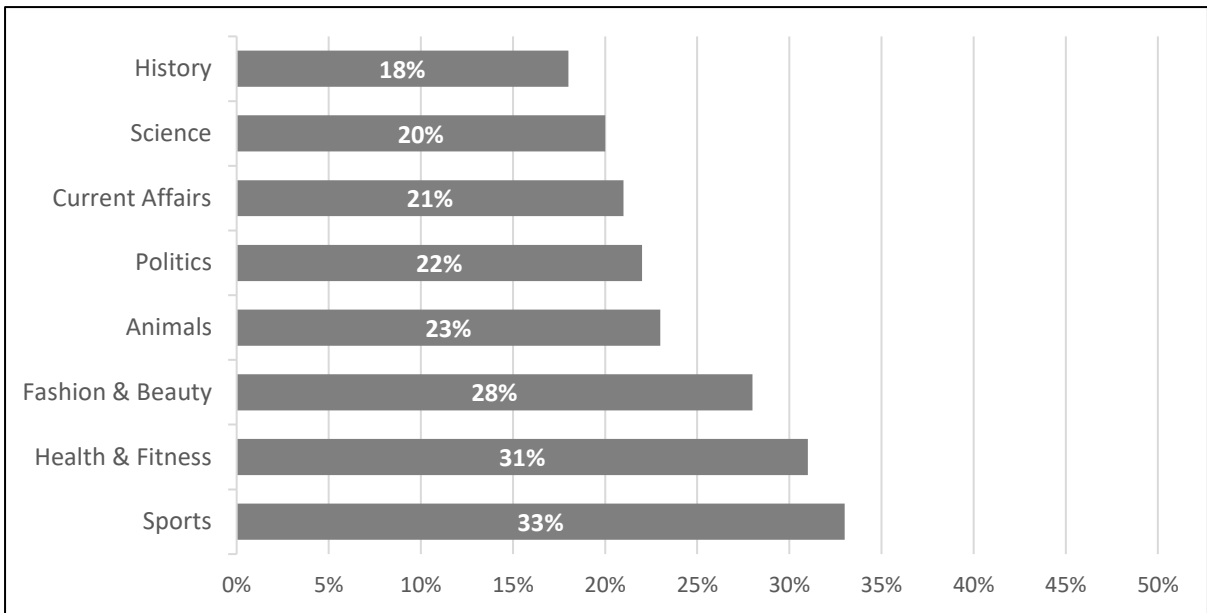
Figure 5. Top Picks for Non-fiction

Data on the top genres read indicated that 94% of students read non-fiction while 89% of the students read fiction. For non-fiction, the top picks were sports, health and fitness, and fashion. For fiction, students picked mystery, fantasy and horror as their top choices.

The survey also elicited factors that would encourage reading among students. A large proportion of the students indicated that they were more likely to read books recommended by their teachers (60%) and books that were adapted into movies (52%) (see Figure 7). Of the factors that students identified as contributing the most to their reading interest, having books in the classroom (62%) was indicated as the most significant. Other contributory factors included teachers sharing about the books they had read (58%) and reading via internet and digital devices (42%) (see Figure 8).
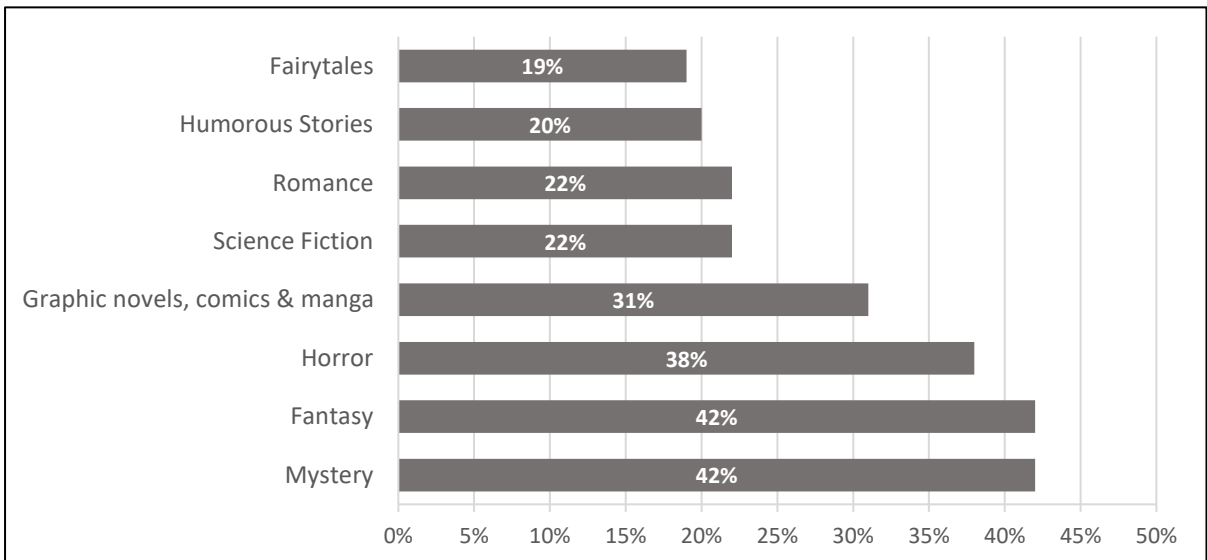

Figure 6. Top Picks for Fiction

There were differing perspectives on the use of digital devices for reading between students and teachers. Although students felt inspired to read from digital devices, 13 out of 15 teacher participants (see Figure 8) felt that the distractions from computers, hand phones and other types of technology

were the main reasons why students did not read for pleasure. It was clear that students and teachers had strikingly different views of how digital devices were impacting students' reading behaviours.
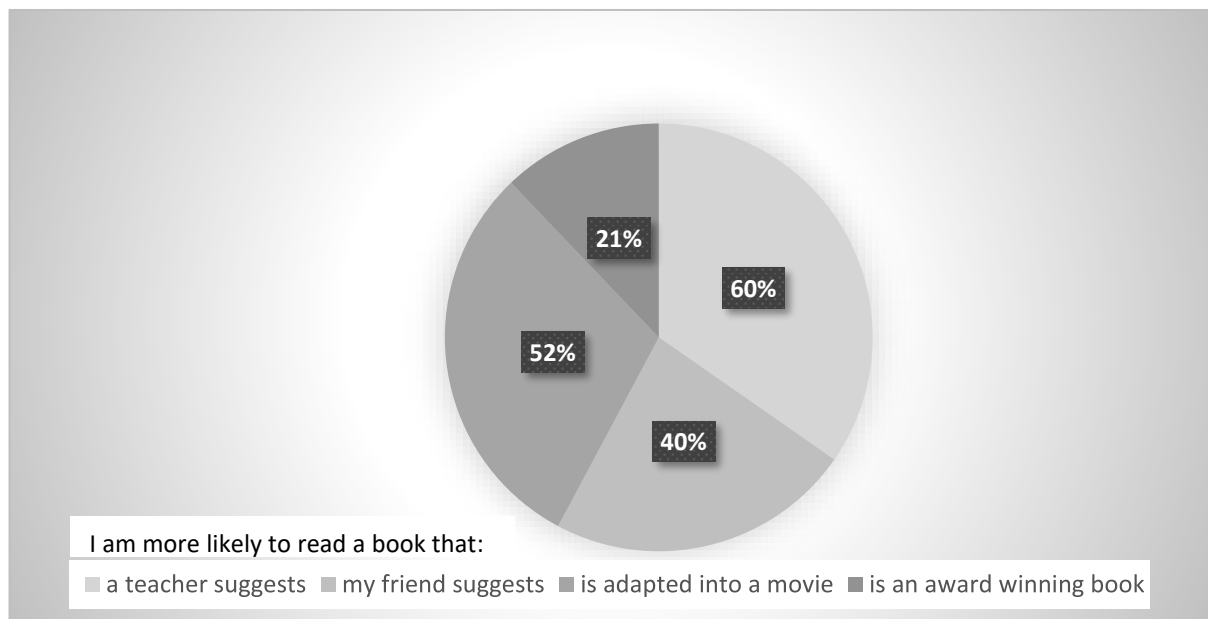

Figure 7: Factors that would encourage students to read

A data finding worth noting was teachers' expectations of the numbers of books students should read within a year. Although all teachers agreed that students could enjoy reading for pleasure, their expectations of the number of books students should read in a year were relatively low. Express
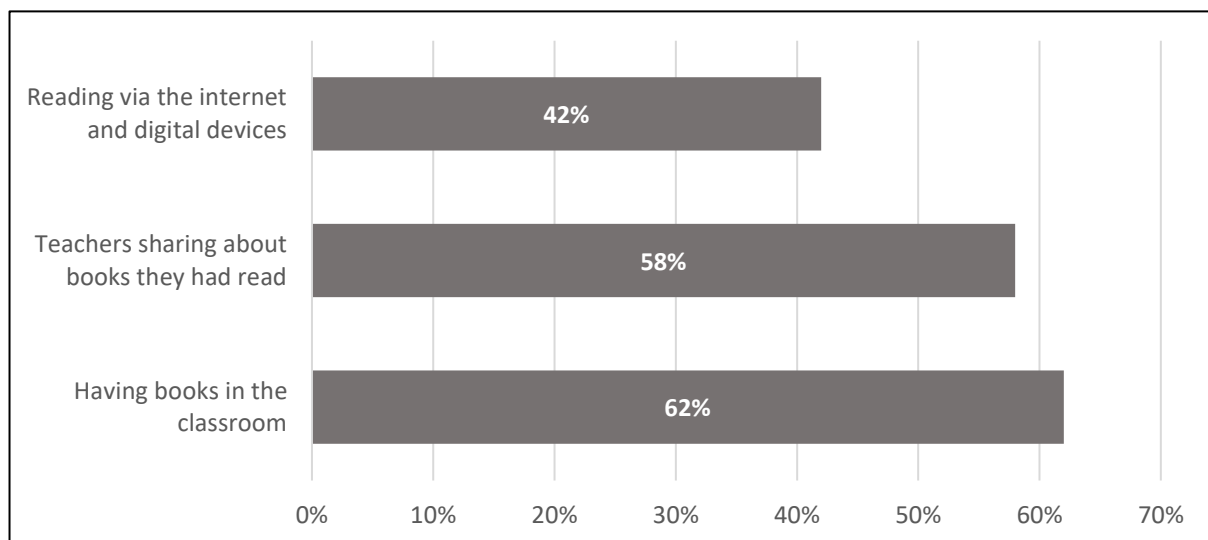

Figure 8. Factors that would inspire students to read more (Top choices)

students were expected to read about 12 books per year while the Normal Academic and Normal Technical students were expected to read between 5 to 8 books only. Although teachers knew that ER involves motivating students to read as many books as they can, they did not expect students to read more than the number of books projected. One explanation for this could be that teachers were influenced by the low library user data that was gathered at the onset of the project.

Of interest to us were teachers' views about comic reading. Although half the teacher participants strongly agreed that reading for pleasure could lead to improved language skills among the students,

about 30% did not see the gains from reading comics (see Table 1). Their views differed from the student data which indicated that students were encouraged by the idea of reading comics (see Figure 6). A probable reason for the teachers' views could be their existing beliefs that comics do not play an important role in developing an interest in books.

Table 1

Teachers' responses in pre-survey

What do you think are possible reasons why students do not/rarely read for pleasure?	
1.	Digital distractions (4) /Obsession with social media (4) / Advent of technology leading to short attention span for reading/ distractions from social media (3)/Students read via electronic means, not the hard copy books. (13 out of 15 responses on the use of digital devices and social media)
2.	They have not found the right books/They read comics instead of novels (2)/Too much reading of comic books. (5 out of 15 responses on comic reading)
3.	Lack of stamina/lack patience/lack of sustained attention for reading (2). (2 out of 15 responses on the lack of sustained attention for reading)
4.	No role model for reading (2)/ Adults are not reading a lot too so they do not have role models. (2 out of 15 responses on role model for reading)
5.	Information online is often concise and summarised so students do not see the point of sifting through pages to read for pleasure. (1 response)
6.	Reading was not encouraged from young. (1 response)
7.	Some students find reading intimidating. (1 response)
8.	No time for pleasure reading. (1 response)
9.	Lack of reading opportunities created in class. (1 response)
10.	Students do not see the link between reading and the real life. (1 response)

Intervention

Access to Classroom and School libraries

Based on the pre-survey findings, we decided to provide students with more access to books by equipping each class with a classroom library. The research fund was used to purchase materials such as mini shelving units and books for six Secondary 1 classes. The remaining fund went into the purchase of books. This decision was made as research has demonstrated that enriching the print environment will result in more reading (Krashen, 2004). Morrow (1982) also reported that students did more voluntary reading when the books in the classroom library corner were within their reach. In his study, students read more when books were physically accessible, and also when teachers allowed them to take books home from the classroom library. Having access to more books in the classrooms could therefore help to establish a reading habit among the students.

Access to the public and school libraries also affected how much students read. Hence, besides providing students an additional 35 minutes of curriculum time for free reading, our programme included a weekly visit to the school library. This allowed the students to explore the library and share books.

Comics as a conduit

In extensive reading, students have the freedom to choose what they want to read. This includes comic books and graphic novels. Hayes and Ahrens (1988) reported that comics could serve as a conduit to move readers to a level where they could read and understand more demanding texts. Other studies indicated that texts in comics were linguistically appropriate, and the pictures could in fact help make the texts comprehensible especially for weak readers. In addition, Dorrell and Carroll (1981) suggested that comic book readers did as much reading as non-comic book readers, and had positive attitudes towards reading. These studies showed that comics led to other readings. With the increasing popularity of comics and in particular, graphic novels like manga, we proposed that teachers allow students to read comics should they choose to.

Freedom to choose books

Student reading interests could inform teachers how the reading "lesson" should go. Teachers need to continue monitoring students' reading progress and have one-to-one conferences with their students to learn about their reading interests and to make suitable recommendations for them. Teachers might, however, discover that the books widely read by their students are not always the most suitable for their particular students. The books that the teachers read with students, use in their lessons or offer in the library may be different books to the ones that they would wholeheartedly embrace for students' reading. By allowing and encouraging students to read what they want, however, teachers are endorsing students' interests (Miller, 2009). Teachers can lose credibility with students if they ignore the books that interest their students and instead design classroom reading instruction around books that are considered "good for the students". Teachers should instead, as far as possible, give their approval when students make their own reading choices, no matter what books students have chosen, so as to get them to read more.

Teachers as role models for reading

Several studies have shown that teachers need to be role models and lead in the discussion of reading for students to benefit. According to Elley (1991), teachers who regularly read aloud from books, following up with class discussion, produced students who outperformed those that experienced more traditional methods of teaching. She also suggested that reading stories aloud to students could help them acquire new vocabulary. Elley (1991) maintained that regular reading aloud aided the language learning process. Beyond the benefits of language acquisition, students also found reading fun through storytelling, and their habits of reading for pleasure improved (McCarthy, Nicastro, Spiros, & Staley, 2001). Correspondingly, their desire for reading increased and they read more at home. In
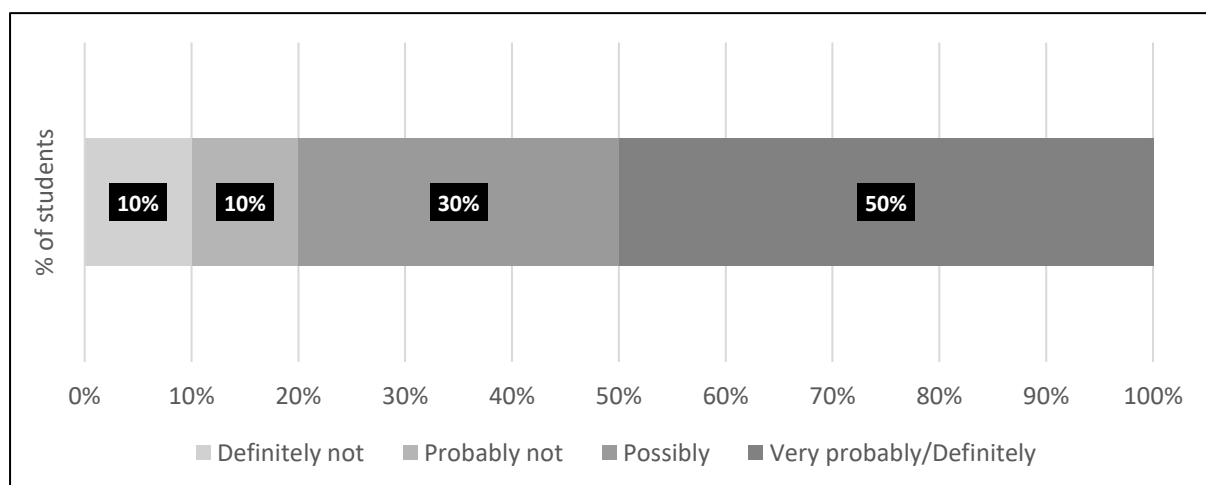

Figure 9. Class mini-library

view of these studies, we proposed that reading aloud or storytelling should feature as a regular and key component of the book sharing by teachers.

Evaluation

Post-Survey Findings

The post-survey findings revealed that 50% of the Secondary 1 students liked having the mini-library in their classrooms (see Figure 9). Students also responded positively to the library visits and the reading activities planned (see Figure 10).
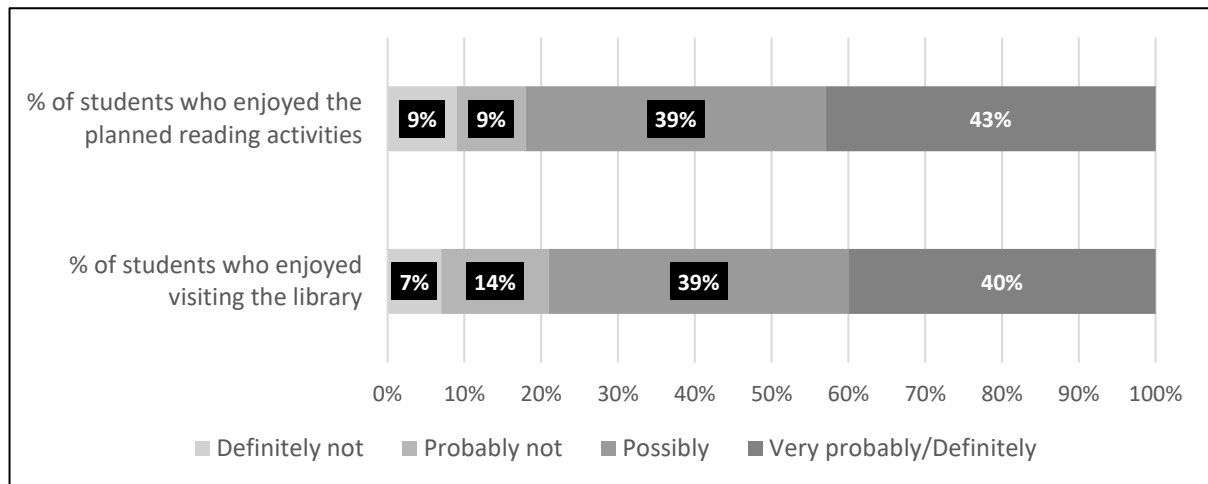

Figure 10. Library enjoyment and planned reading activities

Data from student reading logs also indicated that the most number of books read by students were generally higher than their teachers' expectations. Students who managed to read the number of books they targeted were amazed by their own accomplishments. Of the factors that students identified as contributing most to their increased interest in reading, in-class reading time and library visits were selected as significant factors.

In spite of this, a negative finding clearly emerged from the survey to show that 44% of the student participants felt that their teachers did not know what they liked to read (see Figure 11). This data was based on students' perception of the mini-library books. 45% of students also felt that their teachers had not chosen the books that they liked to read. This suggested that the books purchased by teachers for the classroom libraries did not match their interest.
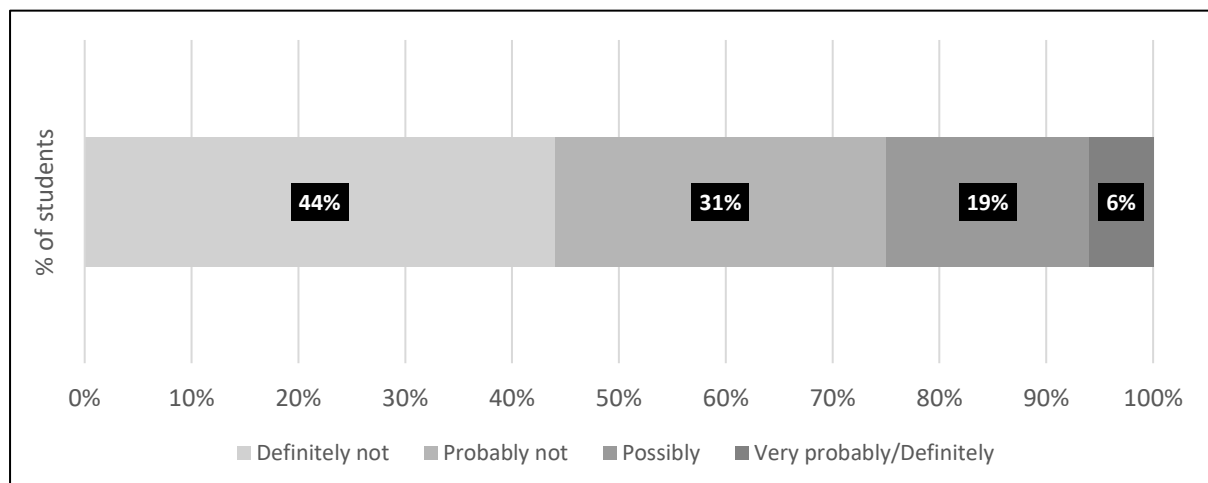

*Figure 11*. Student preference known by teachers

In the post-survey, students were also asked to write suggestions on how their teachers could further encourage them to read for pleasure (see Table 2). The suggestions made totalled 203. A majority of the students recommended that teachers provide them with more interesting, age-appropriate books (48% of suggestions). About 38% requested more comic and other light reading materials. Other suggestions were for more reading time in the classroom, more visits to the library and reading incentives.

Table 2

Students' suggestions on how teachers can encourage them to read for pleasure

(Top 10 suggestions)	
1.	Teachers can suggest books that are for our age group and would spike our interest.
2.	Have more books that I like/ Choose books for teenagers.
3.	Buy more interesting books. Some of the books in class are boring.
4.	Share with us more interesting books.
5.	Buy more Marvel comics/Anime/Manga for the class/library.
6.	More library visits during lessons.
7.	Have more fanfiction stories.
8.	Have more magazines in the library like Teenage Magazines.
9.	Give us more time to read in class.
10.	Give rewards for reading.

Finally, data from the library monthly loan transactions (see Figure 12) showed an amazing growth in the number of books borrowed for 2018 across all levels and streams. This suggested a change in students' attitudes towards reading in general.
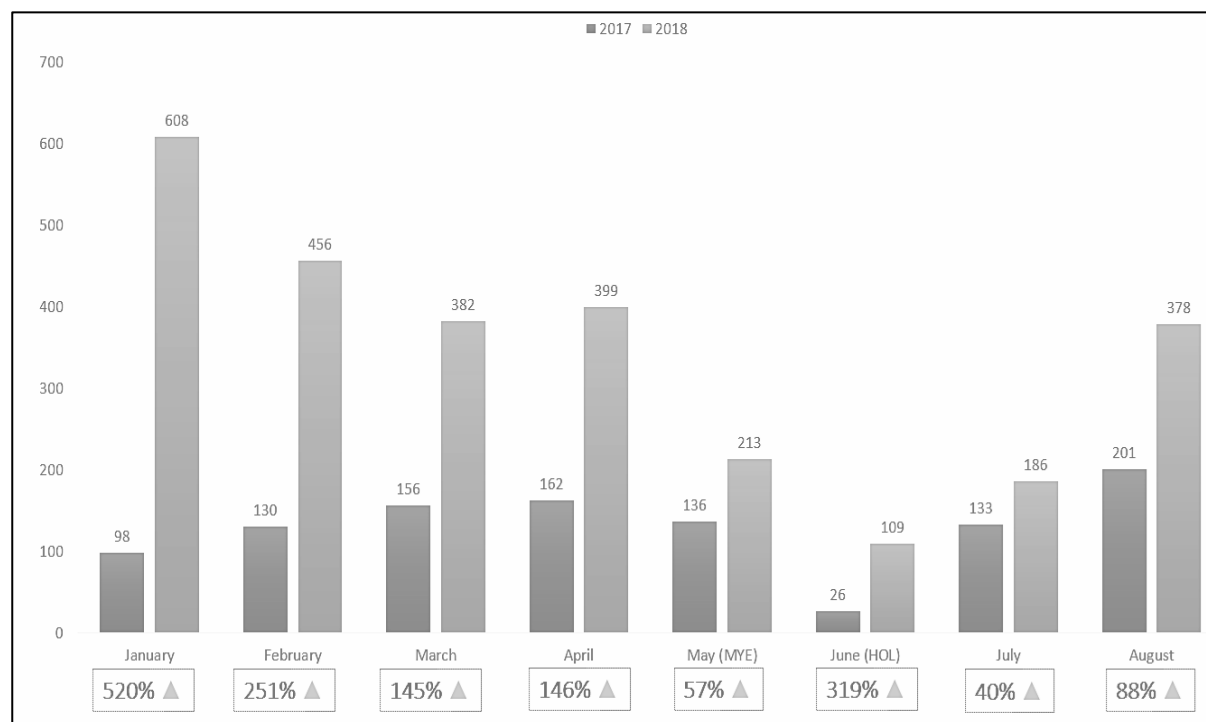
▲ Increase in the percentage of books borrowed from 2017 to 2018

Figure 12. Media Resource Library Loan Transaction from 2017 to 2018

Discussion

Access to reading materials and resources is extremely useful and can establish the development of a reading habit among the students. However, going by some findings in the survey, it was not enough to sustain student interest in reading. As the selection of books in the classroom libraries did not match students' interest, those affected remained uninterested in reading. Miller (2009) pointed out that giving students the opportunity to select their own books to read will empower them and reward their interest. Teachers should therefore give students control in selecting their own books for reading. They may consider getting students directly involved in the selection and purchase of books for the classroom and school libraries. Once the right book is matched to the right student, the book itself will compel the student to read it. Students will then be motivated to continue their reading journey when they know their teachers have taken a personal interest in what they are reading and value them as readers.

Although student choice of what they read should be a norm in ER, data revealed that students were not reading enough of their favourite materials such as comics. The comics available in the library were limited. Although we have placed them in the school library, some teachers did not encourage or allow them to be circulated. Conversations with teachers revealed that a number remained hesitant about letting students indulge in reading comics. Questions that have been of concern to the teachers include: Is the comic challenging enough? Does it cause any harm? Can it lead to reading for pleasure? Their reluctance over comic reading was mainly due to their personal beliefs that comics have negative effects on language development and school achievement. As research findings have shown that the case for comics is a good one, teachers' fears about comic books appear to be unfounded. Teachers should therefore change their mind-set about comic reading as their personal expectations and beliefs will have an effect on the students' interest and their motivation to read.

Although teachers are aware of the basic ingredients of ER, post-data gathered showed that there were gaps between teachers' understanding of ER and their real practice. Not all the teachers have grasped the intent of an ER programme and were still not comfortable in taking a less central role in their reading instruction. As a result, there was a need to revisit the ideas of ER with the teachers to explain the basis for such a programme.

Conclusion

We have gained insights about the reading habits and preferences of our students from this project – including the types of reading materials they enjoyed, what series they are devoted to and their views of the books selected by their teachers. The project has created opportunities for teachers to tap on students' intrinsic motivation and to expand their reading horizons by letting them read what interests them.

To unleash the true potential of extensive reading, the participation of teachers and staff is important for creating an environment in which books are loved and talked about. This project has also shown that teachers' beliefs drive the enactment of the reading programme. Teachers also need to be aware of the factors that are impinging on student reading interest, motivation and engagement which are crucial for building the school's reading culture.

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