Listening Enhancement: Converting Input into Intake

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Abstract To facilitate language understanding and learning, listening takes on significant meaning as it is an essential source of language input in second language acquisition. In an EFL setting of Taiwan where it lacks native speakers to begin with, listening becomes pivotal for foreign language learning to occur. With listening comprehension paving the way for language learning, various research has noticed that effective listening benefits language learners in developing other language skills. In view of its growing importance, it merits attention regarding how teaching listening comprehension at the forefront maximizes young learners' learning outcomes. Given the implicit unidirectionality, listening is often regarded as difficult for foreign language learners. With contextual story grammar mapping underlying the listening construct, learners can otherwise engage in listening interaction, resulting in bidirectional listening that affords comprehensible input. The present study, lasting for 21 weeks, investigates how contextual story grammar mapping instruction with Reading-While-Listening (RWL) impacts on Taiwanese sixth graders' listening comprehension. Forty 6th graders in central Taiwan were recruited. The results of the current study attest that RWL combined with contextual story grammar mapping improves students' listening comprehension and enhances their reading proficiency. What's more, the findings lend further credence to the reciprocal relationship between listening comprehension and reading achievement.

Keywords: contextual story grammar mapping, listening comprehension, Reading-While-Listening

1. Introduction

Listening has been widely recognized as the most frequently used language skill. To assist EFL learners in developing their English ability, cultivating listening at grade level would be a great starting point. In spite of its importance, it receives the least attention in teaching and assessment in the language classroom [14,23]. Improving EFL learners' listening, however, is not an easy task. Some EFL listeners ascribe their frequent misunderstanding of the spoken texts to the improbability to process fast enough to comprehend the input. This can be largely due to the fact that learners incline to analyze words in isolation, resulting in decoding text without comprehending the message [11,12]. Given this, involving learners to notice the listening input by linking the text to the visual stimuli has been claimed to contribute to comprehension enhancement [6,34,38]. To this end, the perceptually salient Reading-While-Listening (RWL) can be considered as an initial polestar to facilitate comprehension for second language (henceforth, L2) listeners.

Another thread merits consideration is story grammar mapping in context. The importance of story grammar has long been acknowledged and well-researched in both L1 and EFL contexts. Assuming that instruction with repetition practice does not bypass developmental sequences for L2 acquisition, explicit instruction of L2 knowledge is thereby of primary importance to the

learners [12,24,30]. As explicit knowledge enables learners to notice the input and obtain intake, the relevant information can then be processed further for short-term memory. It is thereby reckoned that the perceptual saliency displayed in the contextual visual clues accompanying story grammar mapping can pave the way for developing listening input into intake.

With children's listening admittedly interconnected with their reading ability, numerous researches extend their focus on the correlations between listening and reading comprehension. While there is a strong assumption of a link between listening and reading comprehension, little empirical evidence has been found to establish a general consensus on the direct relationship between these two variables, not to mention a paucity of EFL literature on a particular listening instruction to their correlation. To this end, the probable existence of the relationship between listening and reading comprehension is also explored in this study.

Previous research associated with RWL mainly focuses on developing listening fluency, vocabulary acquisition, and story retellings for either L1 learners or L2 college students, but to a lesser extent examining the area of listening comprehension for EFL young learners. Moreover, most EFL studies conducted with RWL include only listening to individual independent texts with no intervention, rendering results inconclusive otherwise [3,5]. To develop listening comprehension for EFL young learners with impoverished aural input, the necessity to employ explicit instructional activities for listening

comprehension in the classrooms is called for [26,31]. Based on these purposes, the four primary research questions are addressed as follows:

1. To what extent does RWL integrated with contextual story grammar mapping facilitate Taiwanese EFL elementary school students' listening comprehension?
2. To what extent does RWL integrated with contextual story grammar mapping impact on Taiwanese EFL elementary school students' English proficiency on listening and reading?
3. What is the relationship between the experimental group students' overall listening and reading proficiency after the intervention?
4. What are the elementary school students' attitudes toward RWL with contextual story grammar mapping?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Input to Intake

In second language acquisition, the proposition has been made that attention to L2 input is essential for input to become intake for further mental processing. Suffice it to say that the subjective experience of input noticing is vital for the conversion of input to intake to take hold [29,40]. In view of language processing, comprehension is undertaken with the control of attention from the input for further bridging form and meaning, hence resulting in encoded intake [13,25,32]. The extension of the noticing hypothesis asserts what needs to be attended to, which is not just the input in its entirety but the relevant features of the input for the target structure in question. That is, to learn grammar, learners must attend to grammatical features while to acquire pragmatics, learners need to take account of the linguistic forms and the related contextual features. Given the reception of the unstructured input, it is suggested that only when the input becomes noticeable can further processing be possible. According to Schmidt [29], a direct link between input noticing and production must be established for acquisition to occur. On these grounds, the current study builds on previous research efforts by exploring how the perceptual saliency accompanying the target text structure facilitates listening comprehension connected to developing input into intake.

2.2. RWL and Dual Coding

Seminal work on Dual Coding Theory (DCT) by Clark and Paivio [8] explained human behaviors in terms of how cognitive processes operate on the modalities of verbal and nonverbal representations. According to DCT, the imagery system combines numerous objects with an integrated image, and such integration in turn facilitates the learning of new materials. Mueller [22] further suggested that a single-mode approach suffices for high proficiency learners while dually-coded material helps low achievers fill in the gap that otherwise exists in previously acquired knowledge. To this end, the use of images creation and pictures has long be recognized to enhance text comprehension [9]. Commonly known as RWL, parallel activities of reading with a listening event have been asserted to generate one's prior knowledge to the listening itself [39]. As indicated by Chang [4,5], combining both input types via Reading-While-Listening (RWL) was found to help students familiarize with the natural flow of the target language, and most of all, promote text chunking for better learning. On these grounds, RWL has exploited spoken texts such as conversations, stories, lectures, and movies to advance listening comprehension. Given that stories are dually coded as an instructive aid, the current study thereby utilizes stories as the listening materials in question.

2.3. Story Grammar Mapping

A number of studies have suggested that children with stories read to them tend to potentially develop complex story structures. Raising their awareness to story grammar elements is deemed conducive to their comprehension [7,21,28]. The effects of developing story grammar mapping within narratives have been widely recognized. Shared by most stories, the major story elements include setting, character, event/plot, problem/obstacle, ending/resolution, and theme [21,27,33,35,36]. The current study adopts an integrated taxonomy of five story elements built on previous research, mainly comprising setting, character, problem, solution, and ending.

To home in on the mastery of the narrative essentials, story grammar mapping has been extensively explored in L1 and L2 settings. A study conducted by Boulineau et al. [2] examined the effectiveness of story grammar mapping on third and fifth graders' comprehension. Positive results with maintained improvement were reported. In a similar study implemented by Kingston [16], positive impacts have also been unveiled in young learners' retelling and listening comprehension. Moreover, in EFL contexts, common to the role story grammar instruction plays in ESL contexts, the effects that story grammar exerts on vocabulary learning, reading comprehension, and writing performance have been revealed [15,36,41]. These results provide an insight into the potential benefits in processing story input via story grammar mapping. Despite the aforementioned positive findings of story grammar instruction, few efforts have otherwise continued to explore its potential impact on listening comprehension, less mentioned in EFL areas.

2.4. RWL and Story Grammar Instruction

In Arnold and Brooks' [1] study, to cope with the limited linguistic knowledge in reading process, fifth graders were taught to read with supported oral input. The investigators maintain that children benefit greatly from reading and listening to stories given that children develop text schemata of story elements as a result. Likewise, Montague, Maddux, and Dereshiwsky [17] examined the relationship between story grammar and story comprehension. After simultaneous reading and listening to stories, superior effects were found in subjects without learning disabilities as they were able to retell significant information of the stories. In addition, Morrow [9] further corroborated the findings that story grammar enhances listening comprehension as early as kindergarten and can be transferable to future literacy.

2.5. Correlation between Listening and Reading Comprehension

Children's listening comprehension has been admittedly interconnected with their reading performance. According to Lerkkanen et al. [17], listening comprehension is taken as an indicator of reading comprehension, particularly in the early stages of reading. Diakidoy et al. [10] further explicated the correlation that elementary school second graders performed significantly better on comprehension after listening to a text instead of simply reading it. In regard to EFL studies in Taiwan, effort has been devoted to the study of how EFL young learners' listening comprehension was related to their performance in reading comprehension [18]. The results obtained concurred with previous research, revealing an intense correlate between listening and reading comprehension. The findings further lent credence to the linkage of listening and reading, indicating that these two comprehension abilities shared reciprocal support from each other during the target language learning.

3. Methodology

3.1. Subjects

The subjects participating in this study included 40 sixth graders (23 boys and 17 girls) from two intact classes in a public elementary school in central Taiwan. To ascertain the homogeneity of the two classes in their proficiency on listening and reading, pretests modified from the Starters of Cambridge Young Learners English Tests (Cambridge YLE) were administered before the intervention.

3.2. Instruments

The instruments employed in the current study consisted of an English learning background questionnaire, English listening and reading proficiency pretests and achievement posttests, nine immediate listening comprehension tests, and an attitude questionnaire for the experimental group.

3.3. Materials and Instructional Procedures

The experiment lasted for 21 weeks. The intervention consisted of nine sessions and was conducted for 40 minutes a week for each group. In the current study, Nine storybooks, with salient story structures favorable for EFL 6th graders, were used as teaching materials. The former five stories were selected from My Story Box. The rest of the stories were taken from Oxford Story Tree series. To take account of the participants' English learning background and their proficiency, Flesch-Kincaid index was used to measure the readability and difficulty level of the selected nine stories. The story levels were all below level two, considered relatively easy for sixth graders starting formal EFL English lessons at grade three.

During the intervention, the experimental group was treated with contextual story grammar mapping instruction in the mode of RWL. In contrast, RWL with oral rendition was implemented within the lessons of the control group. The instructions were carried out in three phase, illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1. Lesson Design of Listening Instructions

Group	Pre-Listening Phase	While-Listening Phase	Post-Listening Phase
The Experi-mental Group	1. Prior knowledge activation & prediction via Q&A 2. Vocabulary preview	1. Read while listening to the story 2. Contextual story grammar mapping within small groups	1. Review the story by read-aloud 2. Immediate listening comprehension tests
The Control Group	1. Prior knowledge activation & prediction via Q&A 2. Listen to the story with aural vocabulary input	1. Read while listening to the story 2. Traditional listening instruction with repeated oral rendition on text chunks	1. Review the story by read-aloud 2. Immediate listening comprehension tests

Drawing on Underwood [37] and Richards [25], the instructor activated students' prior knowledge by asking them to observe the cover page of the story seeking information for the title of the story, precisely what they saw (characters), and what might happen (events) in the story. In the while-listening phase, students were required to read the storybook while listening to the audio. After listening to the story, story grammar elements were introduced, including character, setting, problem, solution, and ending, and were asked to identify the story elements given the story in context. Afterwards, the story map was offered as a task to complete within small groups. The students then read aloud the story as a review in the post-listening phase.

In contrast, the control group received RWL with traditional listening instruction. Based on Morley's [20] Listening and Repeating model for listening instruction, audio-lingual style of hearing-and-pattern-matching was featured. The students were asked to listen to the story with aural vocabulary input as the pre-listening activities. In while-listening, students read the story while listening to the aural input simultaneously. Subsequently, students received traditional listening instruction such that certain words, phrases, and sentences were repeated several times, and finished by repeated listening with pictures. After

repeated practices, the students proceeded to read aloud the story in the post-listening phase.

3.4. Data Analysis

Quantitative analyses were conducted to compare the performance of the two groups in the study. The computer software SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Science) Version 20.0 was used to analyze the collected data, including listening and reading proficiency pretests, nine immediate listening comprehension tests, and achievement posttests. To further elucidate the results obtained, the subjects' responses of the attitude questionnaire were gauged qualitatively.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Results of English Listening and Reading Proficiency Pretests

To establish the homogeneity of the two groups, the listening and reading proficiency pretests were first administered prior to the intervention. With the results revealing no significant differences between the

performances respectively (t = .304, p = .703; t = .15, p = .882), the two classes were randomly assigned as the experimental and control groups, presented in Table 2 and Table 3.

Table 2. Independent Samples T-test Results for Listening Proficiency Pretests of Both Groups

Group	N	Mean	SD	t	p
Control	20	8.2	3.50	.304	.763
Experimental	20	7.9	2.67		

Note. Maximum score=15. P>.05

Table 3. Independent Samples T-test Results for Reading Proficiency Pretests of Both Groups

Group	N	Mean	SD	t	p
Control	20	15.5	4.38	.15	.882
Experimental	20	15.7	4.05		

Note. Maximum score=25. P>.05.

4.2. Results of Immediate English Listening Comprehension Tests

To examine the effectiveness of RWL with contextual story grammar mapping on listening comprehension addressed in the first research question, the Independent Samples *t*-test was employed to analyze the scoring of the immediate comprehension tests. The results outlined in Table 4 showed that the experimental group made significant gains across nine comprehension tests (Test 1: t = 2.793 , p = .008; Test 2: t = 3.376, p = .002; Test 3: t = 3.327, p = . .002; Test 4: t = 2.508, p = . .017; Test 5: t = 5.704, p = .000; Test 6: t = 2.448, p = .019; Test 7: t = 3.965, p = .000; Test 8: t = 2.670, p = .011; Test 9: t = 2.639, p = .012).

Table 4 Independent Samples T-test Results for the Immediate Listening Comprehension Tests of Both Groups

Test	Group / N	M	SD	t	p
1	Control / 20	7.00	2.58	2.793	.008**
	Experimental / 20	8.90	1.62		
2	Control / 20	6.15	2.18	3.376	.002**
	Experimental / 20	8.70	2.58		
3	Control / 20	6.50	2.86	3.327	.002**
	Experimental / 20	9.30	2.45		
4	Control / 20	8.55	2.04	2.508	.017*
	Experimental / 20	10.05	1.73		
5	Control / 20	6.60	1.96	5.704	.000***
	Experimental / 20	9.85	1.63		
6	Control / 20	7.55	2.59	2.448	.019*
	Experimental/20	9.70	2.96		
7	Control / 20	6.20	3.58	3.965	.000***
	Experimental / 20	9.65	1.53		
8	Control / 20	5.55	3.33	2.670	.011*
	Experimental / 20	8.30	3.18		
9	Control / 20	5.35	4.11	2.639	.012*
	Experimental / 20	8.50	3.41		

Note. Maximum score=12, *p<.05. **p<.01. ***p<.001.

The results of immediate tests demonstrated that RWL with contextual story grammar mapping exerted significant influence over young learners' listening comprehension, resulting in superior performance of the experimental group. The findings reported are in line with Montague et al. [19] that story grammar instruction cultivates students' listening growth. Despite the differences of age groups of the participants, both studies indicate noteworthy effects on learners' English listening comprehension through RWL integrated with story grammar mapping.

4.3. Results of English Listening and Reading Achievement Posttests

To delve into the effectiveness of the treatment instruction on subjects' achievement in listening and reading, the Independent Samples *t*-test was conducted. The findings displayed in Tables 5 and 6 showed that the performances of the experimental group on listening and reading were significantly superior to those of the control group. The results obtained are compatible with previous findings reported by Kingston [16] and Tsai & Chuang [36], indicating that learners profit from story grammar mapping on comprehension, leading to better English proficiency.

Table 5. Independent Samples T-test Results for the Listening Proficiency Posttest of Both Groups

Group	N	Mean	SD	t	p
Control	20	8.30	3.39	2.098	.043*
Experimental	20	10.35	2.76		

Note. Maximum score = 15. *p <.05

Table 6. Independent Samples T-test Results for the Reading Proficiency Posttest of Both Groups

Group	N	Mean	SD	t	p
Control	20	15.90	4.91	2.088	.044*
Experimental	20	19.15	4.93		

Note. Maximum score = 25. *p <.05.

4.4. Results of the Correlations between Listening and Reading

To explore the relationship between listening and reading discussed in the third research question, Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient was used to assess the correlations between the experimental group's listening and reading achievements after the intervention. A comparison between the scorings of listening and reading proficiency pretests and posttests was made to measure the possible correspondence. The statistical results are shown in Tables 7 and 8.

Table 7. Pearson Product-moment Correlation Coefficient of English Listening and Reading Proficiency Pretests of the Experimental Group

		Listening Proficiency Pretest	Reading Proficiency Pretest
Listening Proficiency Pretest	Pearson Correlation	1	.429
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.059
	N	20	20
Reading Proficiency Pretest	Pearson Correlation	.429	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.059	
	N	20	20

Note. = Correlation is not significant above 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Table 8. Pearson Product-moment Correlation Coefficient of English Listening and Reading Proficiency Posttests of the Experimental Group

		Listening Proficiency Posttest	Reading Proficiency Posttest
Listening Proficiency Posttest	Pearson Correlation	1	.711**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	20	20
Reading Proficiency Posttest	Pearson Correlation	.711**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	20	20

Note. ** = Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

As regards the analysis of the listening and reading proficiency pretests for the experimental group, summarized in Table 7, the results revealed no significant correlation ($r = .429$, $p = .059$) between listening and reading to begin with. As can be seen from Table 8, an interrelated correspondence between subjects' listening and reading was found in the posttests, with $r = .711$, $p = .000$. Namely, increases in listening comprehension correlated with increases in reading comprehension. The results implied that the 18 week instructional treatment also made significant contribution to reading ability after listening comprehension mastery. The findings, in good agreement with Lerkkanen et al. [17] and Lo [18], affirm that listening comprehension and reading comprehension share reciprocal support from each other. That is, listening comprehension can be a valuable predictor for reading success, implying that the higher one attains in listening comprehension, the better one advances in reading comprehension.

4.5. Results of the Attitude Questionnaire

To answer the fourth research question regarding the elementary school students' attitudes toward RWL with contextual story grammar instruction, an attitude questionnaire for the experimental group was administered after the intervention. In exploring the subjects' perception toward the treatment received, four dimensions were examined: the subjects' responses to the RWL instruction delivered through contextual story grammar (items 1-7), the subjects' perception to the effectiveness of story maps with contextual cueing presented (items 8 and 9), their willingness to apply RWL with contextual story grammar mapping in future listening tasks (items 10 and 11), and reflection on specific language skills related to the progress made via RWL with contextual story grammar mapping (item 12).
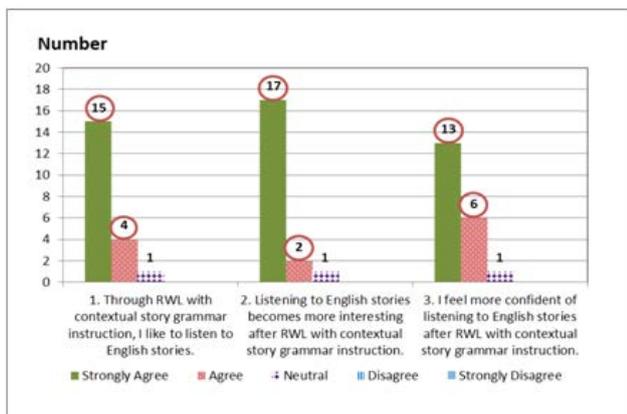

Figure 1. Results of Subjects' Response to RWL with Contextual Story Grammar Instruction (I)

Regarding the subjects' response to RWL with contextual story grammar instruction, as presented in Figure 1, 95% (n = 19) of the students agreed that they liked to listen to English stories through RWL with contextual story grammar instruction (item 1). Likewise, 95% (n = 19) of the respondents expressed their mounting interest and confidence in listening to stories with contextual story grammar mapping in RWL (items 2-3).

Additionally as shown in Figure 2, all the subjects (100%, n=20) believed that the instruction gave boost to their listening comprehension (item 4) and indicated a strong desire to listen to more stories after receiving the intervention (item 5). Further, around four fifths (85%, n=17) of the respondents stated that RWL with contextual story grammar mapping could help them recall the important messages in the stories (item 6). Meanwhile, the majority of the subjects (95%, n=19) said that they liked teacher's contextual story grammar instruction combined with RWL (item 7).
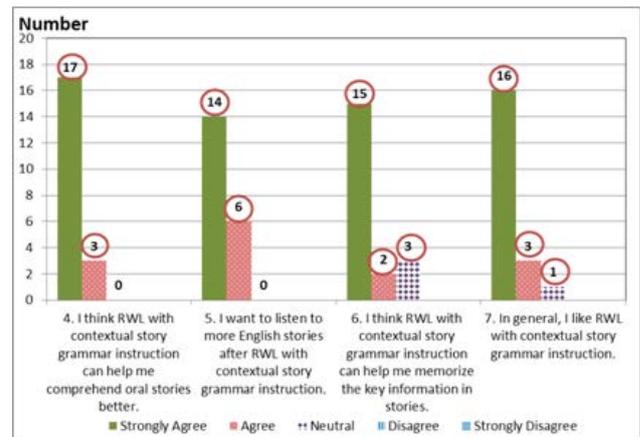
Figure 2. Results of Subjects' Response to RWL with Contextual Story Grammar Instruction (II)
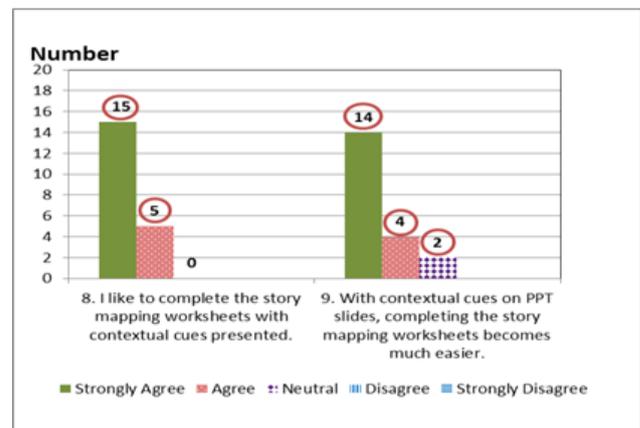
Figure 3. Results of Subjects' Perception to the Effectiveness of Story Maps with Contextual Cueing

When asked to comment on their perception toward the effectiveness of story mapping presented with contextual cueing in English listening, the feedback was overwhelmingly positive, depicted in Figure 3. All (100%, n=20) of the subjects preferred to write the story mapping worksheets with the aid of contextual cueing and 90% (n=18) of them thought that the contexual cues made the task easier (items 8-9).

In terms of the subjects' willingness to apply RWL with contextual story grammar in future listening practice, the results of items 10 and 11, as shown in Figure 4, revealed that the majority (95%, n=19) of the students reflected that RWL contextual story grammar instruction assisted their comprehension for future practice of listening to oral stories (item 10). In a nutshell, students of the experimental group (100%, n=20) thought that they would like to apply the treatment of story mapping to the oral stories they will listen to hereafter (item 11).
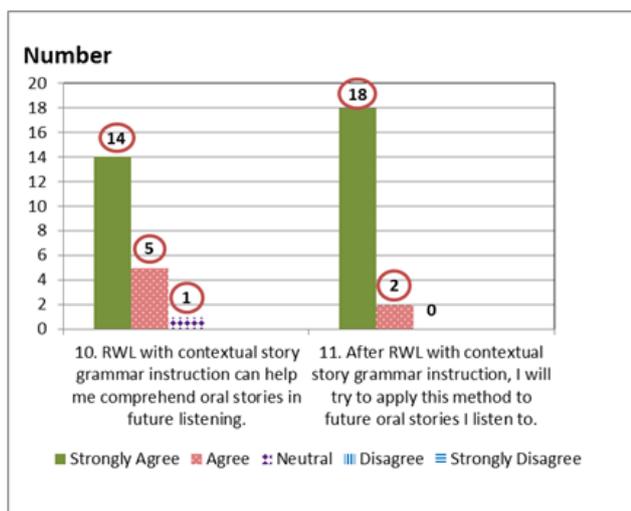

Figure 4. Results of Subjects' Willingness for Future RWL Contextual Story Grammar Application
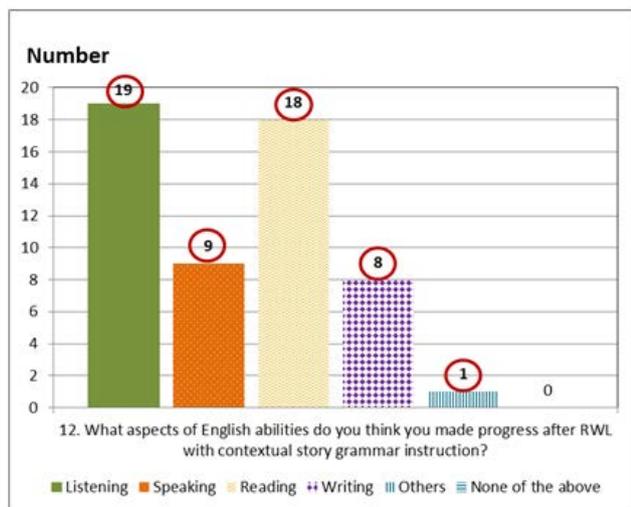

Figure 5. Results of Subjects' Reflection on the Advancement of Specific Language Skills after Contextual Story Grammar Instruction in RWL

In terms of the students' opinions toward their overall English improvement after receiving RWL with contextual story grammar instruction, Figure 5 outlines the responses. 95% (n=19) of the students found their listening ability facilitated through RWL contextual story

grammar instruction (item 12-1), and so did their reading ability (90%, n=18, item 12-3). The remaining abilities were relatively less, distributed across speaking (45%, n= 9, item 12-2), and writing (40%, n=8, item 12-4). Besides the aforementioned four skills, one student (5%, n=1, item 12-5) mentioned that RWL contextual story grammar instruction helped her get to know vocabulary words better.

All in all, based on the results of the questionnaire, the majority of the students held fairly positive attitudes toward RWL with contextual story grammar instruction, confirming the findings of EFL studies reported in Hou [15] and Tsai & Chuang [36]. Given the findings of the current study, it is worth noting that almost every student reported favorably on receiving RWL contextual story grammar instruction. They also perceived the effectiveness of story mapping worksheets, and more than half of them expressed the willingness to apply the novel method in future listening practice. Moreover, students thought that their overall language skills were enhanced. Among the four skills, listening and reading abilities stood out the strongest particularly. It reveals that there is an evident relationship between listening comprehension and reading performance. The results obtained, along the lines of Lerkkanen et al. [17], lend credence to the positive link between listening comprehension and reading comprehension, albeit some inherent differences.

5. Conclusion

With the emphasis on RWL with contextual story grammar mapping, the current study witnesses its effects on young learners' listening development and reading growth. The proposed method can be readily applied in practice for in-service English teachers. Based on the research findings, several pedagogical implications can be drawn to shed light on listening instructions in EFL settings.

First, as unveiled in the English learning background questionnaire, the students had very limited exposure to the RWL storybook practice in school and beyond. With the findings unfolded, it can be concluded that classroom materials enhanced with visual enhancement and aural input make an impact on English learning and teaching efficacy. Second, despite the benefits that RWL offers, elementary school students in Taiwan are rarely taught about how to listen for better comprehension. The exceedingly superior effects that the results of the study yielded highlight the importance of teaching contextual story grammar for better comprehension. A related issue zooms in on students' attitudes toward English learning. The treatment instruction implemented in this study is indicative of the positive aspects of language learning outcomes. That is, given the conversion of listening input into encoded intake, the participants not only better enjoyed listening to oral stories but also perceived its efficacy on their overall language improvement. Third, the correlations obtained from the present findings contribute to the field's understanding of one specific instructional method impacting on both listening and reading development. Namely, the listening comprehension and reading comprehension share reciprocal support. Moreover, their relationship turned out much stronger

after receiving RWL with contextual story grammar mapping. Such findings offer insights into ways of teaching listening which can be of value to English in-service teachers interested in achieving a balance between listening and reading for EFL young learners.

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