

The Effects of L2 Pleasure Reading on High School ESOL Students' Reading Comprehension and Motivation

Audrey Reiter

Annandale High School

Fairfax County (VA) Public Schools

June 2003

Abstract

While a wide body of research has been conducted on the effectiveness of Sustained Silent Reading (SSR) with native speakers of English, less research has been conducted with non-native speakers of English. This paper examines the effectiveness of SSR to increase the reading comprehension and motivation of high school students of English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL). In addition, the study identifies features that are essential to include in an SSR program if it is to keep students engaged in reading.

Introduction

While it is widely accepted that free voluntary reading has significant benefits for young, native language (L1) readers, less is known about its effects on older, second language (L2) learners. Free voluntary reading is defined as reading for pleasure. It is reading whatever one cares to read, newspapers to comics to romance novels, without accountability to a teacher or other authority figure (Krashen, 1993). Given the abundance of research showing pleasure reading's effects on native speakers, schools have adopted various programs in which students are given the opportunity to read for pleasure during school time. These programs are known by a number of different acronyms such as SSR (Sustained Silent Reading), DEAR (Drop Everything and Read), and SQUIRT (Sustained Quiet Reading Time). The main goal for all of these programs is to provide students with uninterrupted time to read material of their own choosing, with little or no accountability. Are these programs appropriate for second language learners? How does an in-school pleasure-reading program affect the reading comprehension of high school English as a Second Language (ESL) learners? How does it affect their motivation to read in English?

Literature Review

Numerous studies have shown the benefits of pleasure reading for native speakers of a given language (Krashen, 1993). While much research has investigated the effects of free voluntary reading on first language acquisition, fewer studies have investigated the effects of pleasure reading on second language acquisition. A review of the literature shows that free reading appears to benefit second language learners as well as first language learners.

Studies of the effects of second language pleasure reading on second language acquisition began with the "book floods" studies done by Elley and Mangubhai (1983) in the Fiji Islands. The researchers provided 250 high interest, English storybooks to 380 elementary-school students in rural Fijian schools. The participating teachers then encouraged the students to read the

books using either the Shared Book Experience or using a Sustained Silent Reading program. Pre- and post-tests were given to all students plus a matched control group of 234 students who had been taught English through the Tate Oral English Syllabus, an audiolingual method that places little emphasis on reading. After eight months, the book flood groups performed significantly better on tests of reading comprehension and English syntax than their counterparts in the audiolingual program. Most impressively, students gained fifteen months of reading growth in eight months. However, the SBE group and the SSR group scores did not differ significantly from each other. Thus the conclusion we can draw is that the exposure to and the voluntary reading of the books led to the better second language acquisition, regardless of the method. One major factor that strengthens this conclusion is that the study controlled for factors outside the dependent variable (the book floods). The students were in Classes 4 and 5, the classes in which instruction in English begins. Prior to these years, instruction is entirely in Fijian, and the students have first become literate in their native language. Furthermore, the students had had little exposure to English outside of the school because of the schools' rural location. Urban settings would have guaranteed that students would have had outside exposure to English, and the researchers would have been unable to rule out outside exposure to English as an explanation for the higher test scores by the book flood groups. Thus, this study strongly supports the hypothesis that second language reading comprehension and notions of syntax are greatly improved by second language free reading by elementary-age students. We may ask, however, if free reading benefits older students in a similar way.

Pleasure reading does indeed appear to benefit older students as well as younger students. Pilgreen and Krashen (1993) found in a study of 125 intermediate English as a Second Language tenth, eleventh and twelfth graders that reading comprehension scores increased significantly after a sixteen-week sustained silent reading program in school. In the study, students read books that they had chosen during a twelve to fifteen-minute period specially designated for Sustained Silent Reading. Following the sixteen-week program, student scores on the Stanford DCRT (test of reading comprehension) had significantly increased. Hence, free reading appears to be beneficial to older L2 learners as well as younger learners.

In addition to improved reading comprehension, free voluntary reading in the L2 appears to provide benefits such as improved writing, increased vocabulary, higher test scores, and a more positive and confident attitude towards L2 reading and the L2 in general. In a case study of two Korean students, Chang and Krashen (1997) found that the avid reader far outperformed the occasional reader in her ability to write English compositions. Pleasure reading has also been found to lead to the incidental acquisition of English vocabulary. Cho and Krashen found an increase in acquired vocabulary when they had three adult Korean-speakers and one adult Spanish-speaker read the Sweet Valley Kids series of books. Pleasure reading was found in another study to help improve Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) scores. Rebecca Constantino encouraged three students to read for pleasure in English

for three months, while a fourth student used only TOEFL preparation materials and grammar books. All students had previously scored at 450 or below on the TOEFL. At the end of the three months, the students again took the exam, and the three pleasure readers scored significantly higher than 450, while the fourth control student's score remained the same. Cho and Constantino's subjects also reported that they benefited from increased listening comprehension after the pleasure-reading program. Chang, Cho, Constantino and Pilgreen's subjects all reported an increased comfort level and increased confidence about English reading in particular and English in general.

These studies provide evidence that pleasure reading in a second language benefits L2 learners. However, only Pilgreen's study has been done with a large sample of older learners. The other studies have been case studies that are not easily generalizable. Therefore, further studies are needed to confirm the benefits of L2 pleasure reading on older learners.

Data Collection and Analysis

In September 2002, I implemented a daily Sustained Silent Reading program in four elementary-level and one intermediate-level high school ESL classes. Students read every other day for fifteen to twenty minutes. While students were given the option to bring reading materials from home, most students chose to read the materials provided for them in a classroom library. The library consisted of around 700 appropriate-level books, magazines and newspapers. "Appropriate-level" means that the materials were at or slightly above the students' reading level in English. Genres included in the library were fiction and non-fiction children's books; biographies of both historical figures and current pop culture artists; comic book collections such as Calvin and Hobbes, Peanuts and Garfield; low-level newspapers; and magazines such as Teen People, Latina and Automobile. At the beginning of every class period, the students chose a book to read, and I set a timer for 15-20 minutes. I read with the students. At the end of the reading period, the students returned the books to a class box in order to continue reading the book the following class. Students were allowed to change books if they did not wish to continue reading the material they had selected.

Seven tools were used to collect data: two surveys, scores on the Degrees of Reading Power tests administered in September and April, anecdotal observations, book checkout records and a book tree.

Surveys

The first survey was administered in September 2002. Seventy-seven students participated in the survey. Some did not answer all of the questions. The questions asked about reading in any language, not just English. In addition to multiple-choice questions about the availability of print material in students' homes and reading habits of adults in the home, the survey included the following questions:

	Most of the time	Sometimes	Not Very Often
I like to read.	18	55	7
I read at home.	24	48	6

While most students indicate that they like to read “sometimes,” other questions revealed that forty-eight students had only between 1 and 10 reading materials of any kind in their home. The school and public libraries were used infrequently. Therefore, I wonder how often “sometimes” really is, and I would refine future surveys to make discriminate further. The survey as it was showed that only 20-25% of the students were avid readers in any language. Therefore, most students showed a medium motivation to read and probably a low motivation to read at the start of the project.

The second survey was administered in December 2002, approximately three months after the reading program began. Three open-ended questions were asked to 67 students. Some students did not answer all the questions. The responses and comments were tallied and categorized as follows:

1. Do you like in-class free reading time?	YES	NO
	57	10

The following comments were made by “yes” respondents as to why they like free reading time:

- learn more English (13)
- learn vocabulary (13)
- can read better (6)
- it’s fun (5)
- settles down class/quiet time (4)
- can choose own books (4)
- good/interesting books available (3)
- learn new information (3)
- helps pronunciation (3)
- no time to read at home (2)

The following comments were made by “no” respondents as to why they do not like free reading time:

- boring (3)
- boring books (3)
- feel sleepy (3)
- too long (1)

2. Do you think reading helps you in other classes?	YES	NO
	60	5
3. Do you think you can read better now than before?	YES	NO
	62	4

Students made the following comments concerning their assessment of their reading skills (comments in quotation marks were made by one student; the number in parentheses indicates the number of students who wrote a similar comment):

- understand new words (16)
- “if you [do] something always, you get used to it” (12)
- “before only I read, but now I read and understand” (3)
- helps pronunciation (3)
- can read faster
- “in summer I can’t read for English book. But now I can read for comic or short story book”
- “because can see when reading”
- “because I read much book and I find same word more than one time”
- “Because I always used dictionary to find the words before, now I remember some words and I did not used dictionary and I guess it what its mean.”
- “before I could not sit a minute and read, but now I can”
- because don’t read aloud, don’t know if reading “right”
- don’t know how (2)
- difficult/don’t understand
- don’t want to

It is clear that after four months of reading time, the students not only enjoyed reading time, they felt that reading in English was easier and that they were reading better. Had I simply seen the survey numbers, I may have suspected that the students were only telling me what they thought I wanted to hear. However, the specific nature of their comments leads me to believe otherwise. Students reported that they used context clues to guess the meanings of unfamiliar words. They learned new words by seeing them used repeatedly. They could understand what they were reading, and they were more comfortable with reading in English. I suspect that this increased comfort level is due to the non-academic material that they chose themselves. Clearly, many students felt that the SSR was helping to improve their comprehension and motivation to read in English.

Degrees of Reading Power

The Degrees of Reading Power test is designed to measure the reading comprehension of native speakers of English. The lowest score is –15 (no English) and a score of 70 is a native speaker of English at the sixth grade level.

The test was administered once in September 2002 and again in February 2003. Forty-seven students took the test at both administrations. The DRP scores increased an average of 12.7 points between the two administrations. While I cannot say that the SSR program caused the increase, I can clearly conclude that the program did no harm to the students' progress in reading comprehension.

Book Checkout Records

Book checkout records were used to track how many books from the classroom library the students chose to bring home to read. Checking books out of the library was completely voluntary on the part of the student. A card system was implemented due the frequency of students asking to borrow books to read at home. Records reveal that 31 students had checked out 64 books in the period between mid-September and mid-May. This number shows that some students were motivated enough to read outside of class. However, it is unclear if they would have been as motivated without the SSR program. In any case, the SSR program made reading materials available to these students.

Book Tree

During the last week of April, all the students participating in the study made a book tree on the classroom wall as a way to gauge how many books they had read individually, as a class and as a group of classes. Each student wrote the titles of the books they had read during the year onto paper "leaves", writing one title per leaf. The leaves were color-coded by class. The students were told that they would neither receive a grade for the leaves nor were they required to write their name on the leaves in order to encourage as much honesty as possible. Students were allowed to look through the library in order to remember as well as possible which books they had read. The 'leaves' were then taped to the wall in a tree shape.

The 81 students in the study read a total of 663 books from mid-September to the end of April. This number may be low, because several students commented to me that they had not written down all their book titles. Thus the true number may be closer to 700 books. Neither of these figures includes the books checked out to read at home.

In addition to documenting the number of books read in an anonymous way, the book tree also served to motivate the students. When they saw the completed tree, many students expressed their pride and delight at the number of books they had read.

Anecdotal Records

While I read with the students during every reading period, I also noted their actions and comments during and about reading time. After an initial few minutes of time to settle down, many students were "engaged" in the reading. Some would ask for extra reading time; however, I am suspicious of their motivations. Some came up to me to ask what words meant.

While many students were actively engaged in reading during class time, many students were not engaged. Some tried to talk to their friends, although sometimes it was about a picture in the book they were looking at. Others chose to consistently sleep during reading time. Still others just turned the pages. Towards the end of the year, students often read different books every class, instead of reading the same book until the end. Our class boxes system broke down because students from other classes would “steal” the books out of the boxes. “Somebody stole my book” was a frequent complaint.

Students frequently asked for new books and showed excitement when they arrived. Students in one class practically ran to the new books I introduced at the end of February. Students spent considerable time browsing new books when they arrived. Also successful were the mid-year book fairs I held using a grant from The Washington Post. One Alexandria bookstore allowed me to “borrow” \$600 of their stock with the promise to purchase \$500. I then took the books to school and spread them out on tables in the library for the students to browse. They were told that each class had \$100 to spend on new books, and they were to anonymously vote for three books they would like to purchase for the library. Three out of the five classes were fully engaged for the 30-40 minutes allotted for this activity. They helped me take the books out of the boxes, they were engaged in browsing, and they read independently or with a friend after voting, even though I had not instructed them to do so. In one class, four male students who are not otherwise successful academically were actively engaged in reading the books. The librarian even commented to me that it looked like the class was having fun. The other two classes were less engaged—while they browsed the books and voted, after 15 minutes they drifted off to talk to their friends. All in all, the book fair excited and motivated students, even many who are not usually academically successful.

Case Study of Student “O”

The success of the project with “at-risk” students is exemplified by the behavior of one student—student O. O. is a ninth-grader from El Salvador. He had been in A-level ESL classes at Glasgow Middle School for two years before arriving at Annandale. He had failed most of his classes, and a dual-language assessment found that O. had limited literacy skills in his native Spanish. He had reportedly completed only first and second grade in El Salvador when he was ten years old. He has been referred to special education.

When O. started my class in September, he had difficulty staying seated; he was often disruptive and refused to do class assignments, even when support was provided in Spanish. He also refused to read. Over a period of a couple of months, however, O. slowly started to show an interest in the books. Often, when he chose not to do class assignments, he quietly looked at the books instead of being disruptive. Then, he began looking at the pictures and asking me questions. Then he would ask me what words in the text meant. He was clearly attempting to make sense of the text. This became evident to me in April, when O. was reading a book about Al Gore. After seeing that Al Gore was in the Vietnam War, O. started asking many questions in Spanish about Gore and the

Vietnam War. O. had clearly become engaged by the books, and they were opening the way for him to seek answers to questions.

Reflections

I started this project with several assumptions about L2 reading. First, I considered L2 reading a fundamental component of successful language learning, despite that it can often be difficult, frustrating and intimidating for learners. Also, I believed that highly proficient L1 readers read a variety of genres and difficulty levels, not only difficult and/or academic texts. L2 readers should be able to do the same. In addition, I believed that access to a large quantity of print material written at a level similar to that of the L2 learner was necessary for the L2 reader to make progress. The print material also had to be on subject matter interesting to a high school student.

The project was often frustrating when I saw students reluctantly settling down to the reading, doing homework, sleeping and complaining during reading time. However, I was encouraged when I saw survey comments about the reading, when students asked for and got excited about new books, when they requested certain books or increased reading time, and when they copied new vocabulary words from the books or asked me what words meant, and when they talked about the books they were reading with each other during reading time. Concerning this latter practice, I was torn between letting the students talk and requesting they be quiet, because if they were talking, they weren't reading and it also became difficult to silence off-task talk. However, after some reflection, I often let the talking about the books occur during reading time because this is a native-like practice. For example, many families read the Sunday newspaper together, and often the readers will talk to each other about articles as they read them, engendering reflective discussion about the article topic.

Now, after having completed the project, most of my assumptions about reading remain intact. I believe that the L2 learner can improve his/her reading skills through a sustained silent reading program modeled upon L1 reading practices. While students will progress at varying paces, and some students will choose to sleep or do other work, others clearly benefited from having appropriate books easily accessible and distributed time to read them. However, in order to engage the reluctant readers, I would like to implement a number of changes to the program as described in the following section.

Implications

Initial results show that students did make progress, therefore it is worthwhile to continue the project next year. However, I will make some changes to make the program run more smoothly and facilitate student motivation.

1. Put books into categories on the shelves. Many students complained they could not find books on the topics they were interested in (e.g. countries, animals, biographies).
2. Post the book checkout procedure and train students to use it early. Students had to get my attention and have me paste a book card sleeve

- into the book before checking it out. This may have deterred some students from checking out books. Next year, I would have all the cards pasted into the books and post the procedure so students could use it independently.
3. Have a couple of students “review” their book for the class after each reading period. This could be as simple as showing the book, reading the title and orally completing two cloze exercises: “This book is about ...” and “I like/don’t like the book because...”
 4. Make book advertisements. The students made advertisements for their books by drawing pictures and writing two sentences about the book in addition to listing the title and author. However, I did not promote the activity enough and never put the final product on the bulletin board.
 5. Begin the book tree in September. Students will be able to better track their progress, and the numbers of books read may be more accurate.
 6. Introduce new books at least once per month. The arrival of new books always created excitement about the program.
 7. Repeat the book fair. A majority of students appeared to enjoy and be motivated by the possibility of choosing the books for the classroom library. Several students inquired about having a book fair where they could purchase books for themselves, similar to elementary-school book fairs.

This study also raises the question of book access. Even if students are motivated to read on their own, outside of school, it is difficult for them to gain access to appropriate materials. First, many students cannot afford to buy books, and bookstores are not generally located in low-income neighborhoods. Second, students report that they are intimidated by the library. For example, the non-fiction children’s books that are so popular in the classroom are mixed in with the general non-fiction collection at the George Mason public library in Annandale. Therefore, students must first use the computer to track down the books using the Dewey Decimal system, rather than being able to browse a collection of books especially at their level. Third, the public library is difficult to access, since it is located on a busy main road. Finally, the school library does not stock an especially large collection of appropriate books, particularly non-fiction. While the books are color-coded as ESOL books, the non-fiction collection is again mixed in with the general non-fiction collection. Research on in-school pleasure reading programs is essential not only to improve students reading comprehension, but also to increase low-income students’ access to print materials.

References

- Chang, J.S. & Krashen, S. (1997). The Effect of Free Reading on Language and Academic Development: A Natural Experiment. *Mosaic*, 4:4, 13-15.
- Cho, K.-S. & Krashen, S. (1994). Acquisition of Vocabulary from the Sweet Valley Kids Series: Adult ESL Acquisition. *Journal of Reading*, 37:8, 662-667.
- Constantino, R. (1995). The Effects of Pleasure Reading. *Mosaic*, 3:1, 15-17.
- Elley, W.B. & Mangubhai, F. (1983). The Impact of Reading on Second Language Learning. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 19:1, 53-67.
- Krashen, S. (1993). *The Power of Reading*. Englewood, CO: Libraries Unlimited, Inc.
- MacLean, M.S. & Mohr, M.M. (1999). *Teacher-Researchers at Work*. Berkeley, CA: National Writing Project Corporation.
- Pilgreen, J. & Krashen, S. (1993). Sustained Silent Reading with English as a Second Language High School Students: Impact on Reading Comprehension, Reading Frequency and Reading Enjoyment. *School Library Media Quarterly*, 22:1, 21-23.