

Does Sustained Silent Reading Result in a Long-Term Reading Habit?

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Abstract: The goal of reading programs is to help students become lifetime readers, which guarantees their improvement in language and literacy long after they finish school. Cho and Krashen (2016) concluded that five conditions are necessary for this to happen: (1) A pleasant initial reading experience; (2) Time to read; (3) A place to read; (4) Self-selection of reading material; (5) No test, no workbook exercises and no rewards for reading. In this study, condition (1) was satisfied, but subjects did not establish a long-term reading habit, confirming that a pleasant initial reading experience is not enough. This conclusion was supported by subjects' comments.

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1. Introduction

The result in which we are the most interested is knowing what our students will be reading ten years from now" (Thomas, 1938, p. 578).

Research on free voluntary reading over the last several decades has repeatedly confirmed the value of a pleasure reading habit: self-selected reading appears to be the major cause of literacy development and an important source of knowledge in many areas (Krashen, 2004; Lee, 2007; Mason & Krashen, 2017; Smith, 2011).

For these reasons, the establishment of a long-term reading habit is a central goal in language education. This is also the case in second and foreign language education: a reading habit in the second language will ensure continued progress even when the acquirer has finished taking a sequence of classes.

Several earlier attempts have been made to determine if SSR reading experiences stimulate the formation of a reading habit. Weisendanger and Birlem (1989) reported that third graders who had done a year of SSR did more self-selected reading on their own during the next summer than comparisons, but the difference was only present for "average" level readers, and were extremely small, with SSR veterans reading only five minutes more per week than comparisons. Greaney and Clarke (1973) reported that 6th grade boys in a sustained-silent-reading program did more leisure reading at the end of the program than boys in a comparison program. Six years later, they contacted

the boys again: A significantly larger percentage of those who had been in the reading group reported reading at least one book over the previous three months (73% for the reading group, 23 out of 31 subjects, vs 53% for the comparison group (18 out of 34 subjects). While significant, the difference is small. (Using the Fisher test, one-tail, $p = .064$ for this data, very close to significance. But if only two SSR veterans had not read at least one book (only 21 out of 31), the p-level drops to a clearly insignificant $p = .17$). Also, neither study provides information about the reading environment students experienced after completing SSR.

Studies of long term readers in a second or foreign language reveal common factors underlying the successful establishment of a long-term reading habit (Cho & Krashen, 2015):

- (1) A pleasant initial reading experience
- (2) Time to read
- (3) A place to read
- (4) Self-selection of reading material
- (5) No tests, no workbook exercises and no rewards for reading.

I hypothesize here that to ensure a long-term reading habit, all of above conditions need to be met and present evidence suggesting that number (1), an initial pleasant experience, is not enough.

The Study

I report on two separate studies with similar groups of readers

1) Subjects

The subjects were third year university students in Korea studying EFL, training to be teachers. All were majoring in elementary education and minoring in English education. All had studied English in school for 12 years, but reported that classes were largely very traditional, e.g. reading short, very difficult texts and grammar study, including diagramming sentences. The focus was preparation for tests. All students were in the author's class on English reading and writing, which was designed to prepare them to teach English reading and writing. Nearly all participants considered themselves to be non-readers before the SSR program began, as revealed by a questionnaire given before the SSR sessions began: 25 out of 26 in group 1 and 24 out of 27 in group 2. Students were also asked to indicate the reasons why they had not read in English. Their responses are presented in table 1 (note that some students indicated more than one reason).

Table 1. Reasons why they had not read in English

Reasons	Group 1	Group 2
Reading in English is too difficult	12	13
Reading in English is no fun	12	7
Lack of access to interesting books	7	8

Does Sustained Silent Reading Result in a Long-Term Reading Habit?

We are tested on everything we read in English	10	21
Others	0	3

Note: Group 1 from Cho, K.S (2017)

2) SSR Procedure

The SSR program for both groups consisted of five sessions of approximately 15-20 minutes per session, done once a week for five weeks.

Students were provided access to the Sweet Valley series, demonstrated to be popular with adult second language acquirers (Cho & Krashen, 1994; 1995 a,b) as well as other books. Students were also allowed to bring their own reading material. They were not tested on what they read.

An apparent success

The results of questionnaires given at the end of the five sessions indicated that the students liked the SSR sessions and that the experience increased their motivation to read. Also, they said they would encourage their own students to do pleasure reading in English (Table 2).

Table 2. Reactions to SSR Time

Questions	Scale	Mean Group 1	Mean Group 2
How was the SSR time?	1 = not at all, 5 = very good	4.44	4.15
After SSR sessions, did you feel less stress about reading?	1 = not at all, 5 = very good	4.20	4.19
After SSR sessions, were you more motivated to read?	1 = not at all, 5 = very good	4.24	4.08
Would you include SSR in your teaching?	1 = not at all, 5 = definitely	4.68	4.20
Will you encourage your students to read series books?	1 = not at all, 5 = very good	4.71	4.24

The experience, however, did not result in their becoming dedicated or even modestly dedicated readers. Questionnaires given to group 1 after six months and group 2 after one academic year indicated that there was a clear increase in reading in English in both groups, but only one student in group 1 became a dedicated reader, and only four in group 2 (read more than five books). A large number of students reported reading no books or only one book (15 in group 1, or 60%, and 11 in group 2, or 42%).

Table 3. Number of books read after SSR

Group	N	None	1	2 to 5	more than 5	more than 10
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1	25	6	9	9	0	1
2	26	3	8	11	2	2

Students in group 2 were asked why they did not read more. Thirteen (13) students responded: four (4) students said that there was no time to read because of heavy school assignments and four (4) more said that they had other obligations, which could have included school work. Four (4) more students said they had no access to easy and interesting books. One student confessed to having a fear of English, which could have been a fear in not understanding.

Conclusions

In this study, sustained silent reading had a positive effect: Students liked it, and said that it motivated them to read, but these positive feelings did not translate into the formation of a reading habit. This was true in both samples of subjects.

The results suggest that the pressures of school, and perhaps other obligations, as well as a lack of access to interesting and comprehensible reading material, prevent the formation of a reading habit. This conclusion is consistent with Cho and Krashen (2016): all conditions must be met to ensure the establishment of a reading habit. This suggestion can be testing directly by providing improved access to comprehensible and interesting books, and making sure students have time (and a place) to read, as a respected part of their school experience.

It is possible that the positive experience and understanding of the benefits of self-selected reading may have a lasting effect. If so, those who were unable to establish a reading habit will form a habit later, after finishing their studies. This is an open question.¹

Notes:

- (1) *It might be argued that five sessions are not enough to establish a reading habit. In response, there are cases in which a single positive experience was enough (home run book studies, e.g. Ujiie & Krashen, 2002; Von Sprecken., Kim, & Krashen, 2000; Kim & Krashen, 2000, based on Trelease, 2001), In addition, the students clearly enjoyed the sessions, and were enthusiastic about continuing to read.*

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Does Sustained Silent Reading Result in a Long-Term Reading Habit?

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