

Overcoming Fear of Reading in English: The Astonishing Impact of a Short SSR Experience

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The value of self-selected reading in a second language has been well established (Krashen, 2004). Nevertheless, few second language acquirers take advantage of this pleasurable means of improving, most likely because they have little access to truly interesting reading material that is comprehensible to them, or they fear that they will not understand the material that is available.

The results of a previous study suggest that it may not be difficult to overcome the second objection. In Cho (2004) and Cho and Krashen (2002), Korean teachers taking classes in teaching English as a foreign language, but who did not feel confident in their ability to read for pleasure in English, were presented with a collection of children's books in English and simply asked to browse the collection for two hours. This simple treatment resulted in a sudden change of attitude when the teachers discovered they could understand and enjoy many of the books.

This study was another straightforward attempt to improve attitudes towards English reading for members of the same population, reluctant readers who were nevertheless eager to improve their English. Again, subjects were Korean teachers taking graduate classes for a master's program in Korea to improve their competence in teaching English as a foreign language.

Three separate classes were used in the study, but results for all three were so similar that the three classes were combined into one group. Subjects had an average of a little under nine years of overall teaching experience (mean = 8.75 years, sd = 5.74, n = 46), but less than three years of English teaching experience (mean = 2.93, sd = 2.47, n = 44 respondents). The subjects were clearly not dedicated pleasure readers in English: When asked if they agreed with the statement "I read books in English for pleasure," on a 1-5 where 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = moderately, 4 = agree and 5 = strongly agree, the mean response was about 2.5 (mean = 2.66, sd = 1.07, n = 44).

The teachers clearly participated enthusiastically in the treatment. They read an average of about ten books over the two week period, with a standard deviation of about five, which means that about two-thirds of the subjects read between five and 15 books (mean = 10.06, sd = 5.22). The rest of the class-time included discussion and reading about reading research, including the role of free voluntary reading.

Following the treatment, a questionnaire was administered in Korean, asking subjects whether they found the books interesting, whether they were interested in reading more in English, whether they would do SSR with their subjects, would recommend it to other teachers and whether SSR should be required in English as a foreign language in Korea. All questions were answered on a one to five scale, with 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = moderately, 4 = agree and 5 = strongly agree.)

The results are presented in table one. The results can only be described as astonishing. All responses were either "4" or "5" with the exception of one subject who marked "3" for level of interest in the books, and responses for all the other questions were mostly "5". In fact, all subjects except one marked "5" in response to the question of whether they would implement SSR.

Table one: Reactions to SSR program (n=46)

	mean	sd
Did you find the books interesting?	4.44	0.55
Are you interested in continuing to read in English?	4.76	0.43
Are you interested in implementing SSR in your classes?	4.96	0.21
Would you suggest doing SSR to other teachers?	4.78	0.47
Should SSR be required?	4.87	0.34

improvement in English? A two-week self-selected reading experience resulted in an unexpected and strong enthusiasm for reading in English, but will it last?

Scale 1-5

Observations confirmed that the teachers were engaged in the reading: Cookies and drinks were made available during the reading time, but quite often teachers ignored the snacks, preferring to stay with their books. In addition, some teachers commented that the 15 minute reading time was too short and that it was difficult to stop reading when SSR time was over. One teacher recommended that the entire two hours be dedicated to self-selected reading. Also, several teachers started buying reading material on their own. One teacher was especially enthusiastic about Archie comic books, bought some, and hid them from her own children until she finished reading them.

Teachers were not only given time to read, but were also given information about the value of reading, including the research support. This orientation may have played a role in achieving the positive results (see Lee, 1998, for evidence supporting this hypothesis). A plausible hypothesis is that potential adult readers of a second language profit from both the knowledge about reading as well as actual pleasurable reading experience.

These very positive results need to be supplemented by studies of whether the enthusiasm seen here is long-lasting: Will these kinds of experiences result in a real reading habit and result in continuing

References

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“Reading helped me to realize that there was a world out there far vaster than the narrow confines of El Barrio.”
- Piri Thomas