

Five Sessions of SSR: The impact of a short pleasure reading experience on reading attitude

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Abstract:

Intermediate level EFL students in Korea preparing to be English teachers participated in a short (five sessions) sustained silent reading (SSR) experience. Most of the reading material made available to the students was from the Sweet Valley High series. Students had a very positive reaction to the SSR sessions and reported a considerable increase in interest in free voluntary reading after the five sessions, but the improvement was less impressive one year later and the amount of actual reading reported was modest. A very encouraging result is that participants uniformly said that they would include SSR in their teaching in the future.

Key words: *Sustained silent reading, Narrow reading, EFL, Pleasure reading habit, Reading attitude*

Introduction

The benefits of having a long-term reading habit are well-established. Those who do more self-selected reading develop more reading ability, have better writing style, have larger vocabularies, spell better, and have better control of complex grammatical constructions. These results hold for all ages and for first and second language development (Krashen, 2004).

For this reason there is considerable interest in helping young people become long-term readers. On the basis of examining a number of case histories, Cho and Krashen (2016) concluded that factors that favor the development of a long-term reading habit include having a pleasure reading experience, having access to interesting reading material, having time and a place to read, and being able to select one's own books.

In this study, intermediate level EFL students who did not have a pleasure reading habit were provided with what promised to be a pleasurable reading experience, allowed self-selection, and were provided time and a place to read. The prediction was that this would result in the establishment of a reading habit for at least some of them, and the impact would be long-term.

Procedures

Subjects

Subjects were 26 (11 males and 15 females) third-year students majoring in elementary education with a minor in elementary English education at a university in Korea. All were students in the author's class on English reading, which was designed to prepare them to teach English reading and also to improve their own competence in reading English.

The Treatment

The course syllabus introduced students to the research on pleasure reading in both first and second language development. In particular, students were introduced to the advantage of narrow reading, doing a great deal of reading in an area of interest, reading books by a favorite author, and reading series books.

Students also personally experienced the effect of narrow pleasure reading. Students participated in Sustained Silent Reading (SSR) sessions once a week for five weeks, from October 27, 2014 to November 24, 2014. Time devoted to SSR ranged from 10 to 25 minutes, with an average of 15 minutes per session.

During this time students could read whatever they themselves chose to read. There was no accountability, that is, no test on what was read and no required book reports. Readers were not forced to finish each book they started. In addition, students were allowed to check out books if they wanted to read outside of class.

They were, however, asked to keep a record of each book they read, and to indicate how interesting the book was, as well as make other comments. They were advised to avoid looking up unknown words unless the word appeared to be vital for understanding the story.

The Reading Material

Most of the books made available to the students in their classroom library were from the Sweet Valley series. This series had been used very successfully in previous studies with students of English as a foreign language (Cho and Krashen, 1994, 1995a,b).

The Sweet Valley books describe the adventures of identical twins with very different personalities. They are ideal for second language acquirers. One sub-series, Sweet Valley Kids, is about the twins in second grade, and it is written at the second grade level. Another, Sweet Valley Twins, is about the Twins in

middle school and is written at the fourth grade level. In the third sub-series, Sweet Valley High, the twins are in high school, and the books are written at the sixth grade level. The series thus provides a natural progression, and also supplies the reader with background knowledge of the twins and their lives, which makes subsequent reading in the series more comprehensible. Besides Sweet Valley books, some adult books were made available to students, such as John Grisham's legal thrillers and a biography of Hillary Clinton. All students except one read from the Sweet Valley series.

Measures and Results

Pre-Questionnaire

One week before SSR was instituted in class, students were given a short questionnaire in Korean, asking if they had ever read books written in English for fun. Only one subject of the group of twenty six (26) reported previous pleasure reading in English.

Students were also asked to indicate the reasons why they had not read in English. Their responses were categorized as follows, with some students providing more than one reason.

1. Reading in English is too difficult: (12)
2. Reading in English is no fun: (12)
3. Lack of access to interesting books: (7)
4. English reading is followed by a test on what you have read: (10)

Post-questionnaire

A post-reading questionnaire was administered one year after the SSR experience ended. Students were asked if they had become pleasure readers because of the SSR experience, and whether they still considered themselves to be pleasure readers one year later, at the time they took the questionnaire. Table 1 combines the responses for the pre and post-questionnaires.

	Reader	not reader	% reader
Before SSR sessions	1	25	4
After SSR sessions	19	7	73
One year later (currently)	10	16	38

Table 1. Do you consider yourself to be a reader?

Subjects were asked how many books they had read in the year since SSR was completed. Of the twenty five (25) who answered this question, six (6) said they read no books and nine (9) said they had read only one. Nine (9) read from two to five books and one (1) subject reported reading more than ten books.

Subjects were also asked the reasons for not reading more during the year, but only four subjects responded to this question. They mentioned lack of time because of the pressure of examinations, as well as the lack of books of interest other than books from the Sweet Valley series. The good news is that ten (38%) of these students did maintain a reading habit for a full year after their SSR experience.

The other questions on the post-questionnaire are listed in appendix A, along with details about responses. A summary of post-questionnaire results is presented in table 2. Students clearly valued the SSR time, felt that the reading experience reduced their anxiety about reading, increased their motivation to read and their reading ability, and they said they would use SSR in the English classes they were preparing to teach. Of great interest is the finding that they felt that reading Sweet Valley books helped improve their conversational English.

Question	Scale	Mean
How was the SSR time?	1 = not at all, 5 = very good	4.44
After SSR sessions, did you feel less stress about reading?	1 = not at all, 5 = very much	4.20
After SSR sessions, were you more motivated to read?	1 = not at all, 5 = very much	4.24
After reading Sweet Valley books, were you more motivated to read?	1 = not at all, 5 = very much	4.36
Would you include SSR in your teaching?	1 = not at all, 5 = definitely	4.68
Did reading Sweet Valley books help your conversational English?	1 = not at all, 5 = very much	4.50

Can narrow reading like the Sweet Valley series improve reading comprehension?	1 = not at all, 5 = very much	4.35
Will you encourage your students to read series books?	1 = not at all, 5 = very much	4.71

Table 2. Summary of post-questionnaire results

Conclusion

The major hypothesis of this study appeared to be confirmed: Providing access to interesting and comprehensible books and time to read resulted in a clear growth in interest in reading, even though the treatment consisted only of five sessions.

One year later, however, the number of students who considered themselves to be readers in English dropped considerably. Also, the amount of reading done over the year after the SSR program ended was not impressive: Nine of the ten who said they were readers during the year after SSR reported that they read no more than five books during the year.

The conditions indicated by Cho and Krashen (2016) that lead to the establishment of a reading habit were present during the time SSR was done, but we do not know to what extent they were present the following year. Most likely, they were not fully met.

An interesting result is that subjects felt that reading Sweet Valley novels helped them with conversation, a major concern of EFL students.

Finally, subjects were enthusiastic about doing SSR with their students when they become English teachers themselves. One hopes that they will make sure that their students will have time to read, will have access to interesting material, and will be able to select their own reading material while they are doing SSR in school and also long after the SSR program has been completed.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Results of the post-questionnaire

1. How was the SSR time? (n = 25)
 - I didn't like it at all: 0
 - Not good: 0
 - Moderately good: 1 (4%)
 - Good: 8 (32 %)
 - Very Good: 16 (64%)
 - Mean = 4.44 out of 5

2. After the SSR sessions, did you feel less stress about reading English books? (n = 25)
 - Not at all: 0
 - No: 0
 - Moderately: 3 (12%)
 - Yes: 14 (56%)
 - Very much: 8 (32%)
 - Mean = 4.2 out of 5

3. After the SSR sessions, were you more motivated to read? (n = 25)
 - Not at all: 0
 - No: 0
 - Moderately: 4 (15%)
 - Yes: 11 (42%)
 - Very Much: 10 (40%)
 - Mean = 4.24

Questions 4-6 were asked only of those who read books from the Sweet Valley series (n = 25)

4. After reading books from the Sweet Valley series, were you more motivated

- to read?
Not at all: 0
No: 0
Moderately: 3 (12%)
Yes: 10 (40%)
Very much: 12 (48%)
Mean = 4.36
5. If given enough time and enough books, would you include SSR time in your elementary school teaching?
Not at all: 0
No: 0
Possibly: 1 (4%)
Yes: 6 (24%)
Very much: 18 (72%)
Mean = 4.68
6. Do you think that reading the Sweet Valley books helps your conversational English? (n = 24)
Not at all: 0
No: 0
Moderately: 3 (13%)
Yes: 6 (25%)
Very much: 15 (63%)
Mean = 4.5
7. Do you think narrow reading like the Sweet Valley series could help improve reading comprehension? (n = 26)
Not at all: 0
No: 0
Moderately: 2 (8%)
Yes: 13 (50%)
Very much: 11 (42%)
Mean = 4.35
8. Will you encourage your students in elementary school to read series books? (n = 24)
Not at all: 0
No: 0
Moderately: 2 (8%)
Yes: 3 (13%)
Very much: 19 (79%)
Mean = 4.71