

Evaluating Sustained Silent Reading in Reading Classes

Chow, Ping-Ha

[lsp-phch \[at\] lsp.hkcampus.net](mailto:lsp-phch@lsp.hkcampus.net)

Po Leung Kuk Lee Shing Pik College (Hong-Kong, China)

Chou, Chi-Ting

[ct899 \[at\] yahoo.com](mailto:ct899@yahoo.com)

Deh-Yu College of Nursing and Management (Taiwan)

A literature review on the effects of incorporating sustained silent reading (SSR) in class was given and the key features of successful SSR were examined. A general assumption about reading is that students improve their reading ability by reading a lot. Research on native speakers of English and students of English as a second language has shown that the amount of time spent reading is related to students' reading comprehension and vocabulary growth. Students also develop more positive attitudes towards reading after the SSR programs. The effects are more prominent when the students are allowed to select their own reading materials and the SSR programs are run for 6 months or more.

Introduction

A Sustained Silent Reading (SSR) program has been implemented in schools through the Hong Kong Extensive Reading Scheme in English, which has been initiated and developed by the Education Department for 10 years. The aim of the SSR is to help students develop a good habit of reading and improve their English proficiency in the long run. In sustained silent reading, students read silently in a designated time period every day in school. They select their own reading material and are not asked to answer comprehension questions or write book reports. SSR is nothing new. The term Uninterrupted Sustained Silent Reading was introduced as early as 1960. McCracken (1971) set forth some basic rules for initiating SSR. Since then, it has been implemented in reading classes at all grade levels. According to several research studies, effects of SSR on students' reading include improvement in reading skills and vocabulary acquisition, as measured by reading test scores, developing a positive attitude towards reading and cultivating a better reading habit.

Gains in Achievement

The study of Nagy, Herman & Anderson (1985) investigated whether students acquire measurable knowledge about unfamiliar words while reading natural text. Subjects were 57 eighth grade students of average and above average reading ability. They were given individual interview and a multiple choice test. The results suggest that a moderate amount of reading will lead to substantial vocabulary gains. Since SSR involves substantial amounts of natural reading, it is probable that this practice fosters vocabulary growth. The researchers state that the findings indicate that reading is a most effective way to produce large-scale vocabulary growth. This study supports the hypothesis that incidental learning from context during free reading is the major mode of vocabulary acquisition during the school years.

A study (Ozburn, 1995) of 60 ninth grade students in remedial classes produces similar findings. Students read a self-selected book for the first 10-15 minutes of each daily 55-minute class. They also checked the books out and were encouraged to read at home. The Gates MacGinitie Reading Test was administered before the study and 9 months later. Results show that all students have improved in their reading level. In the Project READ, which includes the use of SSR, conducted in the Washington D.C. public schools, Coley (1983) reported that over the 6 month period of the project, gains in reading achievement occurred in both 7th and 8th grades. The effect of non-stop reading on improved comprehension is evident in achievement score gains(4). Compared with the control groups, students participating in the project demonstrated better reading strategies when having trouble reading a book. Coley thinks that the result of Project READ lends strong support for the inclusion of a period of non-stop reading daily.

Shifts in Attitudes

Attitude changes towards reading have also been observed. Attitude shifts occurred in both attitude towards reading and attitude towards paperback books for students in Project READ(5). Ozburn (1995) reported that the students checked out over 2000 books during SSR program. Wiesendanger and Birlm (1984) noted that nine of the eleven research studies they analyzed presented evidence that students develop more positive attitudes towards reading in schools with SSR. Valeri-Gold (1995) incorporated SSR in her reading classes and found that the majority of students felt that SSR had a positive influence on their attitudes about reading. They had read a lot more since SSR was implemented into their reading classes.

A survey by Wiesendanger & Bader (1989) investigated what happened after the termination of SSR. They monitored the summer reading habits of both students who had, and those who has not been exposed to SSR during the previous school year. Results of the survey show students who had participated during the academic year in a reading program that incorporated SSR read considerably more during the following summer than did those who had not been part of the SSR program. This survey indicates that SSR can affect the reading habits of students even after they have completed the program. It has also been found that SSR has the greatest positive effect on students of average reading ability.

Providing a Better Knowledge Base

In addition to gains in achievement and shift in attitude, Grubaugh points out that the kind of wide reading that students engage in during SSR should broaden their background of information, thus providing them with a better knowledge base with which to relate to their subject area textbooks and lectures. SSR readers may solve some of their own problems by reading books about kids their own age who are faced with the problems of growing up. Grubaugh stresses that student will learn that reading is more than completing worksheets or memorizing sight words. They learn that reading is laughing, crying, adventuring, exploring, or finding out how to do things. Students will discover reading as a worthwhile pastime and begin to develop an appreciation of the magic of books (170). Fielding et al. agree that reading the wide range of topics in trade books can provide insights into different kind of people, interpersonal relationships, and moral dilemmas that can be difficult to learn from real life.

Does SSR Really Work?

Thousands of students after six or more months of SSR were asked about their reaction to it (McCracken):

Students say they like SSR because it is quiet, with many indicating it is the only quite time in their entire day. All kinds of students have responded that they learned to like to read• cPoor readers responded that since no one watches them they can make mistakes without worrying. Able readers say that they are relieved because they don't have to prove that they are bright every time they read something. All respond that they like SSR because they can read what they want to read (582).

Despite a number of advocates who affirm that SSR works, there are studies which show that SSR makes no significant difference on reading comprehension or it has a negative effect. Dwyer & Reed (1989) conducted a study to investigate the attitudes towards reading of students engaging in SSR. There were 19 fourth and fifth graders in the experimental group and 21 fifth graders in the control group. The experimental group engaged in 15 minutes SSR and the control group had 20 minutes more instructional time in regular reading program. The findings reveal that the experimental group demonstrated an overall drop of nearly 2 points on the attitude scale. The experimental girls gained slightly. There have been no substantial differences in any of the control group pre and post attitude scores. The results seem consistent with findings of a survey by Herbert, (1987) who distributed an attitude survey to 636 students from 7th to 9th grades in a suburban junior high school. Students' responses were largely negative towards SSR. Students did not like it and did not feel it improved their reading skills (651).

It seems that more studies in this area are needed. However, it has to be noted that in Dwyer & Reed's study, both experimental and control groups were using the same basal reading series. Even though students were engaged in SSR, they were not reading books of their own choice, and the sample in the study was small. In Herbert's survey, not much background information is given. It is known that students spent 12 minutes a day 4 or 5 days a week in SSR and they responded anonymously to the survey. In their overview of the research on the effectiveness of SSR, Wiesendanger & Birlm conclude that while effect of SSR on word recognition and reading comprehension appears inconclusive, the relationship between SSR and positive reading attitudes seems clearly established in most studies. They add that "when analyzing the results of long term studies, it is evident that the findings are skewed in favor of SSR" (197). It would prove worthwhile to look into factors that can be attributed to the failure or success of SSR.

Key Elements of Successful SSR

Teacher as a Role Model

Campbell argues that what the teacher does during and after the reading time is crucial. Teachers have the opportunity to demonstrate their interest in and enjoyment of reading by providing a role model of silent reading (179). In order for SSR to be a success, the teacher has to read and modeling does not finish at the end of the silent reading period. Campbell suggests that teachers should comment upon, talk about books they read. Students in class will become eager to do the same. When Valeri-Gold implemented SSR, she brought in several books that she had read over the summer and the latest book she was reading. She told the students why she had selected these books and why she loved to read. She believes that it will help motivate students to select books to read, promote a love for reading and assess who she is as a reader.

A Long Term Project

In reviewing the studies on SSR, Wiesendanger & Birlen observe that four of the five studies conducted for 5 months or less reported that SSR did not improve reading comprehension or word recognition. However, the studies engaging in SSR had achieved significantly better results in reading achievement (199). This observation prompts them to query whether it is possible that the effects of SSR on reading comprehension and word recognition are more likely to be evident only after a period of at least 6 months. From her experience of implementing a successful high school SSR program, Ozburn agrees with Krashen that it will take over 4 months for an SSR program to show results (5). She points out that the time may be longer. It takes many students 4 or 5 months to become hooked on books.

Availability of Materials on a Wide Range of Topics and Readability

The limitation of basal readers leads to the support for using trade books as reading materials for students (Fielding et al. ; Redding). According to Redding, the advantage of using trade books is the wide variety of books available to teachers. The importance of wide variety is to ensure that each student will find a book that will interest him/her. Moreover, trade books use real language, not writing designed to fit a specified vocabulary list. Fielding et al. agree that basal readers and textbooks do not offer the same richness of vocabulary, sentence structure, or literary form as do trade books. Students who spend time reading trade books have more opportunity to unravel the intricacies of written language than students whose reading is restricted to textbooks (153). Ready access to these books is also important. Fielding et al. Remark that although good school and community libraries are a valuable resource, they cannot match the ready availability of books in classroom collections. A classroom library should become a springboard into wider reading. A teacher can build on the students' experience with the classroom library by actively encouraging them to seek books from school and public libraries (157). If possible, there should be a continuous influx of new books.

Ownership and Communities of Readers

"If we want our adolescent students to grow to appreciate literature, another first step is allowing them to exert ownership and choose the literature they will read" (Atwell 161). Allowing students to select their own reading materials will enhance students' motivation to read. McCracken states that no student, able or remedial, should be chided for reading an easy book. A student in Valeri-Gold's SSR class wrote in his journal that in the past, the only time he read was when it was required and he knew that he would be tested on the material. After participating in SSR in class, he feels differently about reading because he chooses his own book to read (336) . Allowing students to create their own • ecurriculum' for reading is an important factor to promote lifelong interest in reading and for students to enjoy reading. By building a community of readers within the class, students can be provided with opportunities after SSR to share their reflections aloud with their peers for discussion and feedback (Valeri-Gold 386). Readers discuss books and what they mean to them, talk about the process of reading and see themselves as readers and interpreters of writing (Redding 6). Siblings, parents and teachers may join the community of readers. The group will talk about books they have read and get recommendation for future reading. Sharing and conferencing of reading experience will help to create a classroom environment where reading is valued.

Other Factors

There are other factors that may be instrumental in determining whether or not SSR is successful. Success of SSR may depend on the support of the principal, teachers, and other staff members in the school. Wiesendanger & Birlen support the view that the attitude of

the teacher toward SSR may be very significant. Teachers' enthusiasm or lack of interest in reading is easily communicated to students. Creating a quiet, relaxing and nonevaluative classroom environment is also a key element for successful SSR.

Studies Done with ESL Students

The discussion of the effects of SSR above is based on the SSR research on native speakers of English. There are a few studies that show SSR can be useful for English as a Second Language students. In Pilgreen & Krashen's study (1993), 125 high school ESL students in grades 10 through 12 participated in SSR for 12 to 15 minutes per day and were encouraged to continue their reading at home. Results indicate that students clearly enjoyed SSR. They reported that they engaged in outside reading more and liked leisure reading better after the 16-week SSR program. Students also showed gains in the Stanford Diagnostic Reading Comprehension Test. However, there is a lack of a control group in this study. It may affect the reliability of the findings, but the results are suggestive. Another study (Petrimoulx) involved 16 foreign students from 10 countries in the International Language Institute of the University of South Florida. Students were divided into 3 groups. Two groups received no SSR, while the third group did SSR 10 minutes a day for 15 weeks. Pre and Post reading comprehension tests and vocabulary tests were administered. The target group showed reading comprehension and vocabulary gains greater than the two control groups, but the gains are too small to be considered significant from a statistical point of view. A survey in this study does reveal a high degree of acceptance of the SSR activity and an increase of at-home reading.

A study that shows significant results was conducted in India (Aranha), a school in the suburbs of Bombay that uses English as its medium of instruction. SSR was introduced twice a week in one fourth grade class. Attitudes towards reading and reading achievement of the children in the experimental class were compared to those children in a control class that used the same language program without SSR. The results of the study show a high gain in reading attitudes in the SSR group and a loss in attitude scores in the control group. Girls of the experimental SSR group showed significant improvement in achievement scores compared with girls in the control group. Aranha concludes that SSR is a suitable classroom procedure for schools in Asia and Africa since it attempts to improve students' attitudes towards reading and their achievement in reading (217).

Elley & Mangubhai emphasize the important role of high-interest story reading in second language learning. They claim that exposure of the second language is normally planned, restricted, gradual and largely artificial. The amount of exposure is also limited (54, 55). Second language learners will benefit from total immersion in the target language. To test the "Book Flood Hypothesis": exposure to large numbers of story books will have an effect on general language competence, Elley & Mangubhai conducted a study in Fiji. The findings of this study and a follow-up study a year later demonstrate that there has been great progress in English language growth in the Book Flood groups.

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