

The Lasting Impact of a Short SSR Experience on EFL Teachers in Korea

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Abstract

This follow-up study examined whether elementary school teachers in Korea who had had sustained silent reading experiences implemented self-selected reading in their English class. The results were remarkable: 70 % of the teachers had implemented SSR in their English as a foreign language class. Reasons for not implementing self-selected reading among teachers were mostly a lack of time, the pressure of exams and a lack of access to English books.

Key words: sustained silent reading, self-selected reading, English as a foreign language, elementary school teacher

Introduction

A previous study showed very positive results on reading attitudes in English among Korean elementary school teachers after they participated in a two-week self-selected reading program in which they read books they selected during Sustained Silent Reading (SSR) time, a special time set aside just for reading (Cho 2013). Before the treatment, subjects were clearly not pleasure readers in English. After the treatment, they showed enthusiasm for SSR and agreed that they would try it in their classes.

The purpose of this study was to probe whether, after six months, the teachers actually showed signs of becoming pleasure readers in English and whether they actually implemented SSR in their English class.

Method

Participants: Forty-six teachers in Korean public elementary schools attending a master's program in elementary English teaching participated in the original study. Twenty of the previous subjects participated in this follow-up study, those enrolled in the researcher's course when the new semester started.

Questionnaire: A short questionnaire written in Korean was distributed, including items asking whether the subjects currently enjoyed reading in English, whether they implemented SSR in English with elementary school pupils, and whether they also did SSR in Korean language classes. In addition, if they did not implement SSR in class, they were asked to provide the reasons.

Results

Improvement in attitude toward pleasure reading: Before the treatment began, 92% (79/86) of the subjects said they did not read books in English with pleasure. During the treatment, 95% (82/86) of the teachers said that they enjoyed reading during their SSR experience (Cho 2013). In the follow-up study, teachers were asked if they currently enjoyed reading books in English, six months after the self-selected reading experience, on a scale of 1-5: 1= not at all; 2 = no; 3 = moderately; 4 = yes; 5 = definitely. Fifteen out of the 20 teachers (75%) said “yes or definitely” and five teachers (25%) said ‘moderately’. There were no negative responses.

Additional evidence of increased enthusiasm for reading is the finding that 18 of the 20 teachers who filled out the follow-up questionnaire said they went to bookstores (real or virtual) to look for and buy English books.

Implementing SSR in their classes: After the reading experience, nearly all subjects indicated that 96% were “very interested” in implementing SSR in their classrooms (44 out of 46), while two others were “interested.”

Six months later, 14 of the 20 (70%) subjects who filled out the questionnaire indicated that they had actually done this in their English (EFL) classes, and 12 out of 20 (60%) had implemented SSR in their Korean language classes. The eight teachers who had not done SSR in Korean classes indicated that they would like to do it in the future.

Student reactions: Teachers who implemented SSR were asked how their students reacted to it. On a scale of 1-5, where 1 = dislike a lot; 2= dislike; 3 = moderately; 4 = liked; 5 = liked a lot, for English, six teachers said the students “liked it a lot,” six said their students “liked” it, and three said their students liked it “moderately.” Of the 12 who used SSR in Korean classes, six said students liked it “a lot” and six said they “liked” it. There were no negative evaluations. These results are consistent with previous research on attitudes toward SSR, reviewed in Krashen (2004).

Reasons for not implementing SSR: Teachers who did not implement SSR in English class were asked why they did not. Here are the reasons for not applying SSR to elementary English class. Some teachers gave more than one reason.

Teachers mentioned a lack of class-time and the pressure of the National English Exam, which is based on the textbook. In light of consistent findings that students who do SSR do better than traditionally educated students in a variety of examinations, including reading, vocabulary, writing, and grammar (reviewed in Krashen, 2004; 2007), this reaction indicates that the research on SSR has not been disseminated widely enough; the research shows that time is better spent in SSR than in traditional skill-building and traditional test-preparation.

Several teachers did not do SSR because their students were not advanced enough to read independently. Some students, of course, are not. SSR is not for beginners, but is designed to help low intermediates improve, those who can read some texts without help. But more students might be ready for SSR than we previously thought, thanks to the availability of graded readers, comic books and magazines.

The most tragic reason was the lack of access to reading material. For some reason, governments often cheerfully spent millions and even billions on what doesn't help (e.g. excessive testing), without investing in what does, a readily accessible supply of comprehensible and interesting reading material.

Summary and conclusions

Cho (2013) showed that a short (two-week) personal pleasure reading experience in English had a dramatic effect on teachers' own reading behavior and their interest in implementing sustained silent reading in their classes. This follow-up study demonstrated that this enthusiasm remained after six months. The obvious implication is that the best way to stimulate appreciation for reading in a second language is to get people to try it themselves, a conclusion consistent with previous results (Cho & Krashen 2001; Cho 2004).

The results would have been even more spectacular if more reading material had been easily available, and if it were more widely known that self-selected reading produces very positive results in literacy and

language development. In both cases, testing is the problem: Over-testing bleeds funding from libraries, and inappropriate testing pushes instruction in the wrong direction, away from self-selected reading and toward far less effective alternatives.

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