

READING IN ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE: WHAT A MOTHER CAN DO

DR. KYOUNG-SOOK CHO
Pusan National University of Education
Korea

DR. STEPHEN KRASHEN
23852 Pacific Coast Hwy #919
Malibu, CA 90265

A mother's efforts to encourage her children to read in English as a foreign language were not successful until she allowed the children to select their own reading. Self-selected reading resulted in clear improvements in attitudes toward English reading and obvious gains in English competence.

In a previous study (Cho and Krashen, 2001) we documented a dramatic increase in interest in recreational reading in English among Korean teachers after a single experience reading comprehensible, interesting children's books. The session lasted only two hours, but was sufficient to at least partially erase negative attitudes toward reading in English that were the result of teachers' experiences as students of English as a foreign language. After the session, teachers reported that they were interested in using recreational reading in their classes as well as reading on their own.

We report here on the efforts of one participant in the original study who encouraged her own children to do recreational reading in English over a period of one year. This former subject visited the first author of this paper and told her of her experiences. Subsequently, both the

subject and her children were asked to write down their experiences with recreational reading during the past year.

Subjects

Mina, our former subject and parent of two, is an elementary school teacher who has had twenty years of teaching experience. She is not an English teacher, but teaches all other subjects in elementary school.

Mina's son Jaemin was in the eighth grade at the time these observations began. Jaemin began formal English instruction in school in grade seven, but like many children in Korea he had private instruction in English before that time. Jaemin clearly disliked English, both in the form of private lessons and in school, and had a special dislike for memorizing vocabulary:

"I really hate memorizing English

vocabulary ... when a tutor came to my house, she always tested me on a list of vocabulary words ... English has been my most difficult subject. I do very well in math and science, well enough to participate in a math and science contest, representing my school." (translated from Korean by K.S. Cho)

Mina's daughter Jaehee was a 9th grade student. She studied English from grades 2 to 5 in a private school as a supplement to her regular schooling. She reported that her mother had been very concerned about her English education and Jaehee had to listen to tapes teaching her the English alphabet before she went to bed. Jaehee had a private tutor in English in grade 5 for about five months, but since then has only studied English in school.

The Early Stage: Mother selects the books

Mina was so enthusiastic about recreational reading after participating in the reading experience described in Cho and Krashen (2001) that she signed up for a lending library delivery service for books for her children that for a small fee loaned books to customers. She ordered English books at an intermediate level (level 5 out of 7) that she selected herself. The plan did not work: Both children were clearly uninterested in the books their mother selected. As Mina noted,

"I noticed my daughter didn't seem to enjoy reading as much as I anticipated she would. My son was also

struggling ... I could see they didn't seem to enjoy reading at all ... and I started asking them why..."

The children's commentaries revealed that the problem was book selection and the fact that the reading was "assigned." Jaemin noted that he was disappointed that the books his mother brought home were not science books and were not interesting storybooks. They were also too hard:

"I was not a bit interested in reading English books, but my mom forced me to read them. I started reading, but it was too difficult to understand even with a dictionary. So I lied to my mom saying that I finished the reading. But a terrible thing happened next...more books were delivered to my house every month! I really had a hard time with these difficult and boring books ..."

Jaehae did a little better:

"I started reading a year ago since my mom brought books after she took the university English class. At first, I didn't know what to do with the books and resisted. But after a few books, I got a little interested in reading, because mainly I love to read in Korean."

The Second Phase: Self-Selected reading

After three months, Mina realized that books she selected did not interest her children and may have been too difficult.

She decided to take the children to a book store with the intention of providing an opportunity for self-selected reading. The children got interested in reading right away. Both children selected books far easier than those Mina had selected, Jaemin at level 2 and Jaehee at level 3. She reported that both children enjoyed browsing through the books at the bookstore, and were, in fact, riveted:

"My boy was laughing out loud and my daughter was nodding to herself and smiling. They seemed to forget about going home..."

Here is Jaemin's version of what happened:

"One day my mom asked me to go to a bookstore with my sister. I tried not to go with them, making the excuse that I had an appointment with my friend. But mom begged me to go just once and we made a deal that if I went she would let me play soccer. So I went to the bookstore. The bookstore we went to had an English name, 'Story House,' and all the books were in English. I was surprised to see that there were so many English books in the store. I saw English science books and travel books. There were many, many interesting books with lively colors. The books my mom forced me to read at home were much less interesting. I asked my mom if I could choose books on my own. She agreed, and I picked books at level 2. Since then, I wanted to read books first before my sister."

Jaehee also found books that interested her:

"One day my mom and I went to a bookstore, where you can also borrow books. The books there were more interesting than the ones mom had borrowed. I asked mom if I could choose books on my own. It would be less expensive if my brother and I read the same books, but mom agreed that we could read different books at different levels. Since then, four books have been delivered every month. They were very interesting and I was eager for new books. I choose books at level 3."

Mina then adopted the policy of only ordering books that her children had selected, either from browsing in the bookstore or from looking at a catalog. She reported that her children usually finished reading each month's books well before the next books were delivered.

Some of the books also came with a workbook inserted in each book along with a test on reading comprehension and vocabulary. At first, Mina asked Jaemin to do the workbook exercises and take the tests. This was clearly not popular. Jaemin commented:

"A problem was that there was a test every month, which I didn't like at all."

Jaemin actually did a few of the tests, but reported that he hated them, and soon gave up. Mina did not ask Jaehee to do any of the tests or exercises.

Improvement in Reading Comprehension

Seven months after the children began reading books that they had selected themselves Mina took them to a bookstore again. She was surprised at the clear improvement in attitude shown by her children:

"I took my kids to another bookstore this winter. While I was talking to an owner of the store and browsing, my two kids were involved in reading in a corner, without moving. I quietly moved closer to see what kinds of books they were reading. They were books from a well-known series of children's literature, reading level 5, the kind of reading I selected for them a year ago ... It was amazing and I couldn't believe that four books a month made them improve so much in reading comprehension. They seemed to be able to read in English as easily as they read in Korean."

Jaemin noted that while he hated visiting the bookstore seven months ago, he was eager to go now-.

"Now I go to the bookstore on my own and buy whatever I want to read. Now I enjoy reading a lot. I can read a newspaper with interest and I feel good in English class, too. Now English is fun!!!!!"

Jaehee also felt she had improved and was interested in going to the bookstore:

"... my mom took me to a new book-

store. Most books looked easy for me, and I saw many interesting books in the corner ... At that moment I realized that my English had improved a lot. Now I don't need my mom anymore to visit the bookstore, but I think I will go there as often as possible."

At the time of this writing, now ten months since the children began free voluntary reading, Jaemin now reads books at level 4 and Jaehee at level 5. Neither child, however, selects books because they are at a certain level; rather, it is the content that dictates their selection. Jaemin is now a reader of English newspapers, and buys books on his own.

Speaking and Writing

Always a good student in English in school, since Jaehee started reading in English, her performance has gotten even better. She improved in English so much that she represented her school in a city-wide competition:

"I was second in a speaking contest at my school, but first on a written English exam, although there were several students who had lived in and went to school in English speaking countries. Later, I was given an opportunity to represent my school to compete with other schools in an English contest. At that time I felt really good. English books, thanks to my mom, helped me a lot in achieving these results."

Jaehee's English improvement was noticed by others:

"...other parents asked how my English had improved so much. My mom told them, 'Give your kids a self-selected reading opportunity.'"

Jaehee entered high school (grade ten) recently, with top scores in her entrance exam, scoring especially well in Korean, math and English.

Belief in Free Voluntary Reading

Mina strongly believes in free reading because of her experience in the training program and witnessed profound language growth in her children during the past year from free voluntary reading:

"I am confident in saying that free reading is a good way of motivating and building confidence in English. The reason I can say this is because of my own experience with free reading during a training program last year, I applied what I learned to my two children for the past one year and have seen very positive results."

Conclusions

The results of this study strongly suggest that providing access to interesting books and allowing children to select books themselves can have a profound impact on interest in reading and results in substantial growth in overall English language.

In the absence of rigorous testing and a detailed account of how much time was spent in reading, we cannot say for sure that these factors were responsible for the gains seen here, but the results are compelling and are consistent with a great deal of previous research. Previous studies have shown that recreational self-selected reading has a strong impact on reading comprehension, grammar, and writing in first and second languages (Krashen, 1993, 2001), and that children can get interested in reading from a single exposure to a quality book collection (Ramos and Krashen, 1998) and from a single positive experience with a book, (a "home run" book experience, Trelease, 2001; Von Sprecken, Kim, and Krashen, 2000, Kim and Krashen, 2000). Research also shows that extrinsic rewards are not necessary to encourage reading (McQuillan, 1997); rather, the crucial element is interesting and comprehensible texts.

What is clear to us is that self-selected, recreational reading deserves to be done much more widely than it currently is.

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sevelt.

7: Titles include *Rascal, A Solitary Blue, Hatchet, The Grey King, Always to Remember, Dragons Gate.*

Note

1. The book levels referred to here were created for readers in English as foreign language. Information about the levels is available at <http://www.mystoryhouse.com>. The levels are described as follows:

1: One or two sentences per page.

2: Three to four sentences per page. Sample titles include *Inch by, Inch, The Very Hungry Caterpillar, Mama, Do You Love Me?*

3: Books at this level are less repetitive. Titles include *Miss Nelson is Back, Mirette on the High Wire, Friends Go Adventuring.*

4: Titles include *When Clay Sings, Andrew's Angry, Words, Too Many Tamales, Amazing Grace, A Chair for My Mother, Martin Luther King, Jr.*

5: Titles include: *Why Mosquitoes Buzz in People's Ears, If You Grew up with George Washington, Ollie, The Day of Ahmed's Secret, Owl Moon, Thank You Brother Bear, Hansel and Gretel.*

6: Books at this level are about 100 pages long. Titles include *Helen Keller, Volcano, Titanic, Bully for You, Teddy Roo-*