

Sustained Silent Reading in Foreign Language Education: An Update

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Abstract: Three meta-analyses of the effect of sustained silent reading are reviewed, all showing a consistently positive effect for self-selected reading in school, with most studies with EFL students. In addition, an important new study from Korea is analyzed: Despite less-than-optimal conditions, EFL students made impressive gains in vocabulary and reading that were consistent with previous results.

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1. Introduction

Three reviews of the impact of in-school reading on second language development have been published in the last ten years. Briefly, in-school reading is referred to as "sustained silent reading": A few minutes is set aside from the language class and students read what they want to read: There are no book reports or other forms of accountability. (For a discussion of the elements of successful SSR, see Krashen, 2011).

Reviews have been published in the form of "meta-analyses," a very useful and precise way of presenting the results of many individual experiments.

An "effect size" is calculated for each study, in this case, for each comparison between test scores achieved by students doing in-school free reading and traditional instruction. A positive effect size means the reading group did better. Effect sizes of around .2 mean that the advantage of the reading group was small, .5 medium, and .8 or greater is considered a large effect size.

Table 1 presents the results of the three recent meta-analyses of studies involving second and foreign language acquisition. Nearly all are studies of English as a foreign language. In each study, time is set aside in the "experimental" group in which students can select their own reading material, and accountability is either minimal or there is no test or report of any kind. The comparison group experiences traditional pedagogy.

The average effect size for reading comprehension ranges from .54 to .87, and for vocabulary from .18 to .47, both confirming that SSR is effective. Several individual studies are included in more than one meta-analysis, but the overlap is not extensive.

Table 1. Effect Sizes for Three Recent SSR Meta-Analyses

	Vocabulary	Reading Comprehension
Krashen (2007)		.87 (15)
Nakanishi (2015)	.18 (9)	.68 (15)
Jeon and Day (2016)	.47 (17)	.54 (46)

Number of studies analyzed in parentheses ().

As was the case with first language studies (Krashen, 2004), the effect was greater when the program lasted a year or longer (Nakanishi, 2015). Jeon and Day (2016) did not find a difference in effectiveness between longer and shorter programs, but only included four long-term (over one academic year) programs.

2. An Important New Study

Suk (2016) will attract a great deal of attention. It appeared in *The Reading Research Quarterly*, considered the most prestigious journal in the field, and the published article is long and detailed.

Suk (2016) examined the impact of free voluntary reading on 83 Korean undergraduates studying EFL who were at the advanced beginner/low intermediate level. Readers read graded readers for 15 minutes once a week in class, and were expected to read outside of class, with a word count goal of 200,000 words to read in 15 weeks. In contrast to the usual procedure in sustained silent reading (Pilgreen, 2000), students took a test on each book they read.

Suk made 350 books available to the readers with 155 different titles. She did not provide details about the books (names or publishers), but we can estimate the difficulty level. She constructed the vocabulary test by sampling words from the 155 different titles using words from the 2000, 3000, and 4000 word levels. This means that the students were reading graded readers from the intermediate to the upper level (1600 to 2500 word levels).

3. The Results

None of the students reached the reading goal of 200,000 words. The mean was about 150,000 words (about 600 pages) read, with a large standard deviation (about 80,000, about 320 pages). The maximum read was about 190,000 (about 760 pages), the minimum was about 8500 (34 pages). The average number of books read was 10, less than one per week. This means that the average book contained about 15,000 words. Assuming each page has 250 words, the average book length was about 60 to 70 pages.

Suk (2016) stated that students read between two and three hours per week outside of school. If so, their reading rate was quite slow. We estimated that they read a total of about 40 hours (assuming 2.5 hours per week) on the average, or 2,400 minutes (3.75 hours in class, 37.5 hours at home). This means they read only a little more than 60 words per minute, which is very slow (compare to Mason & Krashen, 2017, McQuillan & Krashen, 2008).

One possible explanation for the slow reading rate may have been because participants were tested on each book they read, likely trying to remember what they were reading while they were reading. (To confirm this, one would have to compare reading rate without the post-test with reading rates with the post-test.) Another possible cause for the slow rate is the difficulty of the books. Based on our calculations, the graded readers appear to have been selected from the intermediate to upper level, but Suk’s subjects were considered to be advanced beginner and low intermediate level.

The readers did better than comparison students, who did a traditional EFL course focusing on intensive reading (1). We calculated effect sizes based on a formula that takes pre-test scores into consideration (Effect size = the difference between the experimental and comparison gains divided by the pooled pre-test standard deviation; Morris, 2008). Table 2 shows that our calculations give results similar to the effect sizes reported by Suk, using a different procedure (MANOVA).

Table 2. Two Different Effect Size Formula for Suk (2016)

	Morris (2008) ¹	MANOVA ²
Reading Comprehension	0.43	0.30
Reading Rate	0.66	0.39
Vocabulary	0.52	0.70

¹Effect Size formula calculated by Krashen and Mason (2017).

²Effect Size formula calculated by Suk (2016).

Comparing Table 1 and Table 2, the effect size calculations resemble previous studies results. The reading test, however, suffered from low reliability ($r = .65$). In contrast, the vocabulary test was shown to be quite reliable ($r = .96$). Another problem is that students were asked to record their finishing time after reading each passage and after answering comprehension questions for a total of four passages. This is an expected procedure when measuring reading rate, but may affect comprehension and thus literacy development.

4. Discussion

The research on SSR in EFL is remarkably consistent. SSR is clearly more effective than traditional instruction in improving reading ability and vocabulary.

The conditions in Suk's study were not optimal. Readers were tested after reading each book, and were pushed for time on the reading test. Both of these conditions may have interfered with comprehension. Nevertheless, Suk's results were quite similar to what has been found in previous reviews, confirming that the impact of self-selected reading is robust.

This does not imply that testing readers after each book is acceptable. None of the studies in Table 1 used these kinds of tests. Controlled studies would be necessary to show that there is no detrimental effect on comprehension when students are tested on each book they read, and, of course, we would be interested in seeing if enjoyment of reading is affected. Our concern is whether students will continue to read after the course is over. Similarly, it should be determined whether timed post-tests have an effect on comprehension.

What is remarkable about Suk's study is that SSR worked even though conditions were far from optimal. Her subjects were tested after reading each book, were pushed for time on the reading test, and read only a modest amount, less than one graded reader per week.

Note:

- (1) The intensive reading students read assigned essays from a course book, reviewed vocabulary and challenging grammatical structures from the readings, and practiced strategies for learning vocabulary, as well as pre-reading, making predictions, and inferencing.

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