

The Impact of Sustained Silent Reading and a Visit to the Library on Establishing a Reading Habit: Helpful but not Sufficient

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Abstract

Undergraduate university students in Korea who did not have a reading habit in English showed a clear enthusiasm for reading in English after participating in a single sustained silent reading session and a trip to an English library. However, such positive experiences can result in an English reading habit only if students have a time and place to read, and easy access to interesting reading material.

We are always disappointed when we find out how little our ESL and EFL students read in English. In this paper, we will present some evidence that the solution to this problem may be closer than we think, that we simply need to help our students overcome some obvious barriers.

The students in this study are undergraduates in the field of Education at a university in Korea; they are enrolled in a class in English education designed to help them teach English in school. All of them have had EFL instruction and may be considered to be at a low intermediate level as they have enough competence to read authentic English books. (Authentic English books in this case refers to books that have been written for native speakers of English.)

In this paper, we will describe two experiences: In the first instance, students participated in a two-hour sustained silent reading (SSR) session in which a wide variety of English reading material was made available to them. The students were not required to report on what they had read. In the second instance, approximately three weeks later, the same class was taken to an English library in Busan, where they were encouraged to browse through books for about 90 minutes. This was inspired by Ramos and Krashen (1998), who studied the impact of a single library visit on elementary school children who had little access to books.

Before each session, the students were asked about their English reading habits. The results presented in Table 1 clearly show that these students do not have a habit of reading in English. They are however, moderate readers (in Korean) (Table 2). All questionnaires were administered and answered in Korean.

Table 1

Reading Habits in English: Responses to “I usually read English books (novels, etc.) for pleasure.”

	Responses	SSR	Library Visit
1	Not at all	10	6
2	No	19	22
3	Moderately	2	4
4	Yes	0	0
5	Very Much	0	0
6	Mean	1.7	1.94

SSR = sustained silent reading

Sample size: SSR = 31, library visit = 32.

Table 2

Reading Habits in Korean (Library questionnaire): Responses to “I usually read Korean (novels, etc.) for pleasure.”

	Responses	Library Visit
1	Not at all	2
2	No	5
3	Moderately	15
4	Yes	9
5	Very Much	1
6	Mean	3.07

Sustained Silent Reading (SSR)

Thirty-one students participated in a single sustained silent reading session, which lasted for approximately two hours, with a ten-minute break in between. This was the first SSR experience for these students. Approximately 150 English books were made available to them. All the books were “authentic,” that is, written for native speakers of English. They were mostly children’s story books and included books from the Clifford series, Stone Soup series and The Magic School Bus series.

Table 3

Reactions to the Sustained Silent Reading Session

	Responses	Enjoy SSR	Book Interest	Motivated
1	Not at all	0	0	0
2	No	0	1	1
3	Moderately	4	11	8
4	Yes	18	16	18
5	Very Much	9	3	4
6	Mean	4.2	3.7	3.8

Enjoy SSR: Did you enjoy this SSR experience?

Book interest: Did you find most of the books interesting?

Motivated: Were you motivated after SSR to read books in English?

A close look at table 3 shows that the reactions to the SSR experience were quite positive. Despite the modest amount of time allotted for reading and the limited number of books, students found the books interesting and were motivated to read.

Library Visit

According to their website (http://www.bel.go.kr/site_eng/lib_intro/?tgt=data), the Busan English library is a public library that has a collection of about 40,000 Englishbooks, including 1000 comic books and about 1000 audio CD's. More than half of their collection consists of fiction. The library is open on weekdays from 9 am to 9 pm, on Saturdays from 9 am to 6 pm and on Sundays from 9 am to 5 pm.

The students were allowed one and a half hours for the visit, with 30 minutes for briefing and the rest for browsing. Not one of them had been to the Busan English Library before. Thirty-two students participated in the library visit.

Table 4

Reactions to the Library Visit

	Responses	Library Card	Books Today	Revisit	Motivated
1	Not at all	0	0	0	0
2	No	0	2	0	0
3	Moderately	2	10	3	1
4	Yes	24	15	22	23
5	Very much	6	5	7	8
	Mean	4.1	3.67	4.1	4.23

Library card: Would you like to apply for a library card?

Books today: Would you like to check out some books today?

Revisit: Would you like to visit the English library again?

Motivated: Did visiting the English library motivate you to read books in English?

Responses to the questionnaire clearly showed that the students were interested in visiting the library again, and wanted to apply for library cards as well. As was the case with the SSR experience, the library visit was instrumental in motivating the children to read in English. The results of the questionnaire were consistent with the observations: The students were obviously interested in the books, especially comic books and graphic novels.

Discussion

In the questionnaire pertaining to the library visit, students were asked why they did not read as much in English. The students came back with more than one reason. About 21 percent (7 responses out of 32) of the students said they had had no experience of reading in English. Almost 63 percent agreed that this was because of a lack of access to interesting books and 53 per cent said that they found reading in English difficult.

Both the SSR experience and exposure to a library with authentic English books seemed to partially solve the problem of a lack of access to interesting books in English as well as the problem of a lack of experience reading in English. Both experiences, according to the questionnaire results, motivated students to read in English (library = 4.32 out of 5; SSR = 3.81 out of 5). The library was a potential source of books, and SSR gave them the experience of reading interesting and comprehensible books.

These optimistic results however may be not enough to ensure the creation of a long-term reading habit. After a review of the case histories of long-term readers in English as a second language, Cho and Krashen (2016) concluded that the following conditions were necessary for establishing a second language reading habit in children:

1. An initial pleasant reading experience
2. Access to interesting reading material
3. A dedicated time and place to read regularly
4. The freedom to select their own reading
5. No tests, no workbook exercises and no rewards with regard to reading

In the case of the students in our study, conditions (1), (4) and (5) were probably met; for most of the students the library and SSR may have provided a pleasant reading experience. It is not clear however whether the second and third conditions were fulfilled.

Finally, we would like to add that the Busan English Library is far away from where many of the students live. Further, undergraduate students have a lot of responsibilities, and it is often difficult to find a quiet place to read regularly in English.

We have, however, taken the first step, and have evidence that one or two positive experiences with regard to good reading material can improve the motivation to read.

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