

Aesthetic Reading: Efficient Enough

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Ponniah and Priya (2008) compared the literacy competence in English as a second language of 50 engineering students in India who preferred “aesthetic” (fiction) reading with those who said they preferred “efferent” (non-fiction) reading. All had studied ESL for 12 years and all had same amount of instruction in English.

Subjects were asked about the kinds of reading they did. Based on their responses, 37 subjects were classified as primarily aesthetic readers (fiction) and 13 as primarily efferent readers (newspapers, technical, academic).

Aesthetic readers outperformed efferent readers on all tests of English literacy (table 1), a result similar to that reported in Sullivan and Brown (2014) for vocabulary development in English as a first language.

Table 1

	Aesthetic	Efferent	t	p	effect size
R.C.	6.93 (1.57)	6.38 (1.12)	1.15	0.25	0.4
Cloze	6.84 (1.34)	5.84 (1.84)	2.03	0.047	0.62
Grammar	7.71 (2.41)	5.38 (1.43)	3.26	0.002	1.18
Writing	3.55 (.94)	2.26 (.99)	4.17	0	1.34

Grammar = rewrite a passage correcting errors

Writing: Write a passage incorporating a given sentence.

RC: Reading Comprehension

Maximum score: RC, Cloze, Writing = 10, grammar = 20

As seen in the table, aesthetic readers scored higher on all measures, but the difference was not statistically significant on the reading test. It needs to be pointed out, however, that Ponniah and Priya used a two-tail test. A one-tail test is more appropriate here, as the direction of the effect can be predicted based on previous research. For a one-tailed test, $p = .125$, still falling short of significance, but close to an acceptable p -level for statistical significance. Also, the effect size for reading comprehensible is substantial.

As Ponniah and Priya point out, it is likely that the aesthetic readers read more, which could account for their advantage, as a number of studies have reported that those who do more reading have higher achievement in both first and second language (Krashen, 2004). Nevertheless, the results are consistent with studies showing that “aesthetic” texts contain a great deal of academic language (Rolls and Rodgers, 2017; McQuillan, 2014; Greene, in press).

It has not been established that aesthetic reading is more efficient (e.g. more academic words acquired per page read) than efferent reading, but Ponniah and Priya’s results in English as a foreign language, as well as those of Sullivan and Brown’s in first language development suggest that even if aesthetic reading is less efficient than efferent reading in acquiring academic language, it is efficient enough. What is clear is that aesthetic reading counts.

References

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