Free Voluntary reading: New Research, Applications, and Controversies

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Recreational reading or reading for pleasure is the major source of our reading competence, our vocabulary, and our ability to handle complex grammatical constructions The evidence for FVR comes from correlational studies, showing that those who read more show superior literacy development, case histories of those whose growth in literacy and language is clearly attributable to free reading, and studies of in-school recreational reading, such as sustained silent reading (SSR).

In in-school studies, students who engage in free reading for a certain time each day are compared to similar students who have only "regular instruction." Reading has done well in these studies; in my survey (1), readers were at least as good as those in traditional instruction in 51 out of 53 comparisons, and when the study was long-term (longer than one school year), readers were nearly always better and were never worse. The finding that in-school reading works best in long term studies makes sense; it takes some time for children to find reading material of interest.

The efficacy of in-school free reading has been established with a variety of groups including native speakers of English, second language acquirers in several different countries, and students of different ages.

The success of in-school free reading is also consistent with the more general Comprehension Hypothesis, the hypothesis that we acquire language when we understand messages (2). Recreational reading is, of course, comprehensible input.

Issues and Controversies

1. Do they really read during in-school reading time?

It has been claimed that many children do not actually read during sustained silent reading sessions, but only pretend to read. Von Sprecken and Krashen (3) examined the behavior of middle-school children in SSR classes in the middle of the academic year, and reported that 90% of the children they observed were reading, a result confirmed by Cohen (4), who made a special effort to make observations

unobtrusive.

Von Sprecken and Krashen also concluded that children were more likely to be reading during SSR when certain conditions were met: When there was access to interesting reading in the classroom and students are not required to bring their own reading material, when teachers read while students are reading, and when teachers made efforts to promote and discuss certain books. Even in a class in which none of these conditions were met, however, Von Sprecken and Krashen found that 80% of the students were reading when observed.

2. Will they stay with easy reading?

There is a concern that students will always choose books that are too easy and will never move on to more challenging reading material.

Easy books, however, can provide the taste and background knowledge that will lead to and facilitate reading other books. This appears to happen. Readers don't stick to light and easy reading – their reading tastes gradually develop and broaden (5). Finally, it has been argued that reading has to feel effortless for it to result in language development; studies indicate that a text needs to be about 98% comprehensible in order for it to help the reader acquire new vocabulary (6).

3. Is reading enough?

The concern here is that recreational reading is not enough to guarantee full competence and the acquisition of "academic" language. One must agree. Recreational reading, rather, is the bridge, the missing link that makes harder reading and more demanding input more comprehensible.

Should FVR be "supplemented"? Many think so, and the usual recipe is additional grammar study and writing. There are good reasons to doubt that this is effective. The study of grammar makes at best a small and peripheral contribution to competence; There are severe limits to how much grammar can be consciously learned and there are severe limits on its application (7). There is also no evidence that requiring students to write more has a positive effect on writing ability (8). Writing, however, makes a very different kind of contribution; it helps us solve problems and contributes to cognitive development (9).

Mason (10) confirmed this, finding no difference in gains when in-school free reading was supplemented with writing summaries in the L1 (Japanese), writing summaries in English, and writing summaries in English followed by correction and rewriting. In fact, the group that wrote summaries in Japanese acquired just as much English in a shorter total time devoted to English.

The kind of supplementation that will help, it is predicted, encourages more reading and makes reading more comprehensible. This includes the study of literature, i.e. exposing students to the options available to them and providing some background knowledge about books. Literature includes read- alouds, a powerful means of motivating reading and providing growth in literate language (11).

4. How will they do on tests?

In an age of testing hysteria, it is a strong temptation to drop reading and devote more time to test preparation, which in many people's minds is skill- building activities, direct instruction in grammar, vocabulary, etc. The research cited earlier, however, shows that those in in-school reading programs do better on tests than those who follow the regular curriculum of direct instruction. They do better on tests of reading, writing, listening, vocabulary, and even grammar. I think readers do well on tests because they have no choice, because they have acquired, not learned, grammar, vocabulary, and the conventions of writing.

5. How robust is FVR?

We know enough to state the optimal conditions for a good reading program: They seem obvious but are rarely present: (1) A great deal of interesting, comprehensible reading material; (2) A time (and comfortable place) to read. (3) Minimum accountability (e.g. no required summaries or book reports). Also, to show effects, a program should also last for more than a few months.

Is it a waste of time to do free reading when conditions are not optimal? Lee (12) reported on a program in which few of these conditions were met. The students were not particularly motivated – they were second semester university students in Taiwan taking a required English class. The first semester had been a disaster, with students reporting that the teacher devoted most of the class- time to movies.

Reading was done for only 14 weeks, and students read graded readers, which only 18.5% of the students found interesting. Students were also required to write summaries of what they read. On the positive side, the class included some explanation of the theory underlying free voluntary reading, along with research findings.

But the results were encouraging. The readers outperformed a traditional comparison group on a cloze test and did somewhat better on a vocabulary test. A second comparison group had intensive vocabulary instruction and students were encouraged to do recreational reading. There was no difference between this group and the readers on the cloze test, but the vocabulary study group did better on a vocabulary test, especially on words at the 3000/5000 level, words not present in many of the graded readers those in the reading group read.

This result shows that free reading is "robust." Also, despite the lack of enthusiasm for the graded readers, 2/3 the students said they would continue to read in order to improve their English, and only 2% (one) said they would not (the others were undecided). How many would look forward to more vocabulary instruction?

Lee's results suggest that we can still expect benefits when conditions are not optimal. But there are limits. If conditions are truly dismal, if reading material is dull and hard to understand, if reading is done in uncomfortable surroundings, and/or if students are forced to report on everything they read, a reading program may only succeed in discouraging reading. Because optimal conditions are not always possible, it is important to determine not only optimal but also acceptable conditions.

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