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Two critical tips to motivate EFL learners to read extensively

Atsuko Takase^a & Hitoshi Nishizawa^b

Kinki University^a

Toyota National College of Technology^b

atsukot@jttk.zaq.ne.jp

nisizawa@toyota-ct.ac.jp

The purpose of this study is to investigate the effectiveness of Starting with Simple Stories (SSS) and Sustained Silent Reading (SSR) on motivating EFL learners to read extensively. Over the past decade, extensive reading (ER) has rapidly been spreading among people of all ages in Japan. One of the causes of this favourable trend is the spread of the new style of ER, called SSS, which was advocated by Sakai in the late 1990s (Sakai 2002). Furthermore, it has been promoted by the SSS study group and the Japan Extensive Reading Association (JERA) members. Using the SSS method, learners are encouraged to read many easy books, which are considered ‘1, 2 or 3’ level, at the beginning of ER. By finishing many books, however easy they are, learners feel a sense of accomplishment, which leads to self-confidence. This encourages learners to read more and creates a virtuous circle. At the same time, reading easy books enables them to recognize words automatically. This facilitates the learners’ smooth shift to higher levels of books.

According to Krashen (1993), reading proficiency can be improved by free voluntary reading (FVR), which refers to any in-school program where students are provided a short time for reading that requires no book report to be written or after-reading tasks. SSR is one type of FVR. The effectiveness of SSR has been shown by many teachers and practitioners to assist in developing students’ reading proficiency in their L1 (e.g., Henry 1995, Pilgreen 2000). Krashen claims that FVR or SSR is also effective for second and foreign language learners in bridging the gap between the beginning and advanced level by consolidating the learner’s foundation in the language allowing him/her to acquire higher levels of proficiency. The most crucial benefit of SSR is that it gives busy learners time to read, and by reading among peers they can greatly improve their power of concentration. Also, in the foreign language classrooms, in particular, teachers can monitor learners’ reading performance and give them appropriate advice on the spot.

This study was carried out in two institutions:

1) A total of 37 students from Toyota National College of Technology participated in ER performing 45-minute SSR per week for four years. Before the ER course was implemented in 2003, the average TOEIC score of the students of this college had been lower than 350, which was much lower than that of the average score of university students across Japan. The participants of the current study, however, were greatly motivated to read by the new style of ER method, SSS and SSR, and continued reading for four consecutive years. They read several hundred easy-to-read books in the first year and covered a total of 690 thousand words in median throughout the four year course. They said that reading English texts without concurrent translation was unexpected but a fascinating experience. Every year their TOEIC score was raised by approximately 40 points, and during the fourth year of the ER course, they raised their average TOEIC scores to 517 and surpassed the university students whose average was 500. The participants were then divided into three groups according to their reading amount and their TOEIC scores were compared with their former counterparts who had had no ER. Even the group who read least, approximately 310 thousand words on the average, scored 435. This score was significantly higher than the former non-ER group, who were not able to maintain a score over 350.

2) A total of 72 participants from four groups in Kinki University participated in ER for one academic year. Groups 1A and 1B performed the 30-minute SSR per week. Reading easy books at the beginning of the ER course, they read 155 books (145,000 words) on the average under the guidance of the teacher. Conversely, 48 participants from groups 2A and B2 had no SSR and were required to read outside of class. Lack of SSR means not only no reading time in class, but also no monitor or guidance by the teacher on the spot. Participants from 2A chose difficult books from the beginning and read only 22 books (55,000 words) throughout the year on average. In contrast, group 2B read easy books at the beginning and covered 56 books (57,000 words) throughout the year.

As a result, groups 1A and 1B, who had SSR and SSS, showed statistically significant gains at $p < .001$ on the Edinburgh Project on Extensive Reading post test. Group 2B, who performed no SSR but followed SSS style, gained significantly at the $p < .05$ level on the same test. In contrast, 2A, who mainly read a small number of difficult books, showed insignificant gains (Tables 1 & 2).

		Pre-EPER		Post EPER	
	<i>N</i>	<i>M (Min-Max)</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M (Min-Max)</i>	<i>SD</i>
1A	36	16.3 (7-27)	4.10	20.4 (11-35)	5.15
1B	36	25.4 (13-51)	7.22	30.0 (17-47)	6.88
2A	24	22.5 (14-32)	5.06	24.7 (10-43)	7.16
2B	24	24.8 (11-37)	5.84	27.1 (14-43)	7.37

Table 1. Pre- and the Post EPER Test Scores

G	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>SEM</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>Sig</i>
1A	36	4.08	4.40	0.73	5.57	35	.000**
1B	36	4.56	5.07	0.85	5.39	35	.000**
2A	24	2.21	5.82	1.19	1.86	23	.076
2B	24	2.29	4.43	0.09	2.54	23	.018*

Table 2. Paired sample t-tests for the pre- and the post EPER tests

Note: ** $p < 0.001$, * $p < 0.05$

In conclusion, the above two studies illustrate that for a successful ER program at an EFL context, it is necessary to provide learners with time to read in class (SSR) under the guidance of a teacher and to encourage learners to read easy books at the beginning of ER (SSS).

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