

Free Voluntary Reading: It Works for First Language, Second Language and Foreign Language Acquisition ¹

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This claim could not have been made ten years ago, but it can be made now: Free voluntary reading, reading because you want to, is one of the most effective tools we have in second language and foreign language education. It is also the easiest and most pleasant to use.

The research: A brief look

We have known for a long time that free voluntary reading works for first language development: Children who participate in sustained silent reading programs (SSR), free reading in school, outperform those who devote similar amounts of time to traditional language arts instruction in a variety of measures of literacy development. This research goes back to 1939 and includes over fifty published studies (Krashen 1993).

In recent years, impressive evidence has appeared that supports the idea that free voluntary reading (henceforth FVR) is of great benefit to second language acquirers as well. As in first language development, those who report more FVR in their second language show greater literary development and this result holds for English as a foreign language as well as English as a second language. Here are a few examples from this literature:

Gradman and Hanania (1991) reported that the best predictor of performance on the TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) for students planning to study in North American English-speaking universities was the amount of “extracurricular reading” students said they had done.

- Constantino, Lee, Cho and Krashen (in press) reported similar findings for English as a second language; reporting that the

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amount of free reading international students living in the U. S. said they did before taking the TOEFL was an excellent predictor of their score on this examination.

- Constantino (1995), in a case study of four international students in the U. S., also reported that increased pleasure reading had a very positive effect on TOEFL performance among her three subjects who did extensive reading; her subject who did only formal study did not do well on the exam.
- Lee, Krashen and Gribbons (in press) reported that for international students in the United States, the amount of free reading done was a significant predictor of the ability to translate and judge the grammaticality of complex grammatical constructions in English (restrictive relative clauses). The amount of formal study and length of residence in the U. S. were not significant predictors.

In school FVR has also been shown to be successful with second language acquirers. I present here only samples from this literature. See Elley (1991) for a more complete survey.

- In the Fiji Island study, Elley and Mangubhai (1983) reported that children who engaged in sustained silent reading easily outperformed those in traditional EFL classes on tests of English reading, writing, listening comprehension, and grammar. These results were replicated in Elley's Singapore study (Elley 1991).
- Mason (Mason and Krashen, in press) developed a version of sustained silent reading for university EFL students in Japan, termed "extensive reading," in which students do self-selected reading of pedagogical readers as well as easy authentic reading. In contrast with sustained silent reading, a minimal amount of accountability is required, e. g., a short summary of what was read. In three separate studies, Mason found that extensive readers make greater gains than comparison students who did the traditional form-based EFL classes.
- Pilgreen and Krashen (1993) reported that high school ESL students who participated in sustained silent reading gained nearly one month on a standardized English reading test for each week they participated in the program.

The most impressive evidence for the value of reading in a foreign language environment is the case of Lomb Kato, perhaps the world's champion polyglot, a professional interpreter who has acquired 17 languages. While Dr. Lomb typically spends some time on grammar study and gets as much aural input as possible, her primary source of input is reading. Dr. Lomb has lived in Budapest her entire life, and has not always been able to get aural input. She strongly recommends reading as a means of improving language ability, noting that acquirers' tastes vary and people have to read what they are genuinely interested in. She notes that books have clear practical advantages as well:

A book can be put in our pocket, it can be thrown away, we can write in it, we can tear it, lose it and buy it again...we can read during breakfast, after we wake up, and we don't have to phone it when we don't have time to read (unlike a private teacher)...we may be bored with it, but it is never bored with us" (Lomb Kato, *Igy Yanulo Nyulveket*, section translated by Natalie Kiss, from Krashen and Kiss, 1996.)

Using FVR in FL education: SSR

The most obvious use of FVR in foreign language education is at the intermediate level. Simply adding SSR to intermediate level EFL will certainly pay off. Research suggests that the following factors are relevant:

Access: Students read more when there is lots of interesting reading material easily available (Krashen 1993). One reason Pilgreen and Krashen's study (1993) may have succeeded was that a large supply of interesting reading material was available in class; students did not have to bring their own books each time.

Interesting reading includes comics, magazines, and newspapers. There is good evidence from the first language research literature that this kind of "light reading" is a conduit to heavier reading. Those who have done lots of light reading find "serious" reading to be much more comprehensible and enjoyable (for comics, see Krashen 1993; Ujiie and Krashen 1996; for the impact of magazine reading, see Rucker 1982; for a study confirming the strong effect of newspaper reading in English in Ghana, see Smart 1978).

Comfort: Students read more if they have a quiet, comfortable place to read (Krashen 1993). This is not a luxury, but is, rather, an important factor for language development. Noting that eating and reading go well together,

Trelease and Krashen 1996) have suggested that refreshments be provided in the school library in order to encourage free reading.

Other factors: Students read more when they see others read (Krashen 1993), and when teachers read interesting books aloud to them (Trelease 1995). There is, on the other hand, evidence that rewards are not necessary to encourage reading (Krashen and McQuillan 1996); the best incentive appears to be supply of good reading material and a comfortable, quiet place to read. Greaney and Clark (1973) is a spectacular demonstration of this: Boys who participated in a successful SSR program that lasted only eight months while they were in the sixth grade were found to be doing more free voluntary reading than comparisons six years later.

The effect of sustained silent reading will not be obvious immediately. It may be weeks until students find reading material they like, and months until they read enough so that progress is obvious. According to the research, in fact, long term SSR programs (eight months or longer) show much more consistent results than short-term programs do (Krashen 1993).

Sheltered popular reading

A very useful adjunct to sustained silent reading is a class on popular literature. Even foreign language students who are well-read in their first language may not be aware of the options for pleasure reading in the second language. Sheltered popular literature exposes students to the different kinds of light but authentic reading available, moving from comics and magazines to novels. Such a course is taught as *literature*, that is, with discussion of the values expressed in the reading as well as the insights they provide on the culture (for suggestions, see Dupuy, Tse and Cook 1996). Our hope is that such a course will help students discover one or more kinds of light reading they would like to do on their own.

If students become enthusiastic readers of any type of reading, they will progress enormously; better readers are typically “series” readers (Lamme (1974); see also Cho and Krashen (1994), readers of *Nancy Drew*, *The Black Stallion*, *John R. Runis*, *Sweet Valley High*, *Goosebumps* and *Fear Street*, etc.). Reading narrowly builds language and literacy competence rapidly, thanks to the familiar context and resulting high level of comprehensibility. In addition, acquisition of any written style would facilitate comprehension of any other; while there are differences among different types of prose, there is also substantial overlap; someone who can read

light fiction easily has acquired much of what is needed to read academic prose (see discussion of Biber 1988; Biber and Finegan 1989, in Krashen 1995).

FVR at beginning stages

The beginning foreign language student will find authentic texts too difficult. There are two solutions to this problem. One is simply to find the best pedagogic readers and make them available for free voluntary reading. A second is a recent innovation called “Hand-Crafted Books” (Dupuy and McQuillan, in press). Hand-Crafted Books are written by intermediate and advanced second and foreign language students, corrected by the teacher, and are to be read by beginners. Writers are instructed not to look up words while writing; if intermediate students don’t know a word, the chances are good that beginners won’t know it either. Hand-Crafted Books thus have a good chance of being interesting and comprehensible; they are written by peers who are slightly more advanced than the readers. Beatrice Dupuy, the inventor of Hand-Crafted Books, is a professor of French; she reports that she now has a collection of 400 student-written (and often student-illustrated) Hand-Crafted Books written by her French 3 students for her French 1 students.

FVR is pleasant

Given the chance to read, both second language and foreign language students prefer reading to traditional instruction. McQuillan’s sample (McQuillan 1994) consisted of students who had just completed a semester of university level intermediate Spanish or ESL, both of which focused on popular literature. 80% of the sample said they preferred reading to grammar instruction, Dupuy (forthcoming) reported similar enthusiasm for free reading. Her fourth semester university French course focused on self-selected reading with no accountability or grammar instruction. 86% of her students had never read for pleasure in French before taking the course, but 82% said they were likely to do so after the course, and 94% felt more confident in reading French and more knowledgeable about the different types of literature that were available. Such reports are consistent with observations made by readers in their first language (Krashen 1995).

Free reading thus appears to have only advantages and no disadvantages. It leads to improvement in all aspects of literacy and may even contribute to oral/aural proficiency (Cho and Krashen 1994). Studies show,

in fact, that it is more effective than traditional instruction, and it appears to be much more pleasant.

The implications are obvious: Students need time to read and a place to read, with access to lots of interesting reading material. Incentives and “accountability” do not appear to be necessary; they might, in fact, get in the way of reading for pleasure.

Another advantage of FVR is that it is not expensive. For the price of a few computers, any school can have a reasonable light reading library and can even serve refreshments, free of charge.

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