

# Are Read-Alouds and Free Reading “Natural Partners”?

## AN EXPERIMENTAL STUDY

Kyung Sook Cho  
kscho@bnue.ac.kr

Dong Seop Choi  
peda11@hanmail.net

Editor: Stephen Krashen  
skrashen@yahoo.com

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The positive effects of read-alouds and storytelling on literacy development and second-language acquisition have been confirmed many times in the research literature (Vivas 1996, Elley 1989, Mason and Krashen 2004, Mason 2007).

In addition, there is consistent evidence that in-school free voluntary reading (sustained silent reading) is effective for both first- and second-language acquisition (Krashen 2004, 2007).

Trelease (2006) has suggested that read-alouds and sustained silent reading are “natural partners” and Wang and Lee (2007) provide

evidence that storytelling is the “bridge” to free reading. Hearing stories stimulates interest in particular books, which in turn encourages a reading habit.

In this study, we investigate the effect of a combination read-aloud/self-selected reading experience on sixth graders in Korea studying English as a foreign language on measures of both language/literacy development and interest in reading. The latter may be the most important measure as it is an indication of whether the students will continue to read on their own and thereby continue to improve in English after the program ends.

### Procedure Subjects

Subjects were sixth-grade students studying English as a foreign language in Korea. All had studied English for three years, beginning in grade 3. Two groups were formed with twenty-eight students each, selected from a larger group on the basis of a pretest, described below.

For the experimental group, ten to fifteen minutes out of each regular class hour was devoted to hearing stories read aloud by the teacher. Stories read included *Everything Grows* (Bruce McMillan), *Bear about Town* (Stella Blackstone), *Five Little Monkeys Jumping on the Bed* (Eileen Christelow),

*Suddenly* (Colin McNaughton), and *All by Myself* (Richard Brown). During the rest of the time, the class followed the regular English curriculum.

Experimental students were provided with time for self-selected reading during an “extracurricular” class, once a week, for forty minutes. (In the extracurricular class, teachers teach whatever subject they feel is helpful to the students.) During the reading time, students were allowed to read alone or engage in shared reading with friends.

Some reading related activities were done during regular class time and some during the extracurricular session, including story mapping and bookmaking. Contests were held based on the free reading done by students in which students created questions about the stories they read for other students to answer.

The comparison group followed the regular English curriculum taught by the same teacher who taught the experimental group, and read-alouds were not included. During the extracurricular class, the comparisons were taught other subject matter, not English.

The duration of the study was twenty-one weeks.

### **The English Library**

For the purposes of this study, an English library was set up with a small amount of money provided by the school (no English library was available before the study began). The library contained about three hundred books and one hundred audiobooks. Both the experimental group and the control group were notified that the English library was available and it was accessible to both groups.

### **Measures**

Student progress was measured in three ways: gains on tests of English, attitudinal changes, and use of the classroom library.

The language test consisted of items testing listening (ten items), reading (five items), and writing (five items). Items were based on vocabulary covered on the Primary English Level Test developed by the Busan board of education. Reliability of the entire test (Cronbach Alpha) was .93. Alternate forms were used for pre- and post-testing.

The attitude questionnaire contained seven items related to interest in English, and five items related to confidence in using English (see table 4). The reliability for this questionnaire was .93 (Cronbach Alpha). Students also took an anxiety questionnaire (see appendix), with seven items (alpha = .94). On both questionnaires students were asked if they agreed or disagreed with each item, responding on a five point scale (1 = a great deal, 5 = not at all). The same questionnaires were used before and after the treatment.

Experimental group students were also asked to fill out a short questionnaire at the end of the study. Questions asked are provided below in the results section.

All questionnaires were in Korean.

Finally, observations were made of students’ voluntary use of the English library.

### **Results**

As presented in table 1, the experimental group made significantly better gains on all parts of the language test. Comparisons

actually got worse on the reading section, and made nearly no gain at all on the listening section. Effect sizes indicating the impact of the treatment (based on gains) on all three components of the test were nearly identical, and were substantial.

Table 2 shows that experimental children showed a clear and significant increase in both interest and confidence in English (declines in scores reflect more interest and confidence). Comparisons’ pre- and post-test scores were nearly the same.

The experimental group showed less anxiety toward English after the treatment, while comparisons showed slightly more (see table 3).

Results of the questionnaire administered to the experimental group after the treatment confirmed the results of the attitude and confidence surveys. We present here the questions asked and the responses:

1. What do you think about sustained silent reading (SSR)?  
Enjoyed SSR: 22/28 (79 percent)  
Enjoyed moderately: 6/28 (21 percent)
2. Do you think read-alouds and SSR help improve your English?  
Read-alouds and SSR are helpful: 25/28 (89 percent)  
Read-alouds and SSR are moderately helpful: 3/28 (11 percent)
3. Would you like to continue doing SSR in middle school?  
Definitely, yes: 24/28 (86 percent)  
Moderately interested: 4/28 (14 percent)

### **Use of the Library**

Over the twenty-one-week period, the twenty-eight experimental

Table 1. Language Tests: Results

Subset	pre	post	t (gains)	p	effect size
LISTENING					
Experimental	7.75 (1.82)	8.57 (1.23)	2.57	0.01	0.7
Comparison	7.46 (1.86)	7.5 (1.84)			
READING					
Experimental	3.43 (1.64)	3.86 (.97)	2.34	0.02	0.64
Comparison	3.32 (1.7)	2.89 (1.95)			
WRITING					
Experimental	2.68 (2.02)	3.64 (1.16)	2.54	0.01	0.69
Comparison	2.29 (1.96)	2.5 (2.08)			

p < .01 means that the odds of this result happening by chance are less than one in a hundred (very unlikely).

Table 2. Changes in Interest and Confidence in English

Subset	pre	post	t (gains)	p	effect size
INTEREST					
Experimental	2.91(0.61)	1.99(0.75)	4.81	.000	1.31
Comparison	3.14(0.90)	3.20(1.10)			
CONFIDENCE					
Experimental	2.91(0.76)	2.19(0.84)	4.35	.000	1.18
Comparison	3.29(1.06)	3.37(1.17)			

Range: 1 to 5. Lower score = more interest/confidence

Table 3. Changes in English Anxiety

Subset	pre	post	t (gains)	p	effect size
Experimental	3.47(1.02)	4.05(0.79)	3.93	.000	1.07
Comparison	3.08(1.27)	2.86(1.40)			

Range: 1 to 5. Lower score = higher anxiety

students checked out a total of 350 books from the classroom library. Comparison group students did not check out any books, even though the library was available to them as well and they were encouraged to take advantage of it.

Six of the twenty-eight experimental students became dedicated, regular English readers. One of these six had been read to in English at home, but the others had not. These six students came to the library everyday, and in every spare moment

throughout the school day. Informal observation revealed that many of the experimental students used the library during lunch-time and after class, while comparison children did not.

**Discussion**

The combination of read-alouds and free reading (SSR) was effective in increasing interest in reading as well as English language development. This result confirms that read-alouds work in the second language situation as does SSR and confirms suggestions that read-alouds/story telling and

free reading go well together (Elley 1989, Mason 2007, Krashen 2007, Trelease 2006, Wang and Lee 2007).

One could argue that the superior gains from the experimental group were due to the fact that they had more exposure to English: while the experimental group did free reading

during the extra class session, the comparison students had instruction in other subjects, not English. Other studies, however, confirm that reading and storytelling are as or more efficient than traditional instruction (Krashen 2004, Mason and Krashen 2004).

**Appendix. Questionnaire Items: Interest Items (1–7), Confidence Items (8–12), Anxiety Items (13–19)**

N	Contents	Very much	Yes	Moderately	No	Not at all
1	I feel happy during English class.					
2	I want to have more reading time in English class.					
3	Reading in English is fun for me.					
4	Listening in English is fun for me.					
5	Speaking in English is fun for me.					
6	Writing in English is fun for me.					
7	I want to learn more English.					
8	I will be able to do well in English.					
9	I feel confident speaking English.					
10	I feel confident listening in English.					
11	I feel confident reading in English.					
12	I feel confident writing in English.					
13	I am scared when my English teacher asks me to speak during class time.					
14	English class is a burden to me and makes me nervous.					
15	I feel tenser in English class than in any other classes.					
16	I feel uncomfortable speaking English.					
17	I feel uncomfortable writing in English.					
18	I feel uncomfortable reading in English.					
19	I feel uncomfortable listening in English.					

In addition, the superior progress of the experimental students shows that language development can occur without formal instruction, just from hearing stories and reading.

The increased interest and confidence in reading, as seen on the questionnaires as well as the students' behavior, are the crucial results here.

Even if students do well on formal tests of English, it is of no consequence if they do not continue to improve on their own.

For this to happen, students need to understand how they improved. One student was clearly becoming aware of this, telling the teacher:

Now I know how to improve my English and I realize my English can improve without my being aware of it. It was amazing and mysterious. I will never forget this reading experience and I want to have more reading time with my English teacher.

**Kyung Sook Cho** is a professor in the Department of English Education at the Busan National University of Education in Busan, South Korea.

**Dong Seop Choi** is a teacher at Sungnam Elementary School in Busan, South Korea.

**Stephen Krashen** is an Emeritus Professor of Education at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles.

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