

PERCEPTIONS OF SILENT SUSTAINED READING HELD BY MIDDLE SCHOOL
ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS

by

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

For the last forty years, educational research has debated the merits of silent sustained reading (SSR) as part of reading instruction. According to Chow and Chou (2000), the term uninterrupted sustained silent reading was first coined in 1960. Although there are many different names for such programs, in this paper SSR refers to class time set aside solely for self-selected silent independent reading.

SSR is thought to teach learners to develop the reading habits of literate adults. Most adult readers choose texts that interest them, sometimes read more than one book simultaneously, are not compelled to complete reading that no longer interests them, and see reading as a pleasurable and enjoyable past time (Gardiner, 2005). The primary hope of SSR programs is that through modeling and exposure to high-interest books, students will naturally find their own passion for reading as they experience a positive reading environment (Brusch, 1991).

The most notable criticism of SSR has come from the National Reading Panel's 2000 report. The authors of this study feel that the evidence for SSR is insufficient despite how common the practice is found in the classroom (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services). Despite such criticisms, many researchers have observed favorable outcomes of SSR. In the second chapter of this report, I present the leading experts who argue that SSR is an effective component of a balanced literacy program. The SSR debate is likely to remain active for some time, for it is difficult to concretely

prove the benefit of SSR on improving language and literacy. As is often the case in social research, there are simply too many outside factors that can affect the results.

Despite this ambiguity, SSR remains a popular strategy for many teachers in improving reading habits and supporting both emergent and advanced literacy. Additionally, many publishers promote leveled ESL readers for students to engage in high-interest reading that is developmentally appropriate for all levels of language proficiency (Horst, 2005).

Silent Sustained Reading and Second Language Acquisition

In this study, I am particularly interested in the use of SSR in the promotion and development of second language acquisition. SSR programs can be an effective and enjoyable part of language learning, but what about its value and application with different types of students, particularly junior high aged ELLs? There is little discussion as to what SSR means to English language learners.

The theory behind SSR as it relates to second language acquisition is based largely on Krashen's comprehensible input hypothesis (Krashen, 1983, 1989). Key to Krashen's theory is the idea that second language acquisition is by and large an inductive process with many parallels to first language (L1) literacy. Second language (L2) learners acquire new vocabulary and increasingly complex grammatical awareness in a predictable pattern. In order to advance, learners need to be exposed to materials that are just beyond their level of language ability. With appropriate scaffolding, the learner will improve his/her language proficiency as necessary on a natural timeline (Krashen, 1983, 1989, 2004).

McQuillan (1999) provides a general model for an SSR program designed for L2 learners. In this model, students are provided a selection of high-interest texts that are appropriate for their level of language proficiency. The students are allowed to choose texts about whatever they find interesting. Students are generally not held accountable for their reading but are simply encouraged to enjoy the experience of reading. Scaffolding is provided by choosing high-quality books, many of which are illustrated to help develop meaning.

Role of the Researcher

I am a teacher of English as a Second Language in a suburban area of the upper Midwest. Currently I work with junior high aged ELLs of all language proficiency levels. These students are divided into classes largely based on language ability. Their level of English proficiency is determined by academic performance as well as performance on the standardized LAS Links assessments. All of the qualifying students receive ELL services through direct instruction in a small group (four to eight students). This isolated ESL experience is referred to as a pullout setting. I see students during a fifty minute period five days a week. SSR is practiced during a ten to fifteen-minute block of time at the start of each class.

Background of the Researcher

For the last three years I have implemented some form of SSR into all of my English as a Second Language (ESL) classes. I have seen the effectiveness of this time through informal observation of my students and their engagement in reading. However, not all of my students respond in the same way to SSR time. I always believed there was

value in this use of class time but wanted more insight into how the students experienced it.

I became very interested in the silent reading debate after attending a conference featuring Stephen Krashen. I was fascinated by the study results he presented in his lecture. He presented strong support of silent reading and whole literacy as effective reading instruction. I was aware of his bias but intrigued by this counterpoint to the explicit reading strategies that educators are encouraged to teach. At the end of the conference, we were given a short bibliography for the data presented. I decided to investigate further and discovered how extensively the literacy debate has been argued in the academic community.

After further research, I decided that SSR and its relationship to English language acquisition would be the focus of my capstone project. I am aware of my bias in this area and believe that SSR does have an important role in second language acquisition. However, in this study I have attempted to report on information both in support of and against the use of SSR.

Guiding Question

The SSR debate and its relationship to second language acquisition are key to the development of my research question. Instead of attempting to measure the overall efficacy of such programs, I have focused on the reading habits and attitudes of ELLs in my junior high classroom. Specifically, I ask the following research question: How do junior high aged ELLs perceive SSR time in the classroom?

Summary

In this study, I have focused on the perceptions of SSR held by ELLs. This question is significant because researchers continue to debate the benefits of SSR and its potential role in increasing second language acquisition. The SSR debate often leaves out the perceptions and experiences of the students who are actively participating in SSR. I sought out to describe the perspectives of young ELLs. Their interpretation and understanding of SSR will help teachers understand their students' varying responses to SSR in and make a more informed decision about the role SSR plays in their ESL classrooms.

Chapter Overviews

In chapter one I introduced my research project by establishing the purpose, significance, and need for the study. The context of the study was briefly introduced, as was the role, assumptions, and biases of the researcher. The background of the researcher was provided as well as my guiding question related to the perception of SSR in junior high ELLs.

In chapter two I provide a review of the literature relevant to SSR in the second language classroom. I begin by defining the term for the purposes of this paper. I then address the suggested benefits and criticisms of SSR as it relates to both L1 and L2 learners. I explore the ongoing debate between supporters of SSR and those who insist that more substantial evidence is needed to support this practice in our public schools.

Chapter three includes a description of the qualitative research design and methodology that guides this study. I explain the rationale behind this protocol and how

it influences my results. I also describe the approaches used to collect and analyze the data for this paper, which consists of written questionnaires and focus groups. I present an overview of the rationale and specific techniques for these methods.

A presentation of the results is available in chapter four. I have broken down the results as provided by the particular research tool. My system for analysis is described and the results are categorized into sections based on the data and relevant external research. I have included data that both support and challenge the value of SSR time based on the responses from the study participants.

In Chapter Five, I analyze the data and discuss the major findings. I explain that the students provided a great deal of information that contained mixed perceptions toward the practice of SSR in the classroom. I also discuss the limitations of the study, the implications for further research, and recommendations for successful implementation of a SSR program in an ESL program.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Silent sustained reading (SSR) has been a recognized segment of reading instruction for several decades. Although the practice continues to be popular and widespread, the controversy surrounding SSR remains largely unresolved and highly political. In this chapter, I first define SSR as it applies to this study. I then present some of the suggested benefits of SSR for both first (L1) and second (L2) language learners. Finally I summarize the debate surrounding its use in the classroom.

A Definition of Silent Sustained Reading

SSR is referred to in research by numerous different names, including uninterrupted silent sustained reading (USSR), drop everything and read (DEAR), daily independent reading time (DIRT), and free voluntary reading (FVR). All of these names refer to the allowance of time in class for self-selected independent reading with little accountability or extensive analysis. Chow and Chou (2000) assert that the term Uninterrupted Silent Sustained Reading (USSR) was first coined in 1960. A broad definition of SSR is the dedication of class time for students to engage in self-selected pleasure reading (Harris & Hodges, 1995, p. 266).

R. A. McCracken is often cited as the seminal expert in the area of SSR. He described the key components of SSR programs as (a) the entire class reads, (b) a pre-arranged segment of time is allotted, (c) students self-select reading materials, and (d) students read a single text for the allotted period (1971).

Successful SSR programs provide students with easy, enjoyable texts to choose from. Students are encouraged to read books at their reading level; however, no student is chided for choosing books that are too easy. This is an essential qualifier for an effective SSR program. Students must feel comfortable and free of pressure to read as they please. This provides the most authentic setting possible for a natural reading experience. An SSR program must provide a quiet, relaxing, non-evaluating environment for reading. To enjoy reading, students must be comfortable and calm in their environment (Chow & Chou, 2000; McCracken 1971).

SSR is a widespread practice for both L1 and L2 learners. SSR programs can be found in the early elementary, intermediate, and junior high years, as well as in high school, adult basic education, and university reading programs (Yoon, 2002). Research suggests that in-class SSR time is beneficial for students in grades K-12 as well as at the university level (Cho et al., 2005; Elley, 2000; Pitts et al., 1989). Some schools conduct SSR as a building-wide practice that includes even teachers and administrators. Many SSR advocates suggest that adult modeling of good reading habits help further support the value of SSR. School-wide Drop Everything And Read (DEAR) programs are one approach to demonstrating a united commitment to reading in all subject areas (Nagy et al., 2000).

In addition to local promotion of SSR, several professional education organizations, including the National Council of Teachers of English, promote the adoption of an SSR program in schools (Gardiner, 2005). Such programs are found throughout the United States as well as internationally (Nagy et al., 2000). These

programs focus on the conditions outlined above, including access to reading materials, guidance in selecting books, and environments conducive to SSR success.

Suggested Benefits

Extensive research and discussion can be found on the topic of SSR in second language acquisition. An annotated bibliography on the topic cites over 160 various works on extensive reading in a second language (Jacobs, et al., 1999). Many of these works are based on Krashen's comprehensible input hypothesis (1983, 1989). In the comprehensible input hypothesis, Krashen argues that extensive exposure to English is the best way to learn a language naturally. Unfortunately, research suggests that many learners are not often exposed to large quantities of L2 reading materials. According to Grabe and Stoller (2002), most L2 learners do not encounter enough L2 print to develop fluent processing; nor do they have sufficient reading exposure to create a large recognition vocabulary. This deficiency may occur because L2 learners do not participate in much free reading. Cho and Krashen (1994) suggest this is the result of the perceptions L2 learners hold toward free reading. Many L2 learners do not believe that reading will help them and view reading as hard work as opposed to a pleasurable pastime.

Incidental Vocabulary Acquisition

Incidental acquisition of vocabulary is perhaps the best-supported benefit cited by SSR proponents. It is believed that a large portion of vocabulary gains for native speakers occur through extensive reading. One study found that the average L1 English speaker gains about 3,000 words each year through exposure to 1,000,000 words of print

(Nagy & Anderson, 1984). Studies of L2 learners have suggested similar results. L2 students engaged in high-interest, self-selected texts in SSR will increase their exposure to print and automatically gain increases in vocabulary.

One such study was completed by Cho and Krashen (1994). They investigated the effects of reading on four adult ELLs. The ELLs were given copies of books from the Sweet Valley High series. This denied the students self-selection but the books were chosen because they felt it was an appropriate series to catch the participants' interest. With no additional English language instruction, the ELLs acquired vocabulary at a rate comparable to native speakers. Furthermore, the ELLs reported improved ability to speak and understand everyday English. In a later summary of the same data, Krashen (2001) suggested that SSR is the most effective route for L2 learners to acquire new vocabulary. He emphasized that the reading materials must be of interest to the language learner to best motivate them.

Incidental vocabulary acquisition of ELLs is further supported in studies by Ferris (1988, as cited in Pitts et al., 1989). These studies focused on testing words that are unlikely to be encountered from other sources. Ferris investigated ESL university students. An experimental group of students read George Orwell's *Animal Farm* while a control group did not read the book. Pre and post tests revealed that the experimental group made significant vocabulary gains in words that students at their level do not typically know.

Pitts, White, and Krashen followed up on Ferris' study in a 1989 article. In their study, the researchers looked at the *nadsat* vocabulary from Anthony Burgess' *A*

Clockwork Orange. In this book, characters incorporate an imaginary future lexicon called *nadsat* as part of their speech. Although the published book contains a glossary for the *nadsat* terminology, this was removed from the students' copies. The study revealed that despite having no previous exposure to these fictitious words, an experimental group of L2 learners demonstrated comprehension of the neologisms of *nadsat* without access to any reference translating these words into English. A control group of students who did not read the book scored nearly zero percent on the same test. This research suggests that language learners learned new vocabulary words without specific focus or external instruction.

Extensive reading is important to vocabulary development because many important vocabulary words are never encountered in daily speech. Stanovich and Cunningham (1993) described spoken language as lexically limited. They believe that direct vocabulary instruction is an inadequate singular source of exposure. Such ideas are supported by research that found that junior high students are expected to know many words encountered as infrequently as once per million (Taylor et al., 2000). No direct vocabulary instruction, regardless of how extensive, is able to cover all of these words. Additionally, automatic word recognition requires more than one exposure. Therefore, silent reading can be seen as a valuable supplement to explicit vocabulary instruction in language learning.

Research has indicated improvement in L1 vocabulary as a result of SSR (Cunningham & Stanovich, 2003). Such vocabulary development is especially relevant to second language acquisition. There are an estimated 88,500 words in printed school

English. Any systematic vocabulary-teaching program is destined to barely scratch the surface of this enormous lexicon (Nagy & Anderson, 1984). L2 learners need to acquire a vocabulary comparable to a native speaker in a reduced time span if they want to acquire academic language proficiency. No ESL class can provide enough instruction alone to meet this need (Gardiner, 2005; Shiavone, 1999). Several researchers go as far as to suggest that vocabulary learning is the primary benefit of SSR for L2 learners (Cho et al., 2005; Cho & Krashen, 1994, Day & Bamford, 1988; Janopoulos, 1986; Lao & Krashen, 2000; Mason & Krashen, 1997; Pilgreen & Krashen, 1993).

Exactly how fast L2 incidental vocabulary acquisition occurs is a matter of debate, but the results are generally impressive. Nagy, Anderson, and Herman (1987) discovered an average rate for L1 learners of one new word gained for every twenty new words encountered. In one study of L2 learners, the results were even more impressive. Horst (2005) did a follow-up study that used electronic scanning to identify vocabulary words present in the free reading materials of an adult ESL program. Although the study was limited in scope, the results indicated an estimated L2 incidental vocabulary acquisition rate of one new word for every twelve encountered.

There are others who are less certain of the effectiveness of SSR. In the area of vocabulary development, Pichette (2005) argues that the case for SSR is very unclear. In his summary of the existing research, he refers to several examples of L1 learner studies suggesting only small improvements in receptive vocabulary (Stoller & Grabe, 1993 as cited in Pichette, 2005). Waring & Takaki (as cited in Pichette, 2005) found that L1 vocabulary recall only occurs after eight exposures to the target word. Nation and Ming-

Tzu (1999) claim that a benefit can only be useful if the reader knows 95 to 98 percent of the book vocabulary, which makes self-selection a suspect method of choosing SSR texts. They are concerned that readers will regularly choose texts that are too difficult or easy to be sufficiently beneficial. Another limitation of the existing research is that these studies have focused on short-term improvements in receptive vocabulary through the use of a quiz after being exposed to SSR.

Reading Attitude

Following vocabulary acquisition, a second major benefit attributed to SSR is its effect on improving attitude toward reading. Brusch explains this phenomenon as inherent in the structure of an SSR program. Because reading is self-selected, the process is student-focused rather than teacher-focused. This automatically gives students an increased motivation (2000). Furthermore, people generally learn best about that in which they are interested (Gardiner, 2005).

Allowing for self-selected reading also gives students a feeling of self-confidence and self-efficacy in their reading. An enhanced perception of the self as a reader creates increased motivation and engagement in class regardless of the instructional approach used (Alvermann, 2002). Guthrie (2001) makes a similar case when he suggests that reading motivation will create positive outcomes in comprehension and assessments that will lead to further motivation and engagement.

In a series of interviews at his school, Yang (2007) found that most junior high aged students appreciated self-selected reading time and reported its usefulness in creating a reading habit. In a meta-analysis of existing L1 SSR studies, Yoon (2002)

found that most research similarly supports the belief that SSR can develop positive attitudes toward reading.

SSR programs are a way for learners to become hooked on reading. Often, a single home-run experience can be sufficient for developing a positive attitude toward reading for life (Krashen & McQuillan, 2007). In a study done on Korean teachers of English, a single exposure to high-interest reading materials produced impressive results on attitudes toward L2 reading (Cho & Krashen, 2001).

Additional Benefits

Fluency gains are one area of language improvement attributed to extensive reading. Day and Bamford (1989), in fact, claim that increased fluency is the primary goal of SSR. This fluency develops through rapid access to L2 words as a result of repeated encounters. Mason and Krashen (1997) found SSR to improve fluency in L2 readers, especially in the area of sight word recognition. Horst (2005) claims that SSR also increases lexical access speed as a result of increased word recognition.

SSR advocates have suggested other peripheral benefits of SSR. They suggest that SSR's value goes beyond receptive language skills, including reading comprehension. In fact, over time SSR can have a positive impact on expressive skills such as writing and grammatical construction. One powerful example of these peripheral benefits of SSR can be found in the research of Elley & Mangubhai (1983). In a series of studies of EFL in the Fiji islands, these researchers found evidence that SSR time combined with an availability of high interest, high quality reading materials led to all-around academic improvement.

In their research, Elley and Mangubhai provided several schools with a large library for students to voluntarily read from during provided SSR time. They then compared the success of these students to those attending traditional Fijian schools. No additional teacher training was given. English language skills improved, but so did performance on several other areas of national testing (Elley, 1991, 2000; Elley & Mangubhai, 1983). These conclusions are supported by Horst (2005), whose analysis of existing research suggests that participating in an SSR program tends to be associated with improved performance on tests of reading comprehension, writing, and other integrative measures.

Criticism

Although widely practiced in educational settings, SSR remains controversial because of questions regarding methodology and the availability of quality studies. Even fewer studies inform the practice of SSR in regards to ELLs. A significant criticism was seen in the summary provided in the National Reading Panel's 2000 report on L1 literacy practices. This government-funded organization found that there is not sufficient research from studies of high methodological quality to support the idea that in-class SSR time increases how much students read or results in improved reading skills (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services). Instead, the report suggests that the correlations found between SSR and reading comprehension require further investigation. This stands in stark contrast to the 2006 report of the National Literacy Panel. This report, which focused on studies of L2 learners, found that SSR is likely beneficial for

language acquisition. However, they too concede that more research needs to take place (August & Shanahan, 2006).

The conclusions of the National Reading Panel have become a highly sensitive topic in the area of reading and second language acquisition. In addition to the stark criticisms of Krashen (2001), other researchers have found fault with the National Reading Panel's study. In particular, critics question the findings because of the inclusion criteria used in the report. They protest that the study excluded too many qualitative studies, which have an important contribution to understanding the value of SSR in the classroom (Alvermann, 2002; Garan, 2001; Krashen & McQuillan, 2007).

Summary

In this chapter, I have defined the concept of SSR as it pertains to my study. I summarized some of the main arguments in support of SSR for both L1 and L2 learners. I specifically focused on the key L2 benefits of vocabulary acquisition and reading attitude. I then surveyed other suggested benefits of SSR, including reading fluency and expressive skills such as writing and grammar. Finally, I discussed some of the debate and criticisms surrounding the issue. In the next chapter, I will discuss the methodology of my study, including an overview of the qualitative research paradigm. I will also describe the specific procedures used to develop, administer, and analyze the questionnaire and focus group instruments.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

This study is designed to explore the perceptions of silent sustained reading (SSR) time as expressed by junior high school English Language Learners (ELLs). I would like to learn more about how students value their SSR time and what reasons they give to support these perceptions. My research question is: How do junior high school ELLs perceive SSR time in the classroom?

This chapter describes the methodology used in this study. First, the rationale and description of the research design is presented along with a description of the qualitative paradigm. Second, the data collection and analysis protocols are explained.

Qualitative Research Paradigm

The qualitative research paradigm is a broad term that defines a wide set of principals, strategies, tools, and techniques used in the investigation of a question. It is used in varied disciplines with wide-ranging approaches. It is an approach that allows the researcher to explore and understand the world on an interpretive level. Its focus is on experience as opposed to pure measurement. As a result, it is subject to resistance from those viewing it as soft science. Despite the controversy surrounding it, qualitative research has a well-established importance in the human disciplines (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). The qualitative research design is particularly valuable in exploratory or descriptive research. It places a value on the setting and context of a phenomenon and searches for a deep understanding of the human experience (Marshall & Rossman, 1995).

I have chosen the qualitative research paradigm for my study because it is best suited for the descriptive data I hope to acquire from my participants. As a teacher I have developed a strong rapport with my students. My research can benefit from the open interpersonal communication occurring in the classroom. My analysis will therefore be descriptive in nature. The small number of students I am working with is best suited to a study that involves deep personal perspectives as opposed to rigid numerical analysis.

Data Collection Techniques

In this study, I have collected data from students using two different techniques. The primary instrument was a series of focus group interviews. These data were supported by the results of a brief open-ended questionnaire.

Focus Groups

The primary data collection method I have chosen is the use of small focus groups. A focus group is a purposefully designed discussion that takes place within a group of people selected based on certain common characteristics. It is led by a trained interviewer who carefully guides the conversation. The purpose of the group is to allow participants to openly discuss their perspectives and points of view relating to a defined concept. A focus group is established as a comfortable and permissive opportunity for participants as they share their ideas. Krueger (1994) describes the nature of focus groups in great detail as is summarized in the paragraphs below.

The focus group protocol will allow students to interact with one another and deeply explore their feelings and attitudes toward SSR time in the classroom. Focus groups will work well with a small group of students who are all very familiar with each

other and comfortable sharing their opinions. The participants will be able to interact and influence one another as they explore their opinions. Through systematic analysis, the researcher is able to take insight onto how the concept is perceived.

Focus groups, like any data collection technique, face several limitations. One key issue is that the researcher has less control over the conversation than in an individual interview. Another concern is that the data that results from a focus group can be difficult to analyze based on the social context of each comment. A few additional challenges may come from the requirement of a trained interviewer and a carefully selected group. One way in which I hope to counter these focus group limitations is by augmenting my data with results from the questionnaire, which produces more controlled and readily analyzed results.

I have chosen to use focus groups as the data collection technique for my research because I am seeking the perceptions of the participants to a common classroom experience. The focus group protocol will allow students to interact with one another and profoundly explore their feelings and attitudes toward SSR time in the classroom. Focus groups will work well with a small group of students who are all very familiar with each other and comfortable sharing their opinions. The participants will be able to interact and influence one another as they deeply explore their opinions.

The questions used in a focus group are open-ended and designed to elicit individual opinions and maximize the value of varying points of view. It is important that focus group questions sound conversational and use words that are comfortable for the participants. Since the students in this study are not fully proficient in English, care must

be taken to avoid complex vocabulary or grammar structure. The questions must also be clear and easy to say as well as comprehend.

The questions in a focus group are carefully ordered to transition students from introductory information to in-depth analysis. The researcher begins with an opening question to get people talking. This is followed by introductory topics that allow participants to begin connecting with the topic. Next are transition questions that set the stage for the key questions that drive the study. The key questions are discussed fully and in greater depth than the previous questions. Finally, the focus group concludes with ending questions, which bring closure to the conversation and allow time for reflection (Krueger and Casey, 2000).

In the focus group sessions of this study, the transition question asks students to reflect on how they have felt about SSR this school year. The key questions then ask for specific details. For example, the first key question states: some of you said you liked things about silent reading. What do you like about it? The second key question reads: some of you said there are things you don't like about silent reading. What do you not like about it? I then ask two key questions about silent reading as it relates to students' perceptions about their overall reading ability and how it relates to increased vocabulary. For a complete list of questions used in the focus group interviews refer to Appendix B.

Questionnaires

A second data collection technique I have used is a questionnaire. A questionnaire is a useful data collection method for learning the characteristics, attitudes, or beliefs held by a sample population. A questionnaire's validity is based on the

assumption that characteristics or qualities can be described accurately by the participant. Questionnaires are of particular valuable to researchers because of their convenience. Questionnaires are comparatively easy to administer and manage (Marshall & Rossman, 1995). It is easy to score or tabulate the results and the resulting data are easy to statistically analyze given a large enough sample size; this is especially the case when the questions contain a limited number of answer choices. Questionnaires are often the least inexpensive and most efficient method of data collection when working with large sample populations (Patten, 2001).

The convenience of questionnaires comes at the cost of depth and insight. They are unable to analyze complex relationships or the intricacies and context surrounding a topic. Participants usually move through the items quickly and give limited thought to their answers. Furthermore, participants do not always provide accurate responses. Another disadvantage to questionnaires is that with a small sample size such as in this study, it is very difficult to find generalizable results. Questionnaires produce the best data when administered on a carefully selected and sufficiently large sample of the population. However, when questionnaires use open-ended questions, the results can be used as exploratory data for a qualitative study (Marshall & Rossman, 1995; Patten, 2001). In this study, the limitations on depth and insight present in questionnaire research are compensated by the more detailed and involved analysis required in focus groups.

I have chosen to administer a questionnaire as a warm-up to the focus group sessions. I can use the resulting data as a snapshot of the initial perceptions of students'

to SSR in the classroom. I have created a brief questionnaire with entirely open-ended questions. The questionnaire to be used in this study can be found in Appendix A.

Data Collection Procedures

Participants

The participants in my study were junior high students in a suburban midwestern school district. The study took place in two schools with students from grades seven through nine. The age range is from twelve to fifteen. There are a total of twenty-four students divided into five classes. These class divisions were also the basis for the focus groups.

Students were assigned to an ELL class based on language proficiency level. A student's language proficiency level was determined using the Language Assessment Scales (LAS) Links, an English proficiency test of reading, writing, listening, and speaking developed and sold by CTB/McGraw-Hill. ELL placement was also determined by recommendations from the student's previous ELL teachers. At the first site there were three sections of ELL class. The first section was a group of intermediate to advanced seventh grade students. There were three female and two male students. The second group was a mixed grade (seven through nine) group of low to early-intermediate level students. There were two female and two male students. The third section was a group of intermediate to advanced eighth and ninth graders. This class had four female students and one male.

At the second building there were two sections of ELL class. The first section was a mixed grade group of low to early-intermediate level students. There were two

females and four males in this class. The last section was a mixed-grade group of intermediate to advanced level students. There were three females and one male in this class. In this building, LAS Links scores and teacher recommendations were also used to determine course placement. See table 3.1 for a layout of the ELL classes in each school.

Table 3.1. ELL classes involved in the study.

School 1	School 2
Class 1: 7 th Grade Advanced ELLs (6 students)	Class 1: 7 th -9 th Grades Beginner ELLs (6 students)
Class 2: 7 th -9 th Grade Beginner ELLs (4 students)	Class 2: 7 th -9 th Grades Advanced ELLs (4 students)
Class 3: 8 th -9 th Grade Advanced ELLs (5 students)	

Although the number of ELL students at these buildings was relatively small, they represented a diverse variety of language proficiencies and cultures. There were students who were born in the United States all the way up through students who arrived within the last six months. The participants represented an impressive array of language backgrounds, including the following: Spanish, Hmong, Korean, Swedish, Japanese, Vietnamese, Russian, Tagalog, Thai, and Amharic.

Location

Both schools involved in this study were located in a suburban school district in the Midwestern United States. The ELL population of both buildings was under five percent of the total student population. The district has provided ELL services for over a decade but has recently seen a significant growth in ELL numbers, particularly at the elementary level.

The students had access to a large quantity of reading materials both in the classroom and in the school libraries. Students were encouraged to bring their own reading materials. If they forget their own books, the ELL classroom library had been accumulated over the past two years by the teacher and included over \$500 of new books and magazines, as well as a collection of used and donated books. The teacher attempted to provide resources that are high-interest and accessible to students at any level of language proficiency. The materials ranged from picture books all the way up to novels.

One notable variation between the two schools was the socioeconomic background of the communities in which they were located. One building was in a relatively low-income community with a free or reduced lunch rate of twenty-three percent. The other building was in a relatively high-income area with a free or reduced lunch rate of four percent. Despite this difference, I felt that the similarities between the two groups were far greater than the differences and did not anticipate socioeconomics to have a significant effect in the data.

Setup

The questionnaire was administered to the students the day before their focus group session in order to get their perceptions of SSR time before the interview takes place and also as an opportunity to discuss the upcoming research and protocol. The students were given approximately twenty-five minutes to complete the survey. The researcher was present to clarify any questions and address any concerns that arise.

The focus group sessions were limited to a total of fifty minutes due to the age of the participants and in order to minimize any interruption to other classes. The focus

groups took place over the course of a week, with each class spending one period of fifty-five minutes in the interview room. The focus groups took place in the school library's conference room, which provided the participants with privacy as well as comfortable chairs and a large table for beverages and snacks provided by the researcher. A tape recorder was set up in the center of the table and students were directed to speak clearly and one at a time.

The materials required for this study were as follows. The LAS Links placement test was provided by the district as a mandatory assessment of ELL language proficiency levels and a key instrument in the placement and service of ELLs within a school. The questionnaire required the physical document as well as access to a computer for compiling data and preparing tables. The focus groups required snacks and beverages as well as a variable speed tape recorder and a computer for the transcription and coding of the raw data.

Data Analysis

Focus Groups

I began my analysis of the focus group data by completing a full transcription of the interviews I have recorded. I also typed up the field notes taken during the interviews. I then read the transcripts and developed categories for the comments, while also making notes in the margins. This process of coding the data prepared me for the long-table approach of data analysis (Krueger & Casey, 2000).

Once I coded the raw data, I began the long-table analysis. This was a process of describing common themes and recurrent ideas. I also observed outlying information that

offered an interesting insight or a new perspective. This process began by organizing the transcripts and cutting out the individual quotes from one copy while preserving another copy for reference. The quotes were then organized by their relevance to each question asked and overall importance. Quotes that gave similar responses were grouped together as recommended by Krueger and Casey (2000).

Finally, I described the responses to each question. These descriptions took into account factors including frequency, specificity, emotion, and extensiveness. Later, I summarized the overall responses and themes. Selected quotes were used as evidence to illustrate what was discussed. Finally, I made some overall interpretations of the descriptive report in a separate section (Krueger & Casey, 2000).

Questionnaires

The data from my questionnaires was analyzed in a process similar to the long-table approach. I began by typing up all of the answers to the open-ended questions asked in the questionnaire. The results were then coded and organized based on frequency, specificity, emotion, and extensiveness. I used the responses to further support the findings of my focus group analysis. I compared and contrasted the results to questions with the data provided in the focus group.

Establishing Reliability

In order to establish reliability, it is important to recognize the role observer bias. This has been described in the first chapter of this report. Additionally, it is important to note that qualitative educational research is highly contextualized and does not lend itself

to exact replication. This study should be interpreted within this paradigm before making any inferences or extensions of the results.

Verification of Data

Internal validity is always a factor of concern in qualitative research. I have attempted to counteract this through the use of triangulation in my collection techniques. By augmenting my focus group data with the questionnaire results, I was able to compare the results and notice any differences. External validity should be covered through the extensive descriptions of student perspectives.

Ethics

Protecting student anonymity is an important aspect of social science research. All of the procedures and consent information was subject to human subjects review at my university and the school district. To safeguard informants' rights, I have obtained written permission and informed consent obtained from the parents. I have had contact with all of the parents of my students through phone calls and parent-teacher conferences. I made sure to use an interpreter to call home to non-English speaking families and explain the study. I informed the participants and parents of the research objectives and explained the steps I will take to ensure anonymity of all participants. Samples of the documents used can be found in Appendices A and B.

Summary

This chapter contains a description of the methods used to perform this study. A qualitative research paradigm framed this study, which was exploratory in nature as it investigated the individual experience of a small number of junior high aged ELLs and

SSR . The study took place in a suburban school district with relatively small populations of ELLs. The research tools used consisted of a questionnaire and a series of focus groups. The data analysis involved a long-table approach of searching for themes and intriguing thoughts that relate the human experience of SSR. I accounted for validity as well as ethical factors in my research. The next chapter presents the results of this study as obtained through the methodology described in this chapter. I describe the process of analyzing the data and my selection of categories based on the data and external research. Every effort was made to include both the positive and negative responses from the participants to provide a greater sense of perspective and validity.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

This study took place in the ELL classrooms of two junior high schools in the same school district. The students were first asked to complete a questionnaire. They then participated in small focus groups to further elaborate on their opinions. Through the collection of these data, I sought to find the answer to my research question: How do junior high ELLs perceive SSR time? The following is a presentation of the resulting data.

Data Overview

In this study, the students first answered a questionnaire with five open-ended questions. All of the participants completed the questionnaire and responded to each question, resulting in 120 responses for analysis. The second part of the study was a series of focus group sessions that were recorded digitally for transcription and analysis. The student participants provided ninety-three minutes of audio data. The focus group data was then transcribed manually by the researcher.

The following summary of data is based on a long-table approach to analysis as explained in the previous chapter on methodology. Using both the questionnaire and focus group data sets independently, I grouped similar comments together and sought to emphasize themes based on their frequency, specificity, emotion, and extensiveness in the focus group interviews and questionnaires. I also paid attention to comments that

were especially profound or unexpected. This process is described in greater depth in the previous chapter on methodology.

Table 4.1. Data themes found by each research tool.

Focus Group Data	Questionnaire Data
Reading for Pleasure	Reading for Pleasure
Reading Improvement	Reading Improvement
Time Spent Reading	Time Spent Reading
Expanding Language Skills	Expanding Language Skills
Choosing Appropriate Texts	Choosing Appropriate Texts
Accountability	Accountability
Reading Comfortably	

The results are organized into a section on the focus group data and a section on the questionnaire data. I chose to present the focus group data first because I felt that the results were far richer and more expansive. The focus group data section is divided into the following themes: improved reading attitude, improved reading comprehension, providing appropriate SSR time, effects on SLA, choosing appropriate texts, lack of accountability, and environmental concerns. I then present the data collected from the questionnaire. Similar themes were found in the resulting data, including: improved reading attitude, improved reading comprehension, providing appropriate SSR time, effects on SLA, choosing appropriate texts, and lack of accountability. See table 4.1 for a table comparing the two sections. The focus group questions and questionnaire forms are both available in Appendixes A and B.

Focus Group Data

Reading for Pleasure

“Because it’s funny and fun.” Eighth grader Ahnsang had no hesitation describing what he liked about SSR. Many students shared this enthusiasm for class time dedicated to SSR and their overall perception of reading. Amal, a ninth grader, repeated this sentiment when she said, “I feel glad when I read a book because sometimes it’s funny.” Seventh grader Luong jumped in by adding that books “are good.” Eighth grader Tuyet summarized her experience as positive because “There’s a lot of books that are good to read and easy.”

Many students viewed SSR as a pleasant way to start class, or as a relaxing break in the school day. Ninth grader Anna said that she likes how quiet the classroom is during SSR. “Sometimes the book is more interesting. I like when no one is talking to you and then I use the time.” Seventh grader Maria described how the quiet time allowed her to concentrate when she was reading. Eighth grader Amelia explained that “When you read the book you feel your brain is not tired and it makes you relaxed.” Sometimes, the main benefit was simply time away from regular class. “You get to relax before the class schedule starts,” said ninth grader Neng. Amelia further remarked, “Sometimes the book is so good that I want to keep reading. And then we don’t have to do other stuff.”

Some of the most endearing comments related to reading and the imagination. “You can imagine better,” explained Amelia. It was clear that many students viewed reading as a pleasant escape from the school day. As Amal put it, “It’s like T.V. in your

head.” Seventh grade classmate See then added, “When you are really into a book, you can see pictures in your head. That’s what I like about it.”

A few students appreciated personal growth and knowledge that develops with reading and the time spent in SSR. Tuyet said, “We have more knowledge.” She continued, “You can read a book and you can travel around the world and study more cultures. And it helps you communicate with your friends. When you read it you know it so you can talk about it.” Eighth grader Phuong explained that through reading, “You can understand the past and explain the future.” Trinh, a seventh grader, even delved into reading and his understanding of morality. “You can imagine the good side and the bad side from books. And you can use something good in the future.” Several students reported reading more books overall as a result of SSR. Eighth grader Van explained that “Now it’s more interesting to read more of a book than last year.”

Other students held more ambivalent perceptions of SSR in the classroom. “Sometimes fun, sometimes boring.” This is how Jonas, a seventh grader, summarized his experience of SSR. When asked what makes the difference, he responded, “I don’t know. Just how I feel.” That reading is boring was a common complaint in the focus group sessions. “Sometimes it annoys me to keep reading,” said Amelia, who had mostly positive feedback throughout the focus group session.

When asked for specific reasons that reading is boring, the students often were at a loss for detail. “You have to read every single day, you have to write what you read,” said seventh grader Carlos. When I asked him to explain what made that frustrating, he could only repeat, “You have to read every day.” Seventh grader Maria expressed similar

sentiment when she said, “Silent reading you just sit down and read, there’s nothing to do, just read, read, read... How about if you can take that time to do your homework or talk about something?”

Even the students who had described SSR most favorably in the interviews echoed some of these complaints. Phuong said SSR is bad “Because it’s so quiet and students just hold the book and do nothing.” However, only one student was completely adamant that SSR is a negative experience. Sara, a ninth grader did not dilute her negative perceptions when she said, “I don’t like the time, I don’t like everything.” When asked how she would explain SSR to a new student, she answered, “It’s boring. You just take a book and read for like fifteen minutes.”

Reading Improvement

Another extensively discussed benefit of SSR was its role in reading comprehension. Many students reported improved reading comprehension based on their own observations as well as performance on standardized tests. Carlos summarizes the process as “ You can read more, I think. You can understand more when you read.”

The process of improving reading comprehension was usually explained as a logical matter of fact. Pan, an eighth grader, stated that “When we read more the better we get at reading.” When asked to elaborate, he simply emphasized that “If we keep reading it’s going to make us better at reading. It can make you a good reader.”

Trinh, a ninth grader, described his improved comprehension as SSR continued throughout the school year. “When I was a new student, I didn’t know more English and when I know the words I can understand the story.” He continues, “Sometimes when it’s

the beginning of a book, it feels bad or boring but if you read more and try hard, follow the story, you will understand the book.” Van summarized her improvement as SSR “Helps you understand the story more.” Jonas said he valued SSR because over time he could “Understand everything that’s in the book.”

Some students attributed their improved scores on standardized tests directly to time spent in SSR and other pleasure reading. All ELLs in the school are tested three times each school year to learn their current reading level according to a district selected standardized test. Panhia, an eighth grader, explained how her reading level “was like a big jump.” “It did help me out a lot,” she stated, “from my low [level] to a higher one.”

These results illustrate the effects on SSR on reading comprehension as perceived by the participants in the study. The next section will summarize the debate held over the appropriate amount of class time to commit to SSR.

Time Spent Reading

Another issue that students frequently brought up was the amount of time spent on SSR. Surprisingly, this criticism was not a one-sided push for less SSR time but rather a vigorous debate between those who viewed the time as too short and those who viewed it as too long.

As described in chapter three, SSR time was typically the first ten to fifteen minutes of class on four days each week. Those students who felt that this was insufficient explained that it was not enough time to really get into a book. “Sometimes I like a book,” said Elias, a seventh grader. When I get into a book I don’t want to stop... I wish we could read for the whole period.” Anna struck a similar chord when she said,

“What I don’t like is that you’re going to use all the time but a book might get more interesting... When we stop, it’s getting more interesting.” Luong explained his point of view quite clearly: “I think if we are reading we need more time.” When asked how much more time he would prefer, he answered, “Just like five minutes more.”

On the other side of the fence were several students who felt that ten to fifteen minutes was too long for SSR. Panhia, who was so proud of her improved test scores, still did not hesitate to complain that SSR is “so long.” She continued, “The book has so many words in there, it’s so long.” Amal explained that on certain days, “I’m just like, argh! We have nine minutes left! Argh!” Ninth grader Pa was quick to agree. “It gets boring sometimes.”

Our discussion on the appropriate length of SSR brought up a concern that may have implications of the validity of this study. Some of the ELLs in this study were concurrently enrolled in a mainstream language arts class or a reading intervention course. Each of these classes is structured differently and some included an SSR element of their own. This meant that some of the students were required to read silently twice each day. As Maria explains, “What I don’t like is reading every day because we have to read in other classes.” Amal also brought up this issue. “Sometimes I have English before this class and we read for like twenty minutes.” When asked to explain her thoughts further, she continued, “Then I come back here. But if I like the book that I’m reading then I come back here and I’m happy... If I don’t have my book or I don’t like the book, I am bored.”

Expanding Language Skills

Another valuable insight offered by a few students was that SSR improves their understanding and usage of the English language. Luong told the focus group “I can see by myself so it helps me with the words and sentences... how to use them.” He later added, “It even helps us talking better.” Anna said it “helps your writing.” Phuong explained, “We can learn more about words and grammar, English grammar.” Amelia told her personal story of learning English through reading. “When I was small, I didn’t know how to read and speak and then ESL taught me how to read books. I started knowing them and then I could speak it because what I see and what I read I have in my head.”

Choosing Appropriate Texts

“If it’s like a boring book, nothing happens, just reading.” As Jonas describes it, the key to successful SSR may lie in providing students with the right reading materials. As seventh grader Ricky put it, at the beginning of the year “it was hard to find a book that I like.” Amelia repeated this theme when she said, “I didn’t know what to pick because I don’t even know the authors’ names.” Fortunately, students reported finding their way to interesting texts, either by asking the teacher or observing what their friends were reading. Only Sara remained convinced throughout the school year that “there aren’t any interesting books to read.”

These results summarize the value students placed on finding suitable reading materials. The next section discusses a lack of accountability perceived by some participants.

Accountability

In the students' criticisms of SSR time, accountability needs to be discussed. Some students reported feeling tired during SSR and even admitted to spacing out or dozing off. "It makes you sleep," said Van, to which Panhia added, "If the book is boring then I won't read it through. I just stare at it." Shoua described a similar experience: "Sometimes I read the book over and over again." Alma said that usually she enjoys SSR, but sometimes "you fall asleep and then your eyes hurt from reading too much."

One focus group session of advanced students was particularly honest about their daydreaming. "I doze off," said Pa. "Uh huh," laughed See. Amal jumped in, "I start doing something else like writing on my hands." I asked the group how often they doze off instead of reading. "For me, once or twice a week," answered Amal. "Some time every day, maybe," said Jonas. However, they all said it was for just a few minutes and not the entire SSR time.

These admissions bring up a serious concern for any teacher using SSR in the classroom. The next section presents a few concerns related to the school environment for SSR.

Reading Comfortably

Despite the aforementioned confessions of over-relaxation, some students were concerned that the classroom was not comfortable enough for SSR. Maria went on a brief rant: "When you sit somewhere, you're not comfortable. Like if you sit on a chair, it's not comfortable. If you sit on the floor, it's not comfortable. If you sit on a table, it's

not comfortable.” When asked how to improve the conditions in the classroom, she suggested having cushions for reading time.

Two students mentioned that daily stress can interfere with the enjoyment of SSR. “Maybe you’re worried about stuff like failing math, oh failing English, oh no,” said Amal. She had other thoughts on her mind: “Oh, it’s almost toward the end of the year and summer is almost here!”

These results remind us that the environment and external factors play an important role in the effectiveness of SSR. This concludes the data presentation for the focus group sessions. I will now summarize the data discovered in the questionnaires.

Questionnaire Data

Reading for Pleasure

The questionnaire responses showed similar perceptions of SSR. Neng wrote that SSR is “An opportunity to get everything out of your mind before doing the class schedule.” Anna wrote, “It is a comfortable time for reading.” Ricky reflected on his enjoyment by simply saying, “I like reading a book I like to read.”

In their questionnaires, many students mentioned that they appreciate the silent aspect of SSR. “It’s silent. Nobody can disturb me,” said Phuong. “It was a calm time,” wrote Tuyet. “It is silent and you can pick the book you want,” commented Jonas. Three students simply wrote the word “quiet” as their favorite part of SSR.

The criticisms presented in the questionnaire responses paralleled the discussions in the focus groups. “I don’t like that we actually have to read,” explained Amal. She later added, “Sometimes the books are boring.” Tuyet reported that SSR is “boring and

too quiet.” A few students mentioned homework time as preferable to SSR. “When I have a lot of homework, I think the reading time is not necessary,” wrote Phuong.

Reading Improvement

Improved reading comprehension was frequently reported in the questionnaire responses as well. Neng wrote, “I guess SSR is useful because it can help students read better and get their reading scores up.” Van wrote, “It helps me read better and know more books.” These sentiments were shared by Anna, who wrote that SSR “helps us by remembering more... I like to try hard reading.” Pan explained his improvement as the result of a simple process: “You read more, the better you get at reading.”

Time Spent Reading

Although the length of SSR time was not a topic specifically queried in the questionnaire, a few students did take the opportunity to share their thoughts. These comments were exclusively from the camp that felt ten to fifteen minutes was too great a length of time. “Too much reading each week,” reported Shoua. “We have to read every day,” complained Carlos. Tuyet explained that SSR was so long that it made her feel tired.

These comments on the appropriate amount of SSR time were overall quite brief. The next section reports statements made concerning SSR and its effects on SLA.

Expanding Language Skills

“You can build up your vocabulary and learn a new language.” See felt convinced that SSR was a useful technique for improving English. A few students made similar comments in their questionnaire responses. Pa made the remark that reading

“helps you with your English if you just moved to the U.S.” Maria recalled her experience as a newcomer in some detail. “When I came here, all I did was read and read. I got so used to it and that’s how I learned how to speak English better and to write in English better.” It is important to note that there were no negative comments related to SSR and SLA.

These results suggest some students perceive a benefit of SSR time in the SLA. The next section discusses concerns with text selection in an SSR classroom.

Choosing Appropriate Texts

A few students lamented the book choice available in the school. This apparent difficulty to choose texts mirrors the comments made in the focus group sessions. “There aren’t any interesting books to read,” complained Sara. In a related thought, Maria wrote, “Sometimes I don’t like silent reading because some of the books I read are lame and boring.” Ricky reported that he did not have a book many times, despite persistent teacher reminders to bring a text or choose one from the classroom library.

These comments serve as a reminder of the value of adequate reading materials and teacher guidance in text selection. The next section discusses a perceived lack of accountability during SSR.

Accountability

Accountability was a less prevalent issue in the questionnaire data. No students self reported on wasting time or sleeping during class. A few did complain about the time being boring or making them sleepy but there were no confessions similar to those

that came out in the focus group sessions. Nonetheless, the negative feedback does suggest that students were occasionally off task.

Clearly, the data collected in the questionnaires was less extensive than what was found in the focus groups.

Summary

The data from my study present the spectrum of opinions and ideas about SSR as perceived by junior high ELLs in my classroom. These data were collected using both a questionnaire and five focus groups. The students recounted both positive and negative observations of SSR and described their experiences in great depth. Their comments demonstrated reflection and insight that provide valuable information to understanding both the potential value and drawbacks of SSR in the second language classroom. In this chapter, I presented the results of my data collection. I divided these results into themes within their respective data collection instruments. These themes emerged from my analysis using a long-table approach as described in the third chapter.

In chapter five I will discuss my findings and their implications. These findings summarize the great quantity and quality of feedback provided by my students and their mixed reactions to SSR in the classroom. I then present a call for further research and suggestions on how junior high school educators can implement a successful SSR program.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSIONS

In this research project, I examined the question of how junior high aged ELLs perceive SSR time. In this chapter, I will make observations and recommendations based on the resulting data. In particular, I describe major findings of this research, limitations of the results, implications for the educational profession, and suggestions for further research.

Major Findings

While the amount of data obtained in this study was considerable, careful analysis leads to the following three major findings:

1. Many students perceived SSR as helpful for their English language vocabulary development. Students reported understanding and using more words as a direct result of encountering new vocabulary in their reading.
2. Many students described the pleasure of reading and relaxing in the classroom.
3. Students frequently referred to their improved reading ability and enhanced understanding of English language texts. These ideas were reinforced by positive experiences in other classes as well perceived improvement on tests.

One of the most interesting parts of this study is the fact that these three findings mirror the major themes that researchers discuss surrounding SSR. This parallel is interesting, as it suggests that junior high ELLs experience many of the benefits and concerns that researchers and professional educators attribute to SSR as a classroom

practice. I was impressed by how capably the students described their perceptions of SSR in ways that mirrored the findings of major research. The qualitative data gathered in the focus groups and questionnaires largely supported the existing research on this topic.

The student participants had many positive responses to SSR time, often without any prompting from the researcher. The overall tone and discussion of SSR was constructive and open-minded with few students expressing strong antipathy toward SSR time as a classroom practice. However, the students did present issues that need to be addressed in any assessment and implication of SSR as a teaching strategy.

The findings are organized based on the research question presented at the beginning of this capstone: How do junior high aged ELLs perceive SSR time in the classroom? My answer is that first, junior high aged ELLs have much to say about their experience of SSR. Second, that junior high aged ELLs have mixed perceptions of SSR.

I compared the student results to the existing data and presented them in the following sections: vocabulary acquisition, reading attitude, and reading comprehension. I also presented a section on potential areas of concern related to SSR as a classroom practice.

Vocabulary Acquisition

Research suggests that SSR results in a process of incidental vocabulary acquisition for L2 learners (Cho et al., 2005; Cho & Krashen, 1994, Day & Bamford, 1988; Janopoulos, 1986; Lao & Krashen, 2000; Mason & Krashen, 1997; Pilgreen & Krashen, 1993). This suggested benefit of SSR was the most broadly supported finding

of this study. Many students perceived SSR time as helpful for their English language vocabulary development. While students reported understanding and using more words as a direct result of encountering new vocabulary in their reading, a limitation of the study is that I did not measure this.

Reading Attitude

Improved attitude toward reading is another reported benefit of SSR programs (Cho & Krashen, 2001; Gardiner, 2005; Krashen & McQuillan, 2007; Yang, 2007). The student participants in this study largely supported these findings. Many students described the pleasure of reading and relaxing in the classroom. My impression is that students viewed SSR as intrinsically valuable and a welcome alternative to regular classroom activities.

Reading Comprehension

Studies have also shown SSR to be an effective approach to improving reading comprehension (Day & Bamford, 1998; Elley, 1992; Elley & Mangubhai, 1983; Krashen & McQuillan, 2007). In this study, students frequently referred to their sensation of improved reading ability and enhanced understanding of English language texts. The students supported these impressions by referring to successful grades in other classes in addition to improved scores on standardized reading tests. These claims were not validated, however, as they were outside the scope of this research project.

A Word of Caution

The data from this study, though largely positive, present some issues that arise when implementing an SSR program. SSR critics can point to student comments on daydreaming and spacing out during reading time as areas of major concern. Some student comments also reported SSR time as boring. This suggests that the benefits of SSR are not equally applicable to all students, which leads to implications for educators that are presented later in the chapter.

Limitations

This study was performed with a limited number of participants in a largely descriptive and exploratory report. As such, any generalizations to larger ELL populations are speculative. Additionally, the researcher was also the students' teacher. This may have affected the ability of some students to express negative feelings toward any instructional technique used in the classroom.

A further challenge to recognize is that many students were already participating in some form of SSR in their mainstream language arts classes. Each teacher had different expectations and time requirements and therefore many students had varying experiences with SSR while simultaneously enrolled in my class. Several students complained about this variable during the focus group sessions.

Implications for Educational Professionals

This study suggests that SSR is a valuable tool for teaching ESL. Students in the study recognized many benefits that they gain from SSR in the classroom. Teachers and administrators should use this awareness in making decisions on how to provide SSR during the school day. Developing an appreciation for reading should be a goal of any

literacy program. This study provides evidence that ELLs are generally positive about SSR time in the second language classroom and appreciative of the improvements they experience from this time.

This study also reminds educators that SSR must be structured to provide optimal success. As schools become increasingly focused on test scores, teachers must strive to make SSR as efficient as possible. ELLs in an SSR program require a wide variety of texts at different levels of difficulty. They also need guidance in selecting appropriate texts that will encourage language development. Finally, educators must provide sufficient structure that students feel a sense of accountability for time spent on SSR. Suggestions for increased accountability include a reading response journal and tracking the number of pages read each day as well as the text selected. In my own practice I have taken all of these steps to hold students more accountable for their work during SSR. I feel that it is the best compromise between true SSR and the pressures I feel for accountability.

Suggestions for Further Research

This study provides support to those who believe that SSR is an effective part of reading and language instruction for ELLs. However, there remain many questions on how SSR is best implemented to maximize efficacy. Further research will help educators greater understand the actualized benefits of SSR on ELLs and how it is best practiced in the language classroom.

I believe that researchers need to investigate the structure of SSR time in order to engage all students to the greatest extent possible. Studies should be designed to better

understand the appropriate length and frequency of SSR on students in different age groups and language proficiency levels. Research should also be done on best practice in holding students accountable for their time without diminishing the emphasis on reading for pleasure.

Additionally, research must continue to investigate the effectiveness of SSR, particularly on ELLs. Extensive qualitative and quantitative data need to be collected in order to better appreciate the role of reading in second language acquisition. Research should also focus on what type of texts should be available, ultimately leading to improved reading resources for ELLs.

Summary

This study has reinforced my appreciation for the role of reading in second language acquisition. I was excited by my students' positive perceptions of SSR as part of our classroom experience. I remain convinced that SSR is a useful element in language development and worthy of time in the school day.

I hope that further research and practice will help educators use SSR ever more effectively. I believe stronger evidence demonstrating the benefits of SSR will help support the case of balanced literacy instruction and the importance of demonstrating to students that reading is something to enjoy and of personal value. I hope to share this enthusiasm and develop lifelong reading habits in all of my students.

APPENDIX A

Silent Sustained Reading Questionnaire

Name:

Age:

Grade:

1. How would you describe silent reading time to a friend in a different school?
2. What do you read during silent reading time?
3. Something I like about silent reading time is...
4. Something I don't like about silent reading time is...
5. Do you think silent reading time is useful? Why or why not?

APPENDIX B

Focus Group Questions

Introduction to the Study

Today I want to talk with you about silent reading. As you know, I am a student myself and I always want to learn how to become a better teacher. Part of my class time with you has been spent on silent reading time. I would like to know more about how you feel about silent reading time in our classroom. Every opinion is welcome and I would like to hear from everyone. Please be good listeners when other people are talking and do not interrupt. Are there any questions before we begin?

Opening Question

1. Please state your name and one thing you like to read.

Introductory Questions

2. What kinds of things do you read during silent reading time?
3. How would you explain silent reading time to a new student in our class?

Key Questions

4. Think back about the school year. How have you felt about silent reading time in the classroom?
5. Some of you said that you liked silent reading time. What do you like about it?
6. Some of you said that you don't like silent reading time. What don't you like about it?
7. Some teachers, myself included, think that silent reading helps you read better in English. What do you think?

8. Some teachers also think that silent reading helps you learn new English words. What do you think about that?

Summary Question

9. This has been a chance for me to learn more about your opinions regarding silent reading. Some major ideas you pointed out were (summarize conversation). Is there anything else you would like to say?

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