

Sustained Silent Reading Using Assigned Reading: *Is Comprehensible Input Enough?*

Sy-ying Lee, Ph. D.

Department of Foreign Languages and Applied Linguistics
National Taipei University
Taipei, Taiwan
R.O.C.

INTRODUCTION

There is consistent evidence that sustained silent reading (SSR) is effective. Students in SSR classes typically gain as much in reading comprehension as traditional students, and often gain more, especially when treatments last for longer than one semester (Krashen, 2004). SSR is usually self-selected reading. Will assigned reading also work?

The goal of this study is to compare assigned reading to traditional EFL instruction at the college level. Previous research in this area is sparse. In a one semester class, EFL college students in Hong Kong doing assigned reading outperformed traditional students in vocabulary and reading speed (Lao and Krashen, 2004). In another one semester study (Sheu, 2004, study 2) assigned readers made significant gains in vocabulary, reading, and grammar, exceeding gains of traditionally taught students in reading and grammar, but not in vocabulary growth.

Method

To account for at least some individual variation in instruction, three different classes, taught with different instructors, were used as comparison groups. Classes were randomly selected from 26 freshman English classes at National Taipei University.

The comparison groups had traditional instruction, reading, analyzing and discussing texts, student pre-

sentations based on issues related to the assigned readings, and direct instruction in language “skills.” There were frequent quizzes and examinations.

During the first semester, the experimental group did not do assigned reading. Rather, students did self-selected reading of graded readers. Students chose from 570 graded readers varying in difficulty from 300 headwords to 3300 headwords. Students devoted half of the once weekly three hour class to reading, 20 minutes to checking in and out books, and the rest of the class to shared reading, giving short presentations or interacting with group members. Students were required to record what they read (titles, pages, time spent on reading) and write short reflections on what they read in either English or Chinese. These reading logs were handed in each week. Grades were based on participation and students’ logs (time spent reading, pages read, and reflections on reading).

During the second semester, students were required to read five texts: *Stuart Little*, *Charlotte’s Web*, *The Trumpet of the Swan*, *The Little Prince*, and *Tuesdays with Morrie*. In addition, students were required to choose another two books from a list of suggested readings. The list consisted of books related to current films, such as *The Bridges of Madison County*, *Bridget Jones’ Diary* and books from the *Harry Potter* series, as well as teachers’ suggestions.

As was the case in the first semester, students were required to keep and hand in weekly reading logs, and were graded on their logs and class participation.

Measures

The tests used for both groups included (1) a 100 item cloze test measuring reading ability, developed by Mason (2003), which was used as both the pre and post test; (2) vocabulary tests developed by Schmidt (2000) that test the 2000 level words, 3000, 5000, 10,000 and academic vocabulary levels, also used as both pre and post-tests. Tests were given at the beginning of the academic year and at the end.

RESULTS

Pretest scores for the three comparison groups for each level of the vocabulary test, for the total vocabulary test, and for the cloze test were not significantly different (for total vocabulary, $F = 1.84$, $p = .145$; for the cloze, $F = 1.65$, $p = .18$). Scores for the three comparison classes were thus combined.

As noted above, students in the experimental class spent the first semester doing self-selected reading from graded readers. Previous studies done with college student populations have shown that one semester of self-selected reading of graded readers results in about the same gains in vocabulary and reading as traditional instruction (Lee, 2005, using university students; Hsu and Lee, 2005, using junior college students). The data presented below can thus be considered the impact of the assigned reading done during the second semester.

Gains in the cloze test were nearly identical, with both the combined comparison group and assigned reading group gaining about five points (table 1). (For post-test only, $t = .21$, $df = 193$, $p = .34$; for gain scores, $t = .21$, $df = 193$, $p = .71$)

The assigned reading group showed better gains on all levels of the vocabulary test (table 2).

Because the combined comparison group scored slightly, but consistently higher than the experimental group on all levels of the vocabulary pretest, statistical significance was determined by examining differences between gain scores (table 3). At each level, the experimental group made better gains in vocabulary. Because multiple t-tests were used, the alpha level, the level of significance necessary to achieve statistical significance, was adjusted using the Bonferroni procedure (Rosenthal and Rosnow, 1984). Using the adjusted alpha of .008 (.05/6), the experimental group significantly outperformed the comparison group on the combined vocabulary test, at the 10,000 and 3000 word levels.

Table 1: Cloze test

	PRE	POST	DIFF
Comp	46.9 (10.1)	51.8 (9.8)	4.9
EXP	47.1 (10)	52.1 (8.3)	5

Table 2: Vocabulary test results

	COMP PRE	EXP PRE
	means (sd)	means (sd)
2000	27 (3.3)	26.3 (3.8)
3000	22.1 (5.7)	20.9 (6.5)
5000	17.5 (6.0)	17 (6.7)
10000	4.6 (4.1)	3.7 (3.9)
PREAC	20.6 (5.5)	19.7 (6.2)
TOTAL	91.7 (20.3)	87.7 (21.1)
	COMP POST	EXP POST
	means (sd)	means (sd)
2000	27.6 (2.4)	27.9 (2.3)
3000	23.5 (4.9)	24 (4.7)
5000	19.4 (5.6)	20.5 (5.5)
10000	6.0 (4.6)	7.3 (4.3)
PREAC	22.4 (5.5)	22.4 (5.4)
TOTAL	99 (18.7)	102.1 (17.7)

Note: Each level of the vocabulary test contained 30 items

Table 3: Gain scores for the vocabulary test

	DIFF pre/pst			
	COMP	EXP	T	P
2000	0.6	1.6	2.01	0.046
3000	1.4	3.1	2.72	0.007*
5000	1.9	3.5	2.55	0.012
10000	1.4	3.6	3.84	0.00013*
PREAC	1.8	2.7	0.55	0.583
TOTAL	7.3	14.4	4.35	0.000014*

DISCUSSION

This study reports a modest victory for assigned reading over traditional instruction in vocabulary growth, as did Lao and Krashen (2000), and a tie in reading comprehension, as measured by a cloze test. Neither group made impressive gains on the cloze test. Previous studies using the same measure show some experimental (self-selected reading) and comparison groups making five point gains on this test in one semester (Lee, 2005, using university students, Hsu and Lee, 2005, junior college students).

A more likely candidate for these results is the kind of books that were assigned. The list consisted of books that teachers felt were interesting. Teachers' views, however, may not be the same as students' views (see e.g. Ujiie and Krashen, in press, for confirming evidence). In fact, some students remarked that they merely flipped through the pages of the assigned books, with little comprehension, and several students considered E.B. White's books too childish. With such a lack of enthusiasm about the reading, in fact, one wonders how the students made as much progress as they did.

It appears to be the case that for reading to do a reader any good, to result in language and literacy development, it needs to be more than comprehensible. It needs to be interesting, or even compelling. An interesting hypothesis is that the reader needs to be "lost in the book" (Nell, 1988). Sometimes assigned reading is comprehensible and compelling, and results in real gains. Some times it does not (for a review, see Krashen, 2004, chapter 1, fn 8, pp. 51-52). There are good reasons to assign reading: for the purpose of discussion and to ensure exposure to certain crucial readings. We need to be sure, though, that what is assigned is really right for the students.

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