

## Invited Article

**What Does it Take to Develop a Long-term Pleasure Reading Habit?**

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**Abstract:** Six case histories of second language acquirers were examined to attempt to determine what factors play a role in developing a long-term pleasure reading habit in a second language (English). The cases provided support for several hypotheses: Long-term readers are first stimulated to read through a pleasant reading experience, they have access to books and time and a place (or places) to read, they select their own reading material, feel free to stay with certain authors and genres if they want to, and do not profit from tests, workbook exercises and incentives. If these hypotheses are confirmed in future studies, we can conclude that school does not provide the conditions that help develop long-term pleasure reading.

**Keywords:** *second language, long term pleasure reading, self-selected reading, sustained silent reading, access to books*

**1. Introduction**

This paper is based on a central hypothesis: The most important factor in reaching advanced levels in a second or foreign language is developing and maintaining a longterm pleasure reading habit.

There is abundant evidence that this hypothesis is correct: self-selected free voluntary pleasure reading has been shown to have very positive effects on language and literacy development: Those who read more become better readers and better writers, have larger vocabularies and better control over complex grammatical constructions, and spell better (research summarized in Krashen, 2004, 2011). More recently, Mason and Krashen (in press) have provided data strongly suggesting that one hour per day of pleasure reading over three years can result in a second language acquirer moving from the low intermediate to the advanced level without direct instruction, confirming the results of an early analysis by Nation (2104).

In this paper, we assume the correctness of this central hypothesis and the desirability of second language acquirers become long-term pleasure readers. We focus on how long-term

readers become long-term readers. We restrict our main analysis to second language acquisition, where self-selected reading is rarely used or even recommended.

## 2. Hypotheses for long term pleasure reading

We hypothesize:

1. Something will stimulate the start of a pleasure reading habit, e.g. a sustained silent reading class, learning about the power of reading in an academic classes, reading a book in English that stimulates more reading (a "home run" book, Trelease, 2001).
2. Plenty of access to books.
3. Time and place to read regularly.
4. Being able to self-select reading material according to interest and difficulty, and being free to read narrowly, sticking to certain authors or topics.
5. No tests, no workbook exercises, no rewards for reading. Either they will not be present, or the reader who does them will not give them the credit for progress and will not like them.

## 3. Case Studies

We present here a series of case histories, and in each case we provide evidence that the reader has established a pleasure reading habit, determine if the case is consistent with our hypotheses, and describe the improvement that has taken place.

### *Case One: Jung Seo*

**Reading Habit.** Jung Seo, more fully described in Cho and Krashen (2015), is an acquirer of English as a Foreign Language in Korea. Ms. Seo, who had not been a pleasure reader in English, had been reading steadily in English for four years and eight months at the time her case history was written. She reports that she reads at least one hour a day, and has read about 200 books in English since starting her reading program, and has read about 600 children's books in English.

**Stimulation.** After majoring in English in college and teaching English in school, she was not satisfied with her English competence: "She described her English as 'fumbling' and said she made lots of mistakes when speaking and paused a lot to think before saying anything" (Cho and Krashen, 2015). Research on free voluntary reading was included in one of the courses she took in graduate school, and this inspired her to begin a self-selected reading program on her own.

**Access to books.** She is a member of a local English library, which has a wide variety of books. This library was her major source of books.

**Time and place.** She read on the subway, 20 minutes going to work and 20 minutes returning home each day. She also reported that she read in bed before going to sleep, during recess at the school where she teaches, and at home during the weekend and on vacations.

**Self-selected and narrow.** Ms. Seo clearly read what she wanted to read, eventually finding favorite fiction authors, starting with Sidney Sheldon, and then Sophie Kinsella. Seo reports that when she discovered Kinsella's books, she "could not stop reading them" (Cho and Krashen, 2015). She is now reading her seventh Michael Connelly Harry Bosch novel, having read the previous six in the series.

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**Tests, exercises and rewards.** Ms. Seo took no tests during the four years eight months of her reading journey, did no workbook activities, and her rewards were all intrinsic, the pleasure of reading.

**Language Development.** Ms. Seo clearly improved: She reported that she had no trouble reading books in English that she found to be very difficult when she tried to read them several years ago. She says she is less dependent on the dictionary while reading. She feels she is more fluent in speaking English, and is more confident in speaking to native speakers, and that she can now understand American TV and movies without subtitles.

### *Case Two: Ramon*

**Reading Habit.** Ramon, described in Henkin and Krashen (2015), came to the US after completing six years of education in Mexico, and his first school experience in the US was in grade 9, which he began knowing very little English. Less than two years later, he had read one Percy Jackson novel, a number of manga and graphic novels, and was eager for more.

**Stimulation.** Ramon had a "home run book experience," a concept introduced by Trelease (2001), who hypothesized that one positive experience can be enough to create a permanent interest in reading. Ramon's home run experience came from the Naruto manga series, and it happened during the winter break of his first year of high school. He had been watching the Naruto TV series in Mexico, a story about a teenage Ninja, and starting reading Naruto manga in English.

**Access.** Ramon borrowed Naruto manga from the school and local public libraries, and read online versions.

**Self-selected and narrow.** Ramon is clearly a "narrow" reader: A year and four months after starting to read Naruto manga, he was still reading them. He had also completed reading the first book of the Percy Jackson and the Olympian series (The Lightning Thief, by Rick Riordan) in English, having read the entire series in graphic novel format. He is also reading The Red Pyramid (also by Rick Riordan) in graphic novel format.

**Language Development.** There are clear signs that Ramon has improved dramatically. His scores on standardized tests in English place him just slightly below the level for reclassification as a proficient English speaker, which is astonishing considering the short amount of time he has been in school in the US. In his beginning ESL class at the start of grade nine he could only read the simplest kindergarten level books, but three semesters later he had read a young adult novel in English. At the end of grade 10 he earned all A's and B's in his courses, which were regular subject matter classes with some accommodation for speakers of English as a second language.

### *Case Three: Jaimin and Jaehee*

**Reading Habit.** Jaimin, an eighth grader at the start of his reading journey, and his sister Jaehee, a ninth grader, were unenthusiastic students of English as a foreign language in Korea. Their mother, Mina, however, had a very positive experience in a university class on second language acquisition, where she had participated in a brief sustained silent reading session, and was eager to get her children involved in English reading.

After a "false start," described below, Jaimin and Jaehee were eager English readers for the next seven months..

**Stimulation.** Mina began the project by ordering "intermediate level" books for her children that she selected herself, and requiring her children to read them. This didn't work. The children, when interviewed later, said that the books were too hard and not interesting. (Jaehee,

however, said that after reading a few of the books, she got "a little interested," Cho and Krashen, 2002, p. 159.) Things changed when the children were allowed to select their own books (see below).

**Access.** Mina then ordered four books a month that her children wanted to read from a catalog.

**Self-selected and narrow.** After three months of unsuccessfully trying to get her children "hooked on books," Mina changed her policy and let them select their own reading material. She first took them to a bookstore and told them they could select whatever they liked: "She reported that both children enjoyed browsing through the books at the bookstore and were, in fact, riveted: 'My boy was laughing out loud and my daughter was nodding to herself and smiling. They seemed to forget about going home ...' (translated from Korean, in Cho and Krashen, 2002, p. 160).

We do not have details about what the children read, only that they did not select books according to reading level, but according to their interest in the story or topic.

**Tests, exercises and rewards.** Some of the books Mina ordered for her children came with a workbook and reading and vocabulary tests. Mina asked Jaemin to do the exercises and take the tests, but he had a very negative reaction right away.

**Language Development.** Seven months after their reading journey began with a trip to a bookstore, Mina took them to another bookstore. She observed that her children were involved in books:

My kids were soon involved in reading in a corner, without moving. I quietly moved closer to see what kinds of books they were reading. They were books from a well-known series of children's literature ... the kind of reading I selected for them a year ago .. It was amazing and I couldn't believe that four books a month made them improve so much in reading comprehension. They seemed to be able to read in English as easily as they read in Korean. (translated from Korean, in Cho and Krashen, 2002, p. 161)

#### ***Case Four: Karen***

**Reading Habit.** Karen, a 34-year native speaker of Korean living in the US, had never read any books in English and had little interaction with native speakers of English. In one year, she read a substantial number of young adult books, as well as adult novels and magazines.

**Stimulation.** Karen began reading books in the Sweet Valley series at the suggestion of Prof. Kyung Sook Cho, on the basis of success with this series with other subjects (Cho and Krashen, 1995a).

**Time and place to read.** According to Cho and Krashen (1995b), "Karen read the books everywhere, taking them with her on the plane when she went on a trip, and reported that she read the Sage volume of Sweet Valley High until 2:30 in the morning" (p. 18).

**Self-selected and narrow.** After Prof. Cho recommended the Sweet Valley series, Karen enjoyed them and eagerly read them voluntarily. Her additional reading included more from the same genre, as well as a great deal of reading from magazines. In one year, she read 25 books from the Sweet Valley Kids series, 21 from the Sweet Valley Twins series, and 20 from Sweet Valley High, along with 40 copies of the National Inquirer, four Harlequin Romances, and eight novels by Danielle Steel and Sydney Sheldon.

**Tests, exercises and rewards.** Karen took no tests, did no workbook exercises and her only reward was the pleasure of reading during the year her reading was studied by Cho and Krashen (1995b).

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**Language Development.** Karen gradually progressed to more challenging reading, and at the end of the year was able to read novels that she had found incomprehensible a year before. She also felt that her spoken English had improved.

### *Case five: Mi-ae*

**Reading Habit.** Mi-ae was a thirty year old adult speaker of Korean working in Los Angeles, who had been in the US for five years when she was studied by Cho and Krashen (1995c). She reported having difficulty understanding native speakers and TV and was not a reader in English. Over seven months, she read novels from the Sweet Valley series as well as a number of magazines.

**Stimulation.** Mi-ae was one of a group of ESL acquirers who participated in a study in which the acquirers voluntarily read novels from the Sweet Valley series (Cho and Krashen, 1995a). In one month she had read eight books from the Sweet Valley Kids series (second grade level), and had made significant progress with English. She was encouraged by this experience to continue reading.

**Time and place.** We do not have details about where and when she read, but Mi-ae told Krashen and Cho (1995c) that she read during every spare moment over seven months.

**Self-selected and narrow.** Mi-ae continued to read from the Sweet Valley series. After reading eight Sweet Valley Kids in one month, she continued to read 31 more, and four books from the Sweet Valley Twins (grade four level) series. She also read magazines, such as Vogue, People, and the National Inquirer. All her reading was self-selected.

**Tests, exercises and rewards.** Mi-ae took no tests, did no workbook exercises, and was given no extrinsic rewards.

**Language Development.** In addition to her progress in reading more challenging material, there were other signs of improvement:

“I had two movie video tapes. I did not understand them at all five years ago, and just looked at the pictures. I did not understand them two years ago either. Last Tuesday, I watched them again to see if I could understand them. I understood them from the start, I could not catch everything, but I understood the entire story. I was so happy that I could understand words that I knew from the reading, such as ‘envy’, ‘avoid’, and ‘wet’.” (translated from Korean, in Cho and Krashen, 1995c).

It is clear that Mi-ae’s speaking ability in English has improved. A native speaker of English she knows saw her for the first time in a year and asked if she had been taking English classes. She had only been reading Sweet Valley novels.

### *Case six: Reyna Grande*

**Reading Habit.** Reyna Grande came to the US from Mexico at age nine, after a life of great deprivation. She is obviously highly literate today. She has become a published author in English (Grande, 2012) and teaches creative writing at UCLA Extension.

**Stimulation.** Reyna Grande had been a pleasure reader in Spanish before coming to the US. She became a pleasure reader in the seventh grade in the US, and received helpful suggestions for books from her school librarian.

**Access.** In grade eight, she “would stop at the Arroyo Seco Library for books” every Friday before going home. She borrowed the maximum every week: ten books (from: Krashen and Williams, 2012, p. 26).

**Self-selected and narrow.** Reyna Grande profited from suggestions made by her school

librarian and much later by her university English teacher, but her reading was self-selected. Her elementary school reading included popular young adult series, such as the Sweet Valley Series, the Babysitters Club and her eventual favorite, books by VC Andrews.

**Tests, exercises and rewards.** In grade eight, she entered a district-wide short story contest and won first place. This reward, however, came after she had become a dedicated pleasure reader in English.

**Language Development.** Reyna Grande was not a "long term ELL": she "successfully completed the ESL program and got rid of my status as an ESL student" at the end of seventh grade (Grande, 2012, p. 240). She did well in school, winning a writing award in English, attended the University of California at Santa Cruz, and eventually became a successful author in English, publishing two novels in addition to her autobiography.

#### 4. Summary

Note that in several of the cases reviewed here information was missing for some of the categories (Table 1). This is not surprising: The case studies were not done with this set of hypotheses in mind. Our hope is that future case studies will include data that will continue to test the set of hypotheses presented in table 1.

Table 1.

	Started reading	Reading Habit	Stimulation	Access	Times Place	& Self'selected/ narrow	Tests/ exercises
Jung Seo	Adult (34)	4 years	college class	English library	subway, home	yes/yes	none
Ramon	Grade 9	1.5 years	home book	run library, online		yes/yes	
Jaimin & Jaehee	Grade 9,10	7 months	self-selected book	Catalog		yes	rejected
Karen	Adult (35)	1 year	Part of study		"read everywhere"	yes/yes	none
Mi-ai	Adult (30)	7 months	Part of study		"every space moment"	yes/yes	none
Reyna Grande	Grade 7	since childhood		Library		yes/yes	

#### Each hypothesis received clear support:

Longterm second language readers all had some kind of experience that got them interested in pleasure reading: This may be crucial in second language acquisition situations because, as noted earlier, self-selected voluntary reading is rarely done or even mentioned in second language classes.

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Longterm second/foreign language readers had access to books in the second/foreign language. This is rarely the case in the foreign language situations, where books in other languages are often difficult to find and expensive, and rarely provided in schools. It is also crucial in the second language situation for students living in poverty, who have little access to books at school, at home and in their communities (Krashen, 2004).

Longterm second language readers found a time and place to read, often difficult to do in these hectic times. This problem, of course, is similar for all readers.

Our readers read books they selected themselves, typical of successful readers (Krashen, 2004), but of course not typical of classroom instruction, where nearly all reading is assigned. When reading is selected by the reader, this makes it much more likely that it will be of interest and much more likely that the reader will develop higher levels of competence (Lee, 2007).

Our readers were narrow readers, also consistent with what is known about successful readers (Lamme, 1976; Krashen, 2000). And again, narrow reading, staying with a topic, author or genre for an extended period of time, is rarely encouraged in classrooms. Rather, reading and literature classes typically utilize surveys, providing students only samples of different authors and genres. Narrow reading is more comprehensible, thanks to familiarity with an author's style and greater background information.

Tests, exercises and rewards, the core of traditional instruction, were not appreciated by our longterm readers, and several made excellent progress without them.

## 5. Conclusions

If subsequent studies confirm the results of this analysis, we arrive at an interesting conclusion: The formula for success in establishing a longterm reading habit is in direct contradiction to several practices that are part of traditional instruction.

Traditional instruction does not value free voluntary reading, does not provide access to reading material or time and a place to read. It does not encourage self-selection and places the emphasis on short and varied reading samples, rather than narrow reading.

Longterm pleasure readers have overcome these obstacles; in a sense they have overcome what they have learned in school.

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## Appendix: First language studies

McKool (2007) provided information on many of the hypotheses focused on here.

**Reading habit.** McKool interviewed 20 fifth graders who were avid readers (read for an average of 46 minutes a day during a ten day period) and 17 who were reluctant readers (read for an average of three minutes a day).

**Stimulation.** "Avid readers ...reported that voluntary reading was promoted in their classes through the practice of Sustained Silent Reading" (McKool, 2007, p. 125).

**Access.** All avid readers in this study had access to books. Avid readers from higher-income families tended to get their books from bookstores and home, while lower-income readers were more dependent on the school library (p. 123). There was, however, no difference between the high- and low-income avid reader groups in enthusiasm for reading (p. 118). Some reluctant readers had experienced sustained silent reading (SSR), but in several of their SSR classes they did not have access to what they wanted to read.

**Self-selected/narrow.** The readers "... felt ... that it was critical for teachers to allow them to read whatever they wanted to read. When avid readers were asked to read required materials during [SSR] time, they frequently admitted that 'This makes me not want to read.'" (McKool, 2007, p. 125). Some reluctant readers had SSR, but they did have their choice of what to read; teachers did not allow comics or magazines. Both avid and reluctant readers read series books.

**Tests, exercises and rewards.** None of the avid readers felt they read more as a result of a reading incentive program. "In fact, several avid readers admitted that they read less because of such programs" (McKool, 2007, p. 126). Avid readers disliked incentive programs because "they did not allow complete choice in material selection. Students ... reported that participation in the



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program required them to read a book off of a predetermined list on a particular reading level .... One student stated: 'I want to read whatever I want to read. When I have to read an AR (Accelerated Reader) book, it makes me not want to read.'" (p. 126). These reactions confirm the importance of self-selection (see above).

Two additional studies (Purcell-Gates, Degener, Jacobson & Soler, 2002; Rodrigo, Greenbert, & Segal, 2014) provide some useful information. In both cases, those exposed to a literacy program emphasizing reading for meaning (stimulation) were shown to have developed more of a reading habit than those in programs that did not. Both studies included second language acquirers, but it was not clear if they reacted differently from the native speakers of English.

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