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**The Robustness of Free Reading in  
Second and Foreign Language Education**

**R. Joseph Ponniah, Ph.D.**

# **The Robustness of Free Reading in Second and Foreign Language Education**

**R. Joseph Ponniah, Ph.D.**

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## **Abstract**

Free reading is a powerful tool that provides input in a low-anxiety situation. Free reading is consistent with the Comprehension Hypothesis that learners acquire language when they focus on the meaning of the text they read. A brief review of studies on free reading reveals that reading has greater gains in all measures of language competence, with a strong impact on writing style, vocabulary, grammar and reading fluency.

**Keywords:** Incidental acquisition, writing apprehension, reading competence, incidental learning, vocabulary development.

## **Introduction**

It has been hypothesized in a number of studies that free reading results in increased second and foreign language linguistic competence (e.g. Constantino, 1994; Lee, 2007; Ponniah, 2008; Mason and Krashen, 1997). In order to have the desired results in reading, texts written should be well within learners' reading competence, and the goal of the readers is to understand the meaning of the text they read (Bamford and Day, 1997; Day and Bamford, 2002).

In fact, the idea is consistent with the Comprehension Hypothesis that we acquire language when we receive comprehensible input slightly ahead of the current level of understanding, accompanied by a low affective filter (Krashen, 1982; 2002). Free reading provides more comprehensible input that affects acquisition, with a strong impact on grammar, vocabulary, writing style and reading fluency.

## **Types of free Reading Programs**

Free reading programs (Krashen, 2004) are categorized into three:

1. Sustained silent reading
2. Self-selected reading
3. Extensive reading

In all the three, students are involved in free reading but they spend a little time for follow-up activities such as teacher-student conferences and writing brief summaries only to monitor the progress of students, and not as strategies to improve linguistic competence.

### **Characteristics of Free Reading**

Free reading gives freedom to choose any texts of interest; learners can stop reading if they do not like the book they read or if they do not understand. Students participating in free reading programs focus on the meaning of the text they read, and not on the form. They acquire all measures of language competence subconsciously.

For possible free reading to happen, Day and Bamford (2002) posit ten principles to be adopted in reading programs.

- (1) The reading material should be well within the learners' reading comfort zone.
- (2) A variety of texts on a wide range of topics must be available for learners to encourage a desire to read.
- (3) Learners must be given freedom to choose texts they expect to understand and enjoy.
- (4) More reading is desirable to reap the benefits of reading, and to develop a habit of reading.
- (5) Readers should be encouraged to read for pleasure, information and general understanding.
- (6) Experience of reading the text must be at the centre of reading, and no questions should be followed by reading but a minimal level of accountability is required to keep track of what and how much students read;.
- (7) Students must be discouraged from using dictionary to train them to read faster, and to promote reading fluency.
- (8) Encourage silent reading to discover that reading is a personal interaction with the text.
- (9) Readers can be given awareness that reading results not only in reading proficiency but also in all measures of language competence.
- (10) Finally, the teachers have to commit to reading.

Mason (2004) states that, in extensive reading programs, readers must devote their time for reading and not for output based activities because output in the form of writing may not help them increase language competence and, moreover, it takes time away from reading. Further, the teacher should guide students to select books that fall well within the reading comfort zone, because language acquisition takes place only when they understand the meaning conveyed in the texts.

### **Theory and Research**

Free reading is a powerful tool in second and foreign language education (e.g. Mason, 2005; Elley and Mangubhai, 1981, 1983). It is a pleasurable experience; it is pleasant and, in fact, extremely enjoyable and efficient. (Krashen, 2003; McQuillan, 1994; Pilgreen and Krashen, 1993).

This is consistent with the Pleasure Hypothesis that we acquire more language when we receive more pleasant input, a hypothesis related to the Comprehension Hypothesis. Moreover, pleasant input will lower the affective filter, a block that prevents input from reaching the Language Acquisition Device (LAD). The Affective Filter Hypothesis claims that we acquire language only when we receive comprehensible input in a low anxiety situation.

Readers receiving comprehensible input easily outperformed comparison subjects on all measures of second or foreign language linguistic competence: writing style (Lee, 2005, 2009; Krashen, 2004; Janopoulos, 1986); vocabulary (Day et al., 1991; Lehmann, 2007; Kweon and kim, 2008); grammar (Elley and Mangubhai, 1983, Elley, 1991, Lee, Krashen and Gribbons, 1996; Stokes, Krashen, and Kartchner, 1998, Ponniah, 2008), and reading fluency and comprehension (Bell, 2001; Day and Bamford 2002; Nishino, 2007; Iwahori, 2008);

### ***Writing Competence***

More free reading is related to better writing competence. We acquire the special language of writing by reading, and not by writing (Krashen, 2004). Readers subconsciously acquire skills required for writing and they use them involuntarily while writing, and, in fact, it is too complex to develop high levels of writing competence consciously.

Lee and Hsu (2009) experimented with Taiwanese adult EFL students participating in an in-class extensive reading program lasting one year (two semesters) easily outperformed the comparison subjects on writing style. The readers showed better gains on measures of writing, which includes fluency, content, organization, vocabulary, language use and mechanics. The comparison group spent 1 hour and 50 minutes a week in general English periods where they received formal instruction. The experimental subjects also followed the same formal instruction for 100 minutes but they devoted 50 minutes for free reading. At the end of the second semester, the experimental group made greater gains on all measures of writing (Hotelling's  $T=.62$ ,  $P <$  Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) 23

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.000). The study is consistent with the hypothesis that writing competence is subconsciously absorbed only through reading, with a great success in longer programs which provide more interesting reading materials (see Krashen, 2004, 2007).

Lee (2005) noted that recreational reading results in writing competence in EFL context. The data collected from two hundred and seventy students in Taiwan confirmed that those who read more did more leisure writing and the amount of free reading was the only significant predictor of writing competence. Moreover, free reading lowers writing apprehensions and lessens writing blocks.

### ***Incidental Acquisition of Vocabulary***

Reading results in subconscious acquisition of vocabulary; each time when a reader finds an unfamiliar word, he/she will infer a partial meaning of the word and a repeated exposure to the word in different contexts will lead to considerable vocabulary development. Readers absorb the meaning of words when they understand messages and not when they focus on new words while reading. The process is subconscious, which, of course, is incidental learning. The data of the following studies confirm that reading results in the acquisition of vocabulary and the acquired vocabulary can be retained if readers come across the words in different contexts.

Richard et al. (1991) confirm that students reading stories in EFL classroom acquire vocabulary incidentally. Subjects were two groups of students comprising 191 and 397 respectively. The experimental subjects of both groups were asked to read an adapted version of the short story 'Mystery of the African mask' in 30 minutes and the control group did not read. After the experimental groups finished reading the story, the participants of both groups were given a vocabulary test that contained 17 unknown words. The experimental groups outperformed the comparison groups on the test. The results of the Independent Samples t-test confirmed that the vocabulary gains for the subjects of both groups were statistically significant. ( $t = -2.55$ ,  $P < .01$  for high school students and  $t = 9.48$ ,  $P < .01$  for college students). The subjects encountered the target words only when reading the story and for possible retention of the words for longer duration, they need to get exposure to the words in different contexts.

Adult Korean EFL students (Kweon and Kim, 2008) who read authentic texts subconsciously acquired vocabulary, with more gains in words that occurred frequently in the texts. The subjects read three books that contained 638 pages for five weeks, spending an average of 5 to 6 hours per day. They were asked to read extensively without focusing on form while reading. They were given 367 words on the pretest, posttest and the delayed post test. The words were divided into adjective, adverb and noun in order to assess the word knowledge on all the three word classes independently and to assess which one is easier to acquire. The one-way ANOVA revealed that gains in vocabulary between the pretest and the posttest were statistically significant. (for nouns,  $F(1,11) = 309.65$ ,  $p < .001$ ; for verbs,  $F(1,11) = 275.05$ ,  $p < .001$  and for

adjectives,  $F(1,11) = 290.34, p < .001$ .) The study confirms that free reading can be used as an effective tool to acquire vocabulary and the acquired vocabulary through reading is retained without much attrition.

### *Acquisition of Grammar*

Free reading results in the acquisition of grammar; those who read more develop a subconscious feel for correctness. A number of studies have confirmed the claim that those who read more do better on a test of grammar (Elley and Mangubhai, 1983, Elley, 1991, Lee, Krashen and Gibbons, 1996; Stokes, Krashen, and Kartchner, 1998, Ponniah, 2008, 2009)

Ponniah (2008) reports that those who have a pleasure reading habit easily outperformed non-readers on a test of grammar. The study is conducted to determine the effects reading on grammatical proficiency by comparing the performance of readers and non-readers. Subjects were 44 adult ESL students who had studied English for fourteen years with a focus on learning grammar. Among the 44 students, eleven were readers and thirty-three were non-readers. They were asked to take two tests: a grammar test and a reading/writing test. The readers clearly did better on both tests, and the differences were statistically significant (for grammar,  $t = 7.85, df = 42, p < .0001$ ; for reading/writing,  $t = 6.77, df = 42, p < .0001$ ). They were also given a questionnaire to know the frequency of grammar use while taking these tests. The response of the subjects confirmed that readers engaged less with grammar rules while answering the questions on the tests, which indicates that they, apparently, used their subconsciously acquired grammatical competence.

A recent data (Ponniah, 2009) from India confirmed that readers use subconsciously acquired grammatical competence even on grammar tests. The data collected from eight Adult ESL students, who learnt rule formulation for eight years, through a short grammar test and a questionnaire confirmed that constant reading helped them perform better on the test.

The table shows the results of the grammar test

List of students	Correct responses	Incorrect responses	Applied rules for number of items
1	14	1	2
2	12	3	0
3	14	1	2
4	10	5	4
5	13	2	0
6	15	0	0
7	13	2	0
8	15	0	0

Mean scores for students on the test =13.25 (88.34%)

Standard Deviation =1.67

The students did not apply rules when answering 93.33% of the items. When asked, “How did you answer the items for which you had not applied rules?” they replied reading helps them

answer these items. The data confirms that readers subconsciously acquire grammar, and they use the acquired competence on grammar tests.

### ***Reading Fluency and Comprehension***

Free reading will increase the reading speed and it will promote reading fluency because learners' reading material is well within their linguistic competence when they read for pleasure (Day and Bamford 2002; Iwahori, 2008). Young adult learners who did free reading in an extensive reading program for two semesters performed better on a test of reading comprehension, and had greater gains in reading speed than the comparison subjects who did intensive reading, which means reading with a focus on form (Bell, 2001).

Nishino (2007) conducted a longitudinal study, which lasted 2.5 years, with two EFL students from two junior high schools to measure the gains on reading speed and comprehension. As the subjects had no idea about receiving comprehensible input through extensive reading, the experimenter explained that reading will develop their English reading fluency, and they can enjoy the pleasure of reading. The data shows that the reading speed of the subjects had almost doubled during the treatment period. The subjects spent an average of 1 hour a week in four sessions.

The table shows the results of the reading rate test of the two participants (words per minute)

Participants	Feb. 2001	Nov. 2001	Apr. 2002	Jun. 2003
Fumi	72	106	183	137
Mako	58	99	128	111

### **Conclusion**

In sum, there is strong evidence that free reading has greater gains in all measures of language competence.

1. Reading improves the writing style and it lowers the writing apprehensions.
2. It results in incidental acquisition of vocabulary, and the acquired words are retained by readers without attrition.
3. Readers subconsciously acquire grammar, and they use the acquired grammatical competence on grammar tests and in real situations.
4. Reading has greater gains in reading fluency.
5. Free reading made us realize the fact that language learning is a pleasurable experience.
6. Free reading, in the place of traditional instruction, is more effective.
7. Experimental subjects in reading programs outperformed comparison subjects, with a greater success in longer programs.
8. Students who participate in reading programs develop a pleasure reading habit.

Despite the strong evidence supporting the claim that free reading is a powerful tool in second and foreign language education, it has not been integrated into many ESL/EFL programs. To include free reading into the curriculum, more research on how to organize reading programs is required. In-class free reading will motivate students to read even after the program is over and, thus, they will become autonomous acquirers, which, of course, is the goal of all education.

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