

Northwest Practitioner Knowledge Institute
Practitioner Knowledge Documentation

Modified Sustained Silent Reading
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What the Research Said

I was particularly interested in the research done by Renandya, Rajan and Jacobs (1999) as it is one of the few studies done on Sustained Silent Reading (SSR) with adult English-as-a-second-language (ESL) students. As stated in their paper, “Extensive Reading with Adult Learners of English as a Second Language,” “. . . one of the greatest rewards in conducting this study was in seeing the initially not-so-eager readers gradually develop a healthy reading habit – a very important component of learning a foreign language.”

Why I Decided to Use This Particular Research

As one who heartily agrees with the importance of establishing healthy reading habits and behaviors in second language learners, and as one who has seen student resistance to SSR, I enthusiastically embarked upon this project. I had used SSR with my ESL adult students as an activity to do when finished with in-class work. I wanted to see if student reading attitudes would change, given more opportunity and structure, and if, when “offered a strong rationale for engaging in the program . . . that large amounts of English reading would likely result in greater English proficiency.” (Renandya, Rajan, Jacobs, 1999)

I can attest to personal gains in my own language proficiency due to vast amounts of reading. I tried to draw a parallel between my experience as a reader in my first language, English, and a student’s experience with reading in a second language, but without a concrete approach, I was only surmising. This project allowed me to take my assumptions regarding reading and foreign language learning and put them to the test. As a result, the students were the recipients of a wonderful opportunity to engage in an unconventional language learning approach as the navigators of their own learning journey.

How I Applied These Findings

The students who participated in the modified SSR (mSSR) intervention were part of my Intermediate Low I and Intermediate Low II class, as set up by Mt. Diablo Adult Education in Concord, California. The CASAS reading scores of these students actually encompassed the full spectrum of intermediate students at our school, from low to high. The class met five days a week, for two hours at a time. The project lasted two terms, for a total of five months. The native languages of students included Spanish, Korean, Cantonese, Farsi, and Russian.

I started by thinking about how to set up the entire project, from generating student buy-in, to creating a class library, to fostering in my students an enthusiasm for reading, to gathering student input, to brainstorming post-reading activities, and to assessing the project as a whole.

An important and early part of properly setting up this project was to create student buy-in. I explained the importance of reading to language acquisition. I also set up a field trip to the local Borders bookstore. I secured a tour with the manager of the store and it was very successful, as students learned how to access information and find books according to subject matter. More importantly, they were able to immerse themselves in the wonderful world of exploring books as a fun and leisurely activity. Throughout the entire project, I constantly reminded students of what we were doing and why we were doing it. I pointed out the learning that was taking place, as it was happening, and had students express that learning to each other and to me.

I set up a class filing system to house student folders that contained a reading log that I created and a language learning diary that I adapted from the *Collaborations* text book. The filing system had hanging folders with tabs from A to Z. I taught students how to keep records of what they read and learned. I also taught them how to file their folders alphabetically. This system worked out well as it fostered student responsibility and organization.

In creating the library, I decided to choose a few books myself to get the project started, and then facilitated a group vote on genres to be added to the library. Their top four choices were biographies, history, children's books and romance. Biographies came in as a solid first choice. The books were then purchased, new and used, according to the student vote. In purchasing the books, I also considered the students' CASAS reading scores, which ranged from 215 to 232.

The post-reading activities designed by Sandra Banke and Dominique Brillanceau for their research done on mSSR at Portland State University Lab School served as a springboard in my brainstorming of other activities. These activities included retelling to a partner, sharing new words or phrases with a partner, talking about one character in the story, summarizing what had happened so far, and reading out loud to the teacher.

I officially started the project with a reading survey on students' personal reading attitudes and behaviors. This survey served two purposes. First, it set the scene for what we would be doing for the many weeks ahead. Second, it gave me a marker to later assess any changes in student reading attitudes and behaviors that occurred as a result of this project.

My basic approach to mSSR as a classroom activity ended up being twofold. Initially, I planned pre-determined reading days and times and the duration of the reading. After much debate, I designed the reading time to be at the beginning of class, two days a week. After watching mSSR in motion a couple of times, I determined that the length of reading time should be 30 to 45 minutes. This included time to rummage through the library, get folders, grab dictionaries if so desired, and settle in to true, silent reading. The post-reading activity usually lasted about 15 minutes.

As the term went on and the project evolved, I began to use mSSR in other ways. There were many times when I let mSSR naturally occur in our classroom setting. For example, on a test day students handed in their tests and then immediately got a book. Eventually the entire class ended up reading. The test time flowed right into the mSSR time quite naturally. I believe this application of mSSR teaches students to use their time wisely. It is also a natural way to introduce mSSR into the classroom, for those who are hesitant to do so. Additionally, it provides

a solution as to what to do with those students who always seem to be ahead of the rest of the class.

How I Knew How Well this New Strategy or Approach Worked

I chose a couple of different strategies for assessing how successful this new approach was in helping students. First, I kept a log of the success or failure of different mSSR sessions, based on my observations. I also noted the students' personal reading logs. Part of the log included stating what the students liked or did not like about their books. This further helped me discern how students responded to mSSR. Additionally, I noted the students' language learning diaries. There were many opportunities for students to record what they were learning. How full or how empty the diaries were told me a lot about whether this process was helping them learn more. Finally, I used the student surveys that I initially gave students back in January to crosscheck several key answers regarding reading. I did this individually. I met with each student and re-asked several questions off of the survey, as well as their thoughts on the project as a whole. The response was overwhelmingly positive.

What I Learned About This Strategy or Approach

I found an acute awareness in students of their own learning gains throughout this period of reading. More than 95 percent of students involved with this intervention were able to specifically identify how sustained silent reading contributed to their own language learning. Many students reported on the growth of their vocabulary. Many others reported that their reading speed had increased. Several others mentioned their lack of time at home to read. They also talked about being able to make a connection between the grammar and vocabulary learned in class and the written word in a story. One student talked about being able to recognize and understand the grammar within the context of whatever she was reading. Some acknowledged that their interest and desire in reading had increased. A few students talked about how reading had proven to be the means to learning more about United States history and important figures in American history. Along those same lines, others reported that reading had increased their knowledge in the area of science. One particular student mentioned the fact that she did not have access to books that dealt with subject matters such as biographies and United States history. Across the board, all students who participated in this intervention said they enjoyed and welcomed the mSSR time in class and would like to continue incorporating this aspect of learning into our class curriculum.

Supports and Challenges I Faced When I Used This Research

As a whole, I encountered more supports than challenges while using this research in the classroom. The initial Northwest Practitioner Knowledge Institute provided access to the research, as well as time to explore the findings and the implications of those findings. This was a crucial first step. Erik Jacobson, the professional developer from CalPro, lent tremendous support and guidance throughout the entire project. This support included several face-to-face meetings, one including a visit to my class, as well as phone calls and numerous e-mail correspondences. The leadership staff at Mt. Diablo Adult Education was also tremendously supportive of the project.

The greatest challenge I had was a lack of time to devote to mSSR in the classroom. I was constantly trying to squeeze in mSSR or squeeze in the remainder of one of my regular lessons. When I allowed adequate mSSR time, I would often get behind in our main lesson. Conversely, to stay on track with the principle material would mean to significantly cut back on mSSR time, which would defeat the purpose of sustained silent reading. This was and will continue to be a very difficult obstacle in bringing mSSR to the classroom.

What I Recommend to Other Teachers

Now that I have completed my project in modified sustained silent reading, I would encourage other practitioners like myself to bring mSSR into their classrooms. I would also encourage them to use resources like those on the website, www.calpronwpkimssr.blogspot.com, to help them with set up ideas, book choices, and anticipation of potential challenges. Given the proper setup and organization, mSSR in the classroom can be another successful practice used to foster learning in students learning a second language. Strong leadership from the teacher and continual explanation of why reading is vital to language learning and how to make the most of the opportunity to read in class are important parts of bringing mSSR into the adult ESL classroom.

What I Plan to Do Next

I plan to continue to use the research done on modified sustained silent reading and Adult Second Language Learners to support the use of mSSR in the classroom. As one who has used this research in a practical way, I will encourage other staff members in my organization to try it and provide support to them. This has been a very successful and rewarding project for me and my class and I believe many other classes can benefit from it as well.

Renandya W., Rajan, B.R. and Jacobs, G. (1999). "Extensive Reading with Adult Learners of English as a Second Language," *RELC Journal* 30, 39-60.