

Northwest Practitioner Knowledge Institute Practitioner Knowledge Documentation

Sustained Silent Reading **Nellie Nutting**

What the Research Said

In their review of studies on Silent Sustained Reading (SSR), Chow and Chou (2000) discuss the findings of Wiesendanger and Birlem (1984), who observed that 5 months or fewer of SSR did not improve reading comprehension or word recognition. They also discuss the importance of allowing students to choose their own reading materials as well as having a wide range of books available for students. The English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) Lab School in Portland, Oregon also did a study of modified SSR (mSSR) where they noted gains on an “individual level.” (Brillanceau, C. & Banke, S.) Observed successes included areas such as choosing books and staying engaged for 20 minutes, holding books and turning pages in a traditional way, and sharing thoughts about the book. Research on SSR with English-as-a-second-language (ESL) students is very limited, so this will be part of a “new frontier” in ESL.

Why I Decided to Use This Particular Research

SSR is a technique I used when I taught in the K-12 program in the public schools. I had never considered using SSR in any form in my ESL classroom. I was interested in seeing how the students would respond to this approach. Would they stay with one book the whole 15 minutes? Would they stay engaged in the text? Would they begin to document the reading of other English language materials outside of class? Would they document enjoyment and value in the approach? My observations as well as student self-documentation helped to answer these questions.

How I Applied These Findings

In choosing the class to begin using modified SSR, I really only had one choice. In the community where I lived and worked, our ESL classes were quite limited. We operated out of a community college and our ESL program was federally funded with some state community college support. We were located in Western Wyoming Community College which is in the high deserts of South Western Wyoming in a community of about 20,000. Our instructional staff had little, if any, teaching experience and rarely had experience in ESL. Our particular department was, however, very progressive and worked diligently to train instructors and to incorporate outside funding to add to the program.

The majority of students were Spanish speaking from Mexico, but we also had various Asian groups represented and were getting more and more Eastern European immigrants as well. Over the past five years we had also been joined by South Americans who spoke either Spanish or Portuguese. Because we wanted to try this technique with beginning level students on a regular basis, I chose to use my multilevel morning class. This class was made up of mostly women who didn't hold outside jobs and were able to attend class four to five days a week. They were a

highly motivated group and had levels ranging from BEST literacy SPL 0 to 7. Classes met from 9:00 to 10:30 a.m. daily, Monday through Thursday, with a computer lab on Friday.

We divided the group in two for the modified SSR. Students with an SPL below 3 were in one group. Those with SPL 3 or higher were in a second group. We averaged seven students in each group daily. We spent from 15 to 25 minutes of the 90-minute class silent reading and discussing our readings. Because this was an open entry/open exit class we lost a few and gained a few students over the four months we documented this process.

To get SSR started at the beginning of our spring semester in mid-January, I compiled a library of books that I had borrowed from our local libraries from which the students could choose. Later, our department purchased several more books and I was able to return those I had borrowed. We used modified SSR as our class opening, so students would come into the room and immediately select a book and begin reading. Next, I reviewed the example forms on observation and student attitudes given to us at the institute. I developed my own forms from these. We used them at the end of the silent reading and during the discussion time. The instructors each wrote short observations as the students wrote vocabulary words and enjoyment level for the reading they did that day.

How I Knew How Well This New Strategy or Approach Worked

Mostly, I observed student interest in the reading process and in the follow-up questions about what they had found or learned. In addition, observations made by my team-teachers assisted in determining what benefits the students were receiving from this approach. (The observation sheets and student logs can be found at the end of this report.) In the teacher logs all of us reported increasing student interest as the days and weeks passed. Our initial entries were full of phrases like “lots of talking,” and “use of translators,” etc. By the end, our entries were more in the line of “quiet and interested in reading today,” and “some assistance, but reading related,” etc. Student vocabulary logs filled rapidly. Student reading logs which asked how well students liked their chosen book started with many reporting a “terrible” or “so-so” experience but later changed to “good” and “very good” reading experiences reported.

What I Learned About This Strategy or Approach

When I first began the implementation of this modified SSR approach, most students appeared nervous and unsure of what to do with it. They liked to look at the English language materials, but could not seem to find a way to benefit from reading them. There was much frustration at the amount of vocabulary they didn’t know in each text. Initially, students who shared the same native language spent several minutes discussing which book to choose and asking others for help. This shortened the time each student had to read silently.

As we progressed, students got the hang of choosing a book more suitable to their language proficiency. Many students chose the same book for several sessions so they could use a dictionary to figure out more of the meaning. Students who had never looked words up in the dictionary became experts and assisted others in constructing meaning as time went on. One of our Lithuanian students, much to my surprise, turned from having an “I can’t do this” attitude, to

an “I’ll help you choose a book” attitude by the end. Because she didn’t have anyone else in class who spoke her native language and because her level was so low, she was initially very frustrated. It was nice to see that she also became more proficient, even without native language assistance.

When our purchased books started to arrive, I modified the approach slightly again. I had two groups read the same text once a week, allowing for much interaction upon completion to see what they had understood from the reading. Before asking questions about vocabulary and comprehension, students would do a choral reading activity. The structure was as follows. First, the students read the selected text silently. Next, the students repeated the same text after the teacher, line by line. Then the students practiced reading in pairs. At this time, some looked up unfamiliar vocabulary and asked for assistance with the pronunciation of unfamiliar words. Finally, students were brought back together to read the selected text as a whole group. As an ending to the activity, the student pairs were called on randomly to read a short portion of the text until the entire text had been read out loud one final time. Because students were much more comfortable with teacher directed activities, this did seem to make them happy to look forward to some direction once during the weekly classes.

Supports and Challenges I Faced When I Used This Research

My director was willing to purchase some books for our students. The area I live in has plenty of library facilities that were willing to loan books for an extended period. Having feedback from colleagues and NCSALL was also helpful. Because I team-taught this class with two other instructors, I gave them forms to complete with their observations of the approach, allowing more completed observations than I could have done alone.

Because the research points to the need to use SSR for a length of time longer than I had, I am not sure whether or not my observations are dependable enough for a proper research project. (The trial was used from January to mid-April.)

What I Recommend to Other Teachers

First, I would encourage all teachers to use this approach in some form in all ESL classes, at all levels. Second, it is important to give this strategy ample time to become familiar to both teacher and students before making a decision as to what benefits your students are gaining. My team of teachers and volunteer tutors did not have the “buy in” I did, and this took time. It would have been easy to give it up because SSR was very uncomfortable for the first four to five weeks. Next, it is important to have a variety of books readily available for students to choose from. Start with the public library. We purchased many books so the classroom would have a constant supply, but it would have also worked fine to continue to check the books out from our local library. Finally, have the students keep a weekly or monthly reading log of outside reading they did when not in class. It was very enlightening to see the kinds of materials students were perusing when not in class. This allows for spin-off lessons using some of these materials with the whole group, which in turn makes students aware of the kinds of English they are exposed to daily.

What I Plan to Do Next

At this time, I won't be teaching in a group situation because I moved to a new place and will be taking time to hone other skills. However, I will be staying in contact with my prior school next year and will be interested in seeing if they are still using some of the mSSR methods and activities we developed. As I continue doing contracted tutor training workshops, I will incorporate a piece on SSR into my presentation. Tutors can expose their students to written English on a regular basis and use it as a spring board for discussion or further lessons. Also, I will encourage others to look into research on various ESL techniques. We often don't feel we have time to learn or apply a new strategy, but it helps keep us fresh and keeps our students on their toes!

Chow, P. & Chou, C. (2000). "Evaluation Sustained Silent Reading in Reading Classes." *The Internet TESL Journal*, VI (11) <http://iteslj.org/Articles/Chow-SSR.html>

Wiesendanger, K. D. & Birlm, E.D. (1984) "The Effectiveness of SSR: An Overview of the Research." *Reading Horizons*, 24 (3) 197-201.

Teacher Observation Sheet

Date	Total # of Students	Students in Literacy Levels				# of students on task	Comments
		0-1	2-3	4-5	6-7		
01/25/2005	15	6	4	3	2	12	Trouble getting started - especially lowest level students. Spent 5 minutes before most were on task.

Student Reading Log

Name _____

Date _____

Pick something to read.

Read for 15 minutes.

Fill out your reading log.

Date	Name of book, magazine, newspaper, or article	Today the reading was:				
		Very good	Good	So-so	Not so good	Terrible
01/25/2005	King of the Birds		x			

Student Vocabulary Log

Date	New Word	Meaning	Sentence
01/25/2005	Eagle	Big bird, USA bird	The eagle is a symbol of the United States of America.