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# Sustained Silent Reading in the ESL Classroom: The Silent Motivator?

Megan V. Ahonen  
*SIT Graduate Institute*

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# **Sustained Silent Reading in the ESL Classroom: The Silent Motivator?**

Megan V. Ahonen

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
Master of Arts in Teaching degree  
at the SIT Graduate Institute,  
Brattleboro, VT.

March 13, 2011

IPP Advisor: Elizabeth Tannenbaum

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This project by Megan V. Ahonen is accepted in its present form.

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Project Advisor: Elizabeth Tannenbaum

Project Reader: Brendan Wilberton

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## Abstract

This classroom based research paper investigates the use of Sustained Silent Reading (SSR) in the ESL classroom. The purpose is to determine if implementing a SSR program would increase students' interest and desire to read in English outside of the classroom for pleasure. This paper will share background information on the students and school, different reading inventory samples and questionnaires with student responses, and current findings on SSR compared to my own personal findings. The final chapter is devoted to roadblocks and limitations encountered along the way throughout this study.

ERIC Descriptors:

Sustained Silent Reading  
Independent Reading  
Reading Motivation  
Reading Attitudes  
Reading Habits

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## Chapter 1 INTRODUCTION

### *Why study Sustained Silent Reading (SSR)?*

Growing up, I always had a great love of reading. I am not sure how I was initially turned on to reading. Did my parents read to me often as a child? Was I mimicking what I saw my brother and sister doing? Or was it simply that I was the youngest of three children and I needed something to occupy myself with as I was dragged from activity to activity that my siblings were involved in? Whatever the reason, I *loved* reading. One of my biggest requests was for my mother to take me to *Annie's Bookstop*, a small shop in town where you could bring in your old books and exchange them for somebody else's gently used books. My mother usually succumbed to my wishes and allowed for a quick trip to the bookstore, most likely happy that I was asking for books, rather than video games or other toys.

As the years progressed and I meandered my way through the elementary, then middle and high school years, and finally on to college, my love of reading remained strong. While I can't say that reading academic journals and history books was of particular interest to me, I always looked forward to my quiet time with a book of my choosing. Something that I wasn't reading for any school assignment, something that I didn't have to report back on to anyone in particular, something that I could simply immerse myself into for the sheer pleasure of it.

Fast forward to my graduate work at SIT Graduate Institute and the many



courses and assignments that allowed me to choose my own subject area. I often found myself coming back to reading for pleasure. How could I incorporate this into a lesson plan, a paper or a presentation? I knew that at some point in my studies I would find my way back to investigating this topic further.

According to Chow & Chou (2000), “The aim of Sustained Silent Reading is to help students develop a good habit of reading and improve their English proficiency in the long run” (Introduction section, para. 1). I agree with this statement wholeheartedly and after teaching ESL for eight years at the same school with relatively the same type of student, I knew it was time to change things up in my classroom. My students did the *required* reading (for the most part) but few, if any, ever read any books in English for the pure pleasure of it or to improve their English. Therefore I set out researching the topic of ESL and SSR, not specifically narrowing it down to high school students, although hoping I would find some interesting information that would be helpful to me or at least would support what I was experiencing in my own classroom.

Robert McCracken (1971) believed that any good reading program should include the opportunity for students to read for extended lengths of time without being interrupted. In his research for the May 1971 *Journal of Reading* he states that:

Dr. Lyman C. Hunt, Jr. of the University of Vermont designated such a goal as early as 1960 and soon thereafter introduced *Uninterrupted Sustained Silent Reading* with the acronym USSR. The acronym was to command attention; we found it commanded too much attention so we dropped the U and SSR evolved (p. 521).

McCracken then continued his work by coming up with some basic guidelines to be followed in order to implement a successful SSR program in one's classroom, some of which include students reading silently and the teacher modeling reading to her students (McCracken, 1971, p. 521). While investigating this topic more and more, I was keeping track of what pieces I felt would work in my classroom and which pieces I might be able to modify to better serve my situation and students.

Knowing that reading had always been an integral part of my education and my spare time, I felt it important to do something to try to encourage my students to read more. Thinking about this project in its entirety made me stop to weigh the pros and cons of implementing such a time-intensive program. I found support in an article in *Education World* written by Gary Hopkins (1997):

Sustained silent reading can serve many purposes:

- Most school reading is assigned reading. SSR offers students an opportunity to read material of their own choice.
- During SSR time, many students learn that they can use their word attack skills to figure out new words--on their own!
- SSR can build students' confidence in their abilities to work through reading trouble spots.
- Many studies of whole-class groups and of select groups of unmotivated readers show that SSR can result in students wanting to read more.
- The amount of time that students spend reading independently outside of school often increases as a result of SSR, parents report. Often children ask for books to read at home.
- SSR can be one more element in a reading program aimed at demonstrating the joy that reading can bring and developing lifelong readers and learners (Sustained Silent Reading (SSR)... section, para. 1).

The benefits of SSR were clearly worth the time and effort that this project would take. There were just too many positives and possibilities for my students to not give it a try.

### *Questions and Challenges*

As an ESL teacher at a private high school, I began questioning whether I could incorporate SSR into my already jam-packed curriculum. However, being a private school, there is some room for experimenting with new ideas and techniques. So my quest begins: Can one instill a love of reading in ESL learners in the hopes of getting students to read more in their L2? Will SSR help to build students' confidence? Will this help with their reading comprehension and eventually improve their TOEFL scores? These are just some of the questions I pondered as I went about my journey of investigation.

When I began this project, I had a pretty specific plan in mind. With all the questions I had floating around in my head, I was attempting to figure out the best way to "test out" the idea of ESL students learning to enjoy reading in their L2. The first challenge I faced was how to incorporate this project into our daily routine. Next, I wondered if I should include all of my classes as test subjects, or if I should have a control group that didn't participate in SSR so that I had a group to compare to. Then I wondered how I would be able to analyze whether or not the students truly *enjoy* reading. Would I give them some sort of test at the end? No, that wouldn't work because that would then interfere with the whole idea of reading for pleasure. Would I give both the control and test groups a

sample TOEFL test to see which group now did better on the reading comprehension and vocabulary sections? Again, this defeated my purpose of the idea of reading for pleasure. This all began to become extremely challenging in terms of teaching my curriculum and attempting to keep each of my classes at relatively the same place along the way. In the end, I decided to use my two Advanced level ESL classes as test groups while not incorporating SSR into my Transitional level class. I then planned to use another Advanced level class to compare to, however, as the project went on, I realized there were simply too many variables when trying to test classes taught by two different teachers. Our teaching styles, classroom demeanor, and pace were very different and I felt that this would not lend itself to a valid conclusion. So my newest challenge became this: what exactly is it that I am trying to prove with this experiment?

#### *Background information of self as a reader*

As stated earlier, reading has always been very important to me. The ability to retreat into my own quiet world and to delve into whatever topic I chose was such a treat for me as it allowed for some peace and tranquility in an otherwise hectic daily schedule. Immersing myself in a good book and shutting out that busy world was just the thing I needed to be calm and subdued after a long day.

Going to school never bothered me; nor did the class or homework assignments. I always looked forward to the excitement that built as the teacher prepared to reveal the next novel we would read as a class. I was never any

good at math and always struggled with that subject. With English however, I often found success when we read novels. I prided myself on doing well on vocabulary quizzes and being able to discuss the plot, dynamic versus static characters, and what the climax of a story was. However when I got to high school and some of those books began to include Shakespeare and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, I began to worry that perhaps I didn't love reading as much as I'd thought. Maybe I was losing the one strength I thought I had once possessed naturally. It wasn't until most recently that I have come to understand that everyone, students and non-students alike, should have the opportunity to read books they choose on their own. How are students going to love to read if topics are forced upon them before they have even developed a relationship with reading that is positive in their eyes? Exploring this idea with my own students was an eye-opening experience that taught me some of the benefits of incorporating SSR into the ESL curriculum.

#### *Background information of Marianapolis Preparatory School*

Marianapolis Preparatory School is a private, Catholic boarding and day school located in a small town in northeastern Connecticut. The school caters to students from over thirty area cities and towns, twenty foreign countries and five continents. The ESL students arrive with various levels of English competence and motivation. International students at Marianapolis are all tested upon arrival to best determine their placement for the academic year. The placement test used was an in-house version that was created by the ESL Department to best

determine students' English ability in the areas of grammar, reading comprehension, vocabulary, and writing. There was also an oral piece in which students listened to three passages and completed gap fills and responded to related questions. While the placement test is not perfect, it does give a reasonably good idea of what level ESL each student should be placed in; however, it is not comparable to any standardized tests. Therefore, students in the Advanced level for example, are considered to be at the highest level of ESL before transferring out at the end of that academic year. Once the ESL level is determined, a course schedule is created for each student. Apart from ESL classes, students take the requisite math, science, history and theology courses to ensure that they are on the path to graduating on time with their classmates. For the lower level ESL students (Beginning and Intermediate), the history and theology courses are put off until their mastery of English is enough so that they can handle these reading and writing intensive courses.

The ESL courses meet more regularly than the other required core courses offered at the school. Beginning ESL meets three out of seven blocks; Intermediate and Advanced each meet two out of seven blocks and Transitional meets one out of seven blocks, along with the grade appropriate English class taking up another block. The gradual decline in meeting times assumes that as students advance through the levels, they are better able to manage the "regular" courses and do not need as much language support. Due to the rotating seven-block schedule, this means that students in the beginning level can meet with their teacher up to three hours per day; Intermediate up to two hours per day

and so on. This is one of the benefits of second language learners attending our school in preparation for American colleges and universities.

While Marianapolis has catered to students from over twenty different countries, the bulk of our students come primarily from China, Korea and Mexico.

### *Background information of students*

The type of students who come to Marianapolis Preparatory School are generally there because their parents sent them, either to improve their English in an English-speaking country or to assist them in getting into an American college or university. Few are overly motivated and eager to be so far from home, studying all of their academic subjects in a language they hardly understand. This creates a challenge for the teachers who have to ensure that they are serving these students to the best of their ability. Faculty and staff are constantly questioning the ESL teachers regarding the English ability of each of their students. Can they survive in World History I? How are they ever going to write a five-page essay in a theology class? These teachers look to us, the ESL faculty, to provide them with answers and assistance along the way.

There are three main language groups represented in a given year at Marianapolis. The first group is the Korean speakers. These students are generally shy at first, however once they have been at the school for a period of time and are more comfortable, they begin to come out of their shells. These students are generally a highly motivated group, eager to get good grades and consistently improve so as to be admitted into an elite American college or

university. The Korean students are usually quite familiar with working hard, putting in long hours studying, and eventually achieving good grades.

The next group is the Spanish-speaking students. These students come from a variety of countries, which sometimes include Mexico, Spain, Venezuela, Colombia, Puerto Rico, and Brazil. These students generally only attend Marianapolis for one year, simply in order to try to improve their English language skills. Unfortunately, these students are usually less motivated than our Korean speakers, as they are really quite unconcerned about any grades in particular, but more so in passing all their courses so that they get credit for the year they have missed in their native country. These students have great energy and enthusiasm, as well as a zest for life, however they are not highly motivated when it comes to their academics.

The third major language group is the Chinese-speaking students. This group is made up of students from China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macau. These students arrive at school in September as very quiet individuals, and frequently leave the same way at the end of their time there. The Chinese speakers are more often than not polite, well-intentioned students, however they often do whatever they can to pass and often this means plagiarizing. This has always been a challenge for the faculty because according to the students from China, copying and spitting out facts verbatim is quite accepted. It shows that they have listened and learned from their teachers if they are able to repeat back exactly what was presented to them. Largely, this group of students falls in the middle in terms of effort put in to achieve high grades.



## **Chapter 2 Choosing Books**

*How did this process begin?*

Although this classroom-based research project had been pondered frequently over the summer and prepared for before the school year had even gotten under way, it very quickly became sidetracked. As many educators can understand, even the most well-intentioned plans can go awry due to circumstances beyond the teacher's control. This is what happened during my "experiment". The semester had begun and it seemed that almost daily we, the faculty, were given notice of yet another class period that would be missed or shortened due to any number of reasons deemed more important by the administration. One day it was class pictures, the next it was a school assembly; another day it would be an introduction to technology or a guest speaker. All of these class time interruptions kept pushing back the start of our project. Eventually, however we did manage to get started.

I explained to my two Advanced ESL classes that they would be participating in Sustained Silent Reading (SSR) this semester. Although other ESL faculty in our school had never experimented with this type of reading program, all were quite intrigued and eager to see what I learned from my project. In fact, early on the intent was to compare one Advanced section who had participated in SSR with the other section that had not. However, as discussed previously, there were simply too many variables surrounding teaching styles, students, time constraints and so on that got in the way of the comparison on the two sections.

I continued my explanation to my students that this would mean that twice a week, for thirty minutes, they would get to read uninterrupted, in absolute silence and would not have to report back on any of it. They seemed to like this idea, but being the skeptic that I am, I was sure they were envisioning sixty minutes per week of nap time, where they wouldn't need to do any work at all! Now, how was I going to make sure they were actually getting something out of this time rather than just wasting it away (which was certainly commented on by some teachers from other departments)? I was hesitant and questioned myself many times, yet I was still motivated to get started.

#### *Samples of reading inventories and questionnaires*

In order to hopefully get the students excited about our new journey into SSR and to assist them in their search for the book that was just right for each of them, I administered a reading interest questionnaire that I thought might help. It was important for me to first find out what my students' thoughts were about reading in the first place. I searched the internet for reading interest surveys and came across some that I thought could provide me with some of the information I was looking for. The following examples were found by way of internet searches for general reading interest inventories and not specifically for ESL students or SSR; however, I felt that the questions they asked would be simple enough for all my students to comprehend and answer. Aside from explaining to the students what SSR is along with its many benefits discussed earlier, I did not give them any other guidelines about filling out the interest inventories. I simply let them

know that by answering the questions as honestly as they could, I would be able to better help them choose books that would hopefully interest them.

Looking back, I found these reading inventories to be quite useful for the students. They both allowed for ample opportunity to comment on specific questions that were asked. One offered more of a checklist style which it seems the students liked; the other required more writing and was more difficult for the lower level students to complete without assistance. I would however, use either one of these inventories if I were to try this again in the future.

Sample 1 (from "But There's Nothing Good to Read" (In the library Media Center) by Denice Hildebrandt, Media Spectrum: The Journal for Library Media Specialists in Michigan, Fall 2001, p. 34-37)

## Reading Interest Inventory

1. Do you like to read?
2. How much time do you spend reading?
3. What are some of the books you have read lately?
4. Do you have a library card? How often do you use it?
5. Do you ever get books from the school library?
6. About how many books do you own?
7. What are some books you would like to own?
8. Put a check mark next to the kind of reading you like best and topics you might like to read about.

history  travel  plays

sports  science fiction  adventure

romance  detective stories  war stories

poetry  car stories  novels

biography  supernatural stories  astrology

humor  folktales  how-to-do-it books

mysteries  art  westerns

9. Do you like to read the newspaper?

10. If 'yes', place a check next to the part of the newspaper listed below you like to read.

\_\_\_\_\_ Advertisements \_\_\_\_\_ Entertainment \_\_\_\_\_ Columnists

\_\_\_\_\_ Headlines \_\_\_\_\_ Comic Strips \_\_\_\_\_ Political Stories

\_\_\_\_\_ Current Events \_\_\_\_\_ Sports \_\_\_\_\_ Editorials

\_\_\_\_\_ Others: (please list)

11. What are your favorite television programs?

12. How much time do you spend watching television?

13. What is your favorite magazine?

14. Do you have a hobby? If so, what is it?

15. What are the two best movies you have ever seen?

16. Who are your favorite entertainers and/or movie stars?

17. When you were little, did you enjoy having someone read aloud to you?

18. List topics, subjects, etc. which you might like to read about:

19. What does the word 'reading' mean to you?

20. Say anything else that you would like to say about reading:

from "'But There's Nothing Good to Read' (In the Library Media Center)," by Denice Hildebrandt, Media Spectrum: The Journal for Library Media Specialists in Michigan, Fall 2001, p. 34-37.

### Book Genre Questionnaire

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Which of the following types of books do you like? For each type of book that you like, try to think of an example or a specific topic. This will assist me in helping you find more great books!

#### Nonfiction

- Biographies
- Science
- History
- Poetry
- Supernatural
- How To
- Folktales & Myths
- Travel
- Other

#### Examples of Topics or Books You Like

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#### Fiction

- Mystery
- Adventure
- Fantasy
- Realistic Fiction
- Historical Fiction
- Science Fiction
- Humor
- Animal Stories
- Other

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Name \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

**Activity Rating Scale**

Read each activity. Place a check in the column to show how much you enjoy this activity or how closely it describes you. (1 is the lowest score and 5 is the highest score). If you have never done the activity, check in the last column.

Activity Description	1	2	3	4	5	Never Done It
Reading adventure stories						
Building models						
Playing outside						
Putting together puzzles						
Reading about weather or weather systems						
Reading about animals						
Reading short chapter books						
Watching television						
Reading "how to" books						
Writing stories						
Reading about disgusting or gross topics						
Reading mysteries or detective stories						
Riding a bicycle						
Reading magazines						
Reading about drawing or crafts						
Reading comic books						
Reading about far away places						
Reading about plants						
Playing with animals						
Reading about friends and friendships						
Playing word games or doing word puzzles						
Solving math problems						
Writing poetry						

<b>Activity Description</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>Never Done It</b>
Reading fantasy books or stories						
Playing sports						
Reading about fashion						
Reading newspapers or magazines						
Playing a musical instrument						
Going shopping						
Reading about famous people						
Reading science fiction (aliens, space, etc.)						
Drawing or painting						
Reading about science topics (nonfiction)						
Listening to music						
Playing video games						
Cooking or preparing food						
Reading about sports						
Playing sports						
Going to museums						
Reading funny books						
Going to the movies						
Reading about real places						
Reading about cars or motorcycles						
Reading about the military or war						
Reading long chapter books						
Going camping						
Using the Internet						
Talking on the telephone						
Going to the public library						
Going swimming						
Spending time with friends						



## **Reading Interest Inventory**

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

1. How do you feel about reading? Be honest! Explain why you feel that way.

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2. Answer at least one of the following two questions. You can answer both.

What do you like about reading?

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What don't you like about reading?

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3. Do you have a favorite series? If so, what is it and why do you like it?

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4. What topics would you like to learn more about this year?

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5. Do you like to read newspapers or magazines? Explain.

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### *The libraries*

The next step involved coordinating with our school librarian who was entirely on board to help support this project. Each of my two Advanced ESL sections were scheduled a time to go to the library and get acquainted with what is there and how to use the resources. The librarian began by giving a library orientation, something that she does with the new ESL students at the start of every school year so that they are familiar with the resources available to them. She then focused specifically on the different areas of the library that housed the various genres. She even went as far as pulling a multitude of books off the shelves and displaying them during her presentation based on the information I provided her that I had received from the interest inventories. Once the students had their library lesson, they were free to choose any book or magazine they were interested in.

My next problem was an unexpected one. I thought for sure that the students would wander around and excitedly choose books that interested them relatively quickly; I was wrong. They still didn't have the confidence to just start searching through stacks and stacks of books, looking for the one that would pique their interest. In the end, both the librarian and I spent a great deal of time assisting students who were stuck and claimed "there were no books they were interested in". Students also had difficulty finding books that were an appropriate level for them. Although they were in the Advanced ESL level, many had never read entire novels in their L2 on their own before, and therefore had a hard time picking something out that was just right.

Expecting students to not always remember to bring their SSR book to class (especially as I had visions of them getting so engrossed that they would read them at night while tucked into their dorm room bunk beds and forget to put them in their backpacks in the morning) I felt it necessary to create a classroom library. This library was a tall bookshelf in the back of the classroom that housed extra copies of the novels we were reading as a class such as Steinbeck's Of Mice and Men and The Pearl, Lee's To Kill a Mockingbird, and Knowles' A Separate Peace. I also included some easier readers from the Penguin series of books (published by the Penguin Group, New York, NY 1996) making sure to include all different levels. I gathered some old magazines that the library was recycling like *Sports Illustrated*, *Time*, *Newsweek* and more. I also came across an old stash of biographies that included a range from historical figures to more recent movie and pop music stars. I felt that I now had at least a relatively good assortment of choices for when that rare student was sure to forget his or her book on SSR day.

Looking back however, it seems that the students needed much more guidance than we (the librarian and I) had given them. I was certain that they would be ecstatic to go through the different areas of the library and pull books off shelves, peruse them and decide on one or two to check out and begin reading. I was way off. My students were incredibly overwhelmed at the idea of searching through the many stacks of books, trying to find "just the right one", even though I'd felt that I had given them enough basic information about books of different genres and where they were located in our school library. In my

conclusion, I will include a list of changes I would implement if I were to run this program again.

### **Chapter 3 Classroom Results**

#### *Classroom Observations*

Back in the classroom, the project was ready to begin. After an extensive period in the library, the majority of students came back with a book to read while a select few either had one of their own in the dorm they wanted to bring in or still had not found one they were particularly interested in. Panicking about losing more time, I let the students know that we would begin the next day and that they had to have a book to read by then. My next thought was about the repercussions for not having their book with them. Should I impose a punishment or academic consequence if they didn't bring in their book? Again, I worried about the effect this would have on the students and the purpose of this whole project: to make reading fun! But I couldn't let the students just sit there for thirty minutes doing nothing while everyone else was reading. In preparation for this potential mishap, I looked over and felt a renewed sense of confidence looking at my neatly stacked bookshelf full of a variety of choices. I finally felt ready to begin the actual reading.

The next day, the class arrived and I had decided to begin our sixty minute period with our SSR. They knew it was on the schedule for the day and most were therefore prepared for it. I set our timer and we all set about reading. I know that as a good role model I was also supposed to be reading, but I couldn't help

myself from looking around the room to see what the students' responses were. How many of them were actually getting into their books? How many were staring out the window? How many would fall asleep? Again, what was I going to do if any of those things happened?

Overall, I observed that the bulk of the classes did in fact, get right down to reading. They seemed engrossed in their books and content to have a little "down time" during the school day to relax a bit. This response from my students was similar to what McCracken found in his 1971 study on whether SSR really works. McCracken states:

Students say they like SSR because it is quiet, with many indicating it is the only quiet time in their entire day. All kinds of students have responded that they learned to like to read...since no one watches them they can make mistakes without worrying...All respond that they like SSR because they can read what they want to read. (p. 582)

However, I definitely noticed a little apprehension from some of the higher achieving students who seemed to feel as if time was being wasted. It seemed that they were comparing what was going on in our classroom with what was happening in the other Advanced section and were perhaps concerned that they were falling behind. Or perhaps that was only my own guilt creeping back in.

### *Student responses*

Although this project was supposed to have begun right in September and was to run throughout the first semester, our time frame needed some adjusting. Since we didn't get started until the middle of October and because we weren't able to do SSR as often as I had hoped (twice a week, every week for one

semester), I decided to do an official “check-in” after Christmas break in late January and again as a final assessment in mid-May. I needed to find out what their thoughts and feelings were toward SSR now that they were used to it and had experienced it for a lengthy period of time.

In order to gather information, I created some quick and confidential check-ins for each student to fill out. With the first, I was particularly interested in what they liked, didn’t like and what they thought could be changed about SSR to make it better for them. The responses from students are summarized below:

**January 29, 2009**

Likes about SSR:	Dislikes about SSR:
•hard to find time to read for pleasure; allows me to read book regularly	•too short; we should have whole period 1x per week
•i like the book i am reading about the Patriots	•it’s not constant; we should do it more often
•it’s a good way to push foreign students to understand more English	•i don’t really like reading in any language; i would rather “watch” a story (like movie or tv)
•after reading, it feels like we know something more	•i don’t like reading when i look at words and don’t understand or recognize them and can’t ask teacher

These results confirmed what I pretty much already knew. None of the students really included any changes that were different from the responses they gave in the “dislikes” column above. As discussed earlier, due to circumstances beyond my control in terms of curriculum and changes in class schedules, snow days, and many other unforeseen conditions, the SSR project did not occur as often as I had planned. Although I did my best to keep it in the schedule for at

least one day per week for at least twenty minutes, there were certainly weeks where it was continually moved from Tuesday to Wednesday to Thursday to eventually the following week to make room for other “more important” work that needed to be done in the classroom. I also worked hard at trying to let the students know what day SSR would be taking place so they could plan for it and would hopefully *look forward to it*.

In May, after almost an entire year of valiant attempts to stick to our schedule and get the most out of our SSR time, I once again, created an anonymous form for students to fill out to share their feedback about the experience. Due to the fact that our reading blocks were at times sporadic and unpredictable, I wanted the students to feel that they had gotten something out of this time they had spent with the books of their choosing. Therefore I searched for a way that they could “share” their books with others while still not compromising the idea that this was “reading for pleasure”. I did not want them to feel the pressure of having to complete an assignment that would bog them down on top of their regular coursework. That was when I came across a website with SSR Extension Activities ([http://www.readwritethink.org/files/resources/lesson\\_images/lesson141/ssr.pdf](http://www.readwritethink.org/files/resources/lesson_images/lesson141/ssr.pdf)) that I was hoping would be a fun *bonus* assignment that students could complete to share the books that they had read. The students were able to choose an activity to convey something about the book they had read from the list below:

## **SSR EXTENSION ACTIVITIES**

### **Board Game**

Create a board game based on the book. Format it after a traditional board game (such as Monopoly or Trivial Pursuit), or create your own original game. The game must include instructions and at least twenty (20) facts from your selected book.

### **Book Cover**

Create a new book cover for the book and write an explanation for why you have redesigned the cover as you have. Compare it to the original cover. (Written piece— $\frac{3}{4}$  page minimum)

### **Character Sketch**

Sketch a portrait of an important character from the book and write important details about him or her based on what you learned about this character in the story. Include physical traits as well as personality. (Written piece—1 page minimum)

### **Demonstration**

Demonstrate how to make or do something you learned from the story. Include a written outline that details what you are planning to demonstrate.

### **Diary**

Write a diary for one of the characters telling what happened to him or her in the story. Each entry should be five to seven (5-7) sentences long. You must write at least seven (7) entries. Be creative with the format that you use.

### **Diorama**

Create a diorama that depicts one scene from the story. You must include a written summary of the events that took place in the scene and the key role that scene plays in the book. (Written piece— $\frac{3}{4}$  page minimum)

### **Drawings**

Make a series of at least five (5) drawings showing the major parts of the plot and include a written explanation of each drawing. Each explanation should be two to three (2-3) sentences long.

### **Interview**

Conduct an interview with the main character in the book that you have read. You will hand in a written document that includes questions and answers. The interview should provide some real insight into the character that you have chosen. It should also show that you have a good understanding of the story. Include at least five (5) questions and responses.

### **Letter to the Author**

Write a letter to the author giving your reaction to the book using the friendly letter format. Items that you might discuss in your letter include your reaction to the story, your



reaction to the main character(s), what you liked or didn't like about the plot, and why you would or would not recommend this book to a friend. (Written piece—1 page minimum).

### **Mobile**

Design a mobile that depicts characters, events, or both from the story. You must include at least twelve (12) "dangling facts."

### **New Ending**

Write a new ending for the story. Explain how and why you changed the original ending. (Written piece—1 page minimum)

### **Newspaper**

Write a newspaper with articles highlighting characters and events from your book. Your newspaper should include headlines and at least four articles. You may also include pictures, graphics, or comics. Be creative!

### **Pamphlet and Poster**

Design a pamphlet and poster that summarizes and advertises the book that you have read. Things that you might include are brief character descriptions and a plot summary. Remember that your goal is to "sell" the book to other readers.

### **Poem**

Write and illustrate a poem about the story. The poem should be at least fifteen (15) lines in length.

### **PowerPoint Presentation**

Use Microsoft PowerPoint or other presentation software to produce a multimedia project. Your presentation should summarize the story, give a character description, or sell the book. (Minimum of 10 slides)

### **Radio Advertisement**

Write and record a radio advertisement that will make other students want to read the story. It should be at least two (2) minutes in length. Be sure to include a written copy.

### **Television Commercial**

Write and perform a commercial to sell the book to others. It should be at least three (3) minutes in length. Be sure to include a written copy.

### **Story Chain**

Make a paper chain that summarizes the book or one chapter in the book by sequencing the events. Write one event on each paper link and connect them to form a story chain. Please include a written copy of the story chain.

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Most students were thoroughly excited about this opportunity. I felt that I had to make it less burdensome by allowing it to be worth bonus points at the end of the semester so as not to unnecessarily stress them out with one more project. My students have always loved the opportunity to earn bonus points, especially when they are nearing the end of the quarter or semester. Therefore, the assignment wasn't as daunting to most as it could have been if it were a required assignment.

The creativity absolutely blew me away! On the day of the project presentations, the pride on my students' faces was clearly visible. They *loved* this project, and I truly believe it was because they were given the freedom to choose their own books to read and report on. Some projects the students chose to do included dialogues between characters from their book, posters for the movie version of their book, old-fashioned book reports that answered the Who? What? Why? Where? When? model, and intricately detailed pamphlets "selling" their book to a publishing company. Some students also enjoyed changing the ending of their book or continuing the story. Although some research supports the idea that students should simply read for pleasure in a SSR program with no stress of being "tested" or "graded" on what they've read, I felt that it was important for students to be able to share, in some way, the books that they spent so much time with. According to Janice L. Pilgreen (as cited in Schiavone, 1999, p. 5) one of the most important pieces of a successful SSR program is non-accountability on the part of the students:

Not holding students accountable for what they have read allows poor readers to make mistakes without worrying about

what the teacher or their peers will think. Non-accountability can also lower the affective filter for second language learners and allow them to read for pleasure. Book reports, logs, notebooks, and oral retells are not recommended because they convey the message to the students that their teacher does not trust them to understand what they have read. Students who dislike writing or oral presentations begin to associate reading with these sources of irritation. (p. 5)

Just before the presentations, students were asked to complete one final feedback form to allow me to gauge their concluding thoughts on this whole SSR process. Although there was a wide range of responses, I chose three that I felt were a good representation of some truly honest feedback about the program. I did not receive any responses that were overly negative about the whole experience, which leads me to believe that while there was definitely some room for improvement, the program overall was enjoyed by the students. Below are some examples:

1. How do you feel about SSR at this point in the year?

I feel that is good, because people like me that like to read, but do sports and have a lot of homework, doesn't have a lot of time to read, but with SSR, you can read and is a book you like.

2. Do you think incorporating SSR into the ESL classroom is useful? Why or why not (please explain your opinion)?

Yes because reading is a very good way of improving a person's vocabulary and it is in a fun way, because is a book that the reader chose.

3. What are the negatives associated with SSR?

VMM the negatives can be that some people doest ~~use~~ use the SSR time as they should but from there, there are no negative.

4. What are your thoughts about the final SSR project? Are you happy to share information about your book with your peers?

My thoughts is that is a very good project because you explain your book and invite and encourage the ~~rest~~ expectators to read it.

5. Would you recommend that SSR be continued and / or added to other ESL classes? Yes I recommend and encourage to have SSR in all ESL classes. Is a good way to get better in English

6. Please provide any other information that could be helpful in making SSR a positive experience in the ESL classroom...

I don't know what to say, just that I love reading before SSR and I still love it.

## 1. How do you feel about SSR at this point in the year?

I often read many books in my language but not in English. The book was thought that like assignment from school. But at this point, reading understandable books are as fun as I am reading and learn in my language.

## 2. Do you think incorporating SSR into the ESL classroom is useful? Why or why not (please explain your opinion)?

I think SSR is useful. For students, grade is important obviously, but sometimes they have to lead themselves in class. SSR or group work is one of things make students not only in academically, teach students to provide their own work.

## 3. What are the negatives associated with SSR?

It is totally depends on students; if students use time wisely in class and does work independently, it is helpful. However, if students does not, the SSR is useful because there is no way to teacher to check students' work.

## 4. What are your thoughts about the final SSR project? Are you happy to share information about your book with your peers?

Some of book I had read, I wanted to share about the book and suggest them to read, my SSR book at this point is not my favorite book, still like it and suggesting to others to read.

## 5. Would you recommend that SSR be continued and / or added to other ESL classes?

I suggest to other ESL classes the SSR. Not only the work from teacher, students ~~can~~ have to learn ~~their~~ own work, providing their

## 6. Please provide any other information that could be helpful in making SSR a positive experience in the ESL classroom...

It would be hard to move in act, but the work students are doing while SSR should be checked. Otherwise the SSR would lost its purpose.

1. How do you feel about SSR at this point in the year?

I think it was nice to have seperated time for reading book in class, which is SSR time.

2. Do you think incorporating SSR into the ESL classroom is useful? Why or why not (please explain your opinion)?

I think it is very useful, because ESL is basically to learn English and reading English book is the best way to learn it. ~~that is~~.

3. What are the negatives associated with SSR?

It ~~was~~ <sup>gives</sup> kind of too many choices to me. I hope teacher to recommand a few books to chose, because I don't know which book to read. It was a little bit hard to chose a book for SSR.

4. What are your thoughts about the final SSR project? Are you happy to share information about your book with your peers?

~~In my opinion,~~ I think it is better than other projects that I did in the past. I am happy to share information about my book with my peers.

5. Would you recommend that SSR be continued and / or added to other ESL classes?

Yes, I would.

6. Please provide any other information that could be helpful in making SSR a positive experience in the ESL classroom...

- Teacher's recommandation for books
- Summary for each chapters
- Give more time
- Given Topic for books
- Go to library during SSR time
- Take students to book store

## Chapter 4 Research Findings

### *What does the research say?*

Throughout this lengthy project, I would periodically search for information on SSR and ESL classrooms and students. I wanted to be sure that the way I was running my “experiment” with SSR was in line with what other educators and professionals were doing out there. My findings really did not reveal any new or surprising conclusions about SSR and its effectiveness in either increasing students’ enjoyment of reading or support the idea that SSR would improve vocabulary or TOEFL test scores. Instead, what I found repeatedly was validation of a few key points regarding how to effectively organize a SSR program, adaptations to traditional SSR programs, and some common roadblocks.

### *Organizing a successful SSR program*

In order to implement a successful SSR program into one’s classroom, Pilgreen (2000) came up with a list that encompasses what it should look like:

- Access to a wide variety of appealing texts- this includes classroom libraries with a wide range of genres, reading levels, and interest. Students can self-select books from the classroom or the school library.
- A conducive reading environment coupled with teacher encouragement- this includes areas in the classroom where students will not be disturbed and where they are able to relax and enjoy reading.
- A consistent time to read- students have a regularly scheduled reading time to promote the habit of reading.
- Reading modeled by the teacher- while students read, teachers read.
- Staff training given to support implementation- teachers establish guidelines for implementation and define their roles as facilitators.
- Non-accountability- students do not feel as though they are

responsible for completing a task or demonstrating comprehension/improvement.

- Follow-up activities that sustain excitement about books- students complete activities to sustain their excitement about the books they read. (p. 16)

Each of these guidelines seemed pretty straightforward and easy to incorporate. However, I quickly realized that I would run into challenges with each of them somewhere along the way.

As discussed earlier, I believed I was fully prepared with plenty of reading material for my students to choose from. Again, I really had not considered just how overwhelming it would be to search a library full of books, even with the reading interest inventories they had filled out. Next, my classroom did not have any particularly comfortable, relaxing areas set up specifically for reading. Students remained at their desks, and perhaps were uncomfortable or distracted being so close to their neighbors (although none ever commented or complained about this on the feedback forms). The next tip about consistency was probably the most difficult to achieve. While every effort was put forth to keep SSR consistently in our schedule, the demands of the school schedule, mother nature and other unforeseen obstacles did in fact get in the way more times than I would care to admit. Lastly, modeling reading by the teacher was something I strived to do, but I certainly did find myself trying to observe my students and take notes rather than always reading as I had planned. It was so very easy to tell myself I would start reading in a few minutes after I first just finished grading these papers, making up the test for the next class, prepared lessons for the following



week. Unfortunately, modeling reading too often fell by the wayside for me which was not helpful for my students at all.

### *Adaptations to the program*

As the program in my classroom got underway, I was quickly recognizing things that worked and didn't work and I was entirely willing to alter my program if necessary. First and foremost, I wanted my students to really take ownership of their part in this program so I created a binder with a reading log where each session they could record what they had read (i.e. number of pages, brief summary, etc.) This allowed them to go back and check where they had left off last time and held them accountable to a certain extent for what they were reading, without being unnecessarily intrusive. I was also able to look and see if someone had been on the same page or chapter for an extended period of time and could orally check in with them about whether they were stuck or simply slacking off entirely.

Next, I realized from my "check-ins" with students that many of them were struggling with the fact that they weren't able to talk about their books. For example, if there was a section they didn't understand or simply something interesting that they had learned and wanted to share with the group, why shouldn't they be able to discuss it? So we began occasional "sharing sessions". Students were not forced to share about their books (in keeping with the idea of reading for fun) but did have to respect others by listening and paying attention. This led to some students taking the recommendations of others and putting a

book they heard about on their future reading list. It was working! This idea was in line with what Deb DeBenedictis and Douglas Fisher found in their study of “Sustained Silent Reading: Making Adaptations” (2007), although their study was conducted in the context of an elementary school classroom as opposed to a high school. Their research found that:

During the 1980’s, I, and many others were influenced by socio-constructivist theory (i.e., Vygotsky, 1962), which taught that learning is social, and that students construct meaning from linking prior knowledge with new knowledge during discussions...This altered the manner in which many of us implemented SSR (Questioning the Middle S in Sustained Silent Reading section, para. 1).

I worried that this might not relate to my high-school aged students, however, I quickly found that some of them were just as eager as an energetic elementary aged student to share what they had read and learned about with their peers.

A second example of this idea of sharing came to the forefront of this project once I really knew my students and recognized how very social some of them were. Although I had a plan of how I hoped to carry out this project, it occurred to me that this was *my* experiment and I could adapt it to best fit my students and classroom accordingly. It wasn’t imperative that I adhere to all the so-called rules of SSR by sticking to the *silent* piece so stringently. In fact, in a study conducted by Manning & Manning in 1984 (as cited by DeBenedictis & Fisher, 2007, p. 33), three different types of SSR programs were implemented with a group of fourth graders. The researchers found that:

...(silent reading only, silent reading with peer interaction, and silent reading with teacher/student conferences) along with a control group, it was found that the peer-interaction group had significantly higher reading achievement scores than the other

groups. (p. 33)

This helped me to realize that sometimes making changes is necessary along the way for the benefit of the different learning styles found within a classroom. I was certainly able to recognize that while some of my students truly enjoyed the quiet opportunity to read uninterrupted for an extended period of time, there were others who preferred and perhaps even needed the social interaction in order to successfully benefit from this reading program.

The last adaptation I made had to do with the final project mentioned earlier. Again, I was hesitant to incorporate any major *assessment* at the end of this program because I did not want the reading to lose its appeal and defeat the purpose; however, assigning it as a bonus opportunity and with a wide variety of options to choose from, students did not resist at all.

### *Common roadblocks*

There are most definitely challenges associated with running a successful SSR program, especially with international students whose first language is not the target language they will be reading in. Not only was I dealing with at times moody, irritable, unengaged teenagers, but reading did not always seem like the most exciting thing to do. In their article “You Can’t Hide in R5: Restructuring Independent Reading to Be More Strategic and Engaging”, authors Clausen-Grace, Kelley, Brigman & Wood comment on some obstacles they have encountered in the past:

Students and teachers can often be the obstacles in SSR implementation. This might include students choosing inappropriate

books (too easy or too hard) or lacking engagement with the book. We all know the student who diligently reports, "I'm on chapter 2 now," then adds ten minutes later, "I'm done with chapter 2." His or her eyes pass the print, but this student fails to comprehend what he or she has read. Reading just means getting through the book (Problems with Implementing SSR section, para. 1).

Throughout our project, I certainly saw students similar to those described above and was always hesitant about whether to confront them. I was so afraid of turning them off entirely to reading and this project and wanted so badly for this to be a positive experience for everyone, especially so that I could defend my position that SSR was an important part of the academic day and not a waste of time. I found myself somewhere in the middle of the road and occasionally made quiet comments to certain students who clearly were just sitting and zoning out as opposed to reading. When I would approach them, they would immediately sit right up, shake their head as if to wake up, and pretend to get engrossed in their book. I would just quietly remind them that our SSR time was just as important as any other academic work we did in class. They seemed to accept that and usually made valid attempts at focusing from then on.

As Clausen-Grace et al. (2007) found, students are not the only hindrance to a successful SSR program. Teachers can also get in the way:

Some teachers have thrown out SSR when something needed to be cut from the day, or they used the reading time to do administrative tasks, such as grading papers. If a practice is going to be effective, it must be valued by the teacher (Problems with Implementing SSR section, para. 1).

I definitely found myself guilty of eliminating SSR on days when there were just too many other things that needed to get done. For example, if we had a test coming up and it had to stay scheduled for a particular day because students had

too many other tests on surrounding days, I had to get through the information in order for students to be prepared for their test. Therefore, the first and easiest thing to cut from the schedule was always SSR. Doing this was certainly not ideal, but very often necessary to stay on track with the curriculum for the year.

## **Chapter 5 Conclusions**

Throughout this project, I have had the opportunity to explore the many different facets of implementing a sustained silent reading program. My students and I were able to experience both the joys and challenges associated with reading for pleasure. Along the way, I took the opportunity to note any changes I would make to my program should I run it again, as well as what specific pieces would stay the same.

Although there were a variety of challenges we met, I was reassured to learn that many other educators have faced the same difficulties with their programs. The research I conducted allowed me to confirm that my findings were not out of the ordinary, even though much of my research was geared toward elementary aged students as opposed to my high school group.

### *Changes*

If I were to implement an SSR program again, I would make some very distinct changes based on what I know now. The first change would have to do with students and their initial book selection. This seemed to be one of the most difficult parts of the program which was entirely unforeseen by me. Although it would take a great deal of time, I believe that in order to get started on the right

foot, students need more assistance in choosing books. The library can be an extremely overwhelming place when one is told to “go find a book”. In retrospect, I think that I should have set up individual meetings with students (or at least small groups of 3-4) and discussed their reading inventories with them prior to sending them to the library. That way I could have relayed the information about their interest and reading experience to the librarian who may have been able to pull some specific books from the shelves. I would also have introduced them to the “five-finger test” as explained by Hopkins (1997) in his *Education World* article. He stated:

In the five-finger test, students are asked to select a page from the book to read to themselves. They hold up all five fingers on one hand as they begin to read. Each time the student encounters a word that is hard to read, he or she puts down one finger. If all five fingers are in the down position before a student finishes reading the page, the book is probably too difficult. The student should probably put the book back on the shelf and look for one that won't be so hard. (SSR Takes Many Forms section, para. 2).

This simple technique may have alleviated some of the stress of choosing just the right book and getting started on the right track.

#### *Teacher check ins*

Another change I would implement would be to have more regular check-ins with students to see how they are getting along with their reading. Some students mentioned on their evaluation forms that they didn't like that they weren't able to ask questions about their books when they didn't understand something. Perhaps including a reading conference during SSR time would allow students to feel comfortable that they had support if necessary while still not taking away any other class time.

### *Consistent SSR time*

Perhaps the most important change would have to entail the consistency of the SSR times. While I mentioned numerous times the challenges with sticking to a schedule due to circumstances beyond my control, it really hindered students progress and perhaps their thoughts on the importance, or lack of importance, of SSR overall. If it was okay to just eliminate SSR on a day that had become too busy, then it must not be very important so why should students read when it was an SSR day? This is something that would need to be investigated very carefully if I were to implement another SSR program.

### *What I want to keep*

#### *Reading log*

Apart from the challenges, there were pieces that worked quite well. The first part that I would keep in tact would be the **reading log**. It was a very simple chart that allowed students to keep track of where they left off last time they read. At the end of each reading session, students would grab their form from the binder and quickly fill out what page they left off on and a few words summarizing what they read during that time. At the start of the next session, it was nice for them to check their log and refresh their memory before they began reading again. Some students didn't rely on the log as much as others, but it was nice for them to have in order to prevent their having to go and reread something they read last session.

### Final project

Another successful piece of our SSR program was the **final project**. This was one of the things I was most hesitant about because of its potential to hinder the “reading for fun” idea. However, this ended up being such a wonderful way to end the program and the school year. Students were incredibly creative in the ways they shared their books and I could truly see each and every one of them getting into their projects. The fact that I actually heard students asking one another more about their books once class ended because they might want to read it made me realize this was not simply a huge waste of time; students had found enjoyment in reading in their L2!

This project began moving forward in one very distinct direction, however, I am comfortable with the fact that I was able to allow it to evolve organically, changing along the way to best suit the needs of the students and the classroom as a whole. Although I discovered some challenges and weaknesses along the way, I feel that the program was a success overall. With some minor changes and a better understanding of the need for consistent reading time, I believe that SSR can be a successful part of any English as a Second Language classroom. I have seen its benefits firsthand and would recommend that educators who are attempting to bring more reading into their classrooms, give it a try.



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