

Invited Research Article

PLEASURE READING IN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE AND COMPETENCE IN SPEAKING, LISTENING, READING AND WRITING

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Abstract: Positive and significant correlations ranging from .34 to .51 were found between self-reported pleasure reading (books, newspapers and magazines) and self-reported competence in speaking, listening, reading and writing English, among teachers in Korea whose responsibilities included teaching English as a foreign language. This result confirms the comprehension hypothesis, which claims that understanding what we hear and read is the cause of language development.

Keywords: pleasure reading, language skills, comprehension hypothesis

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A number of studies have reported that more free voluntary reading is related to better literacy development in both first and second language acquisition (reviews in Krashen, 1988, 2004, 2011; Krashen and Mason, 2017; Mason & Krashen, 2017). We present here a replication, a study of the relationship between reported free voluntary reading in a foreign language and self-reported competence in second language reading, writing, speaking and listening.

All subjects were teachers in Korea who spoke English as a second language, and their teaching responsibilities included teaching English in Korean public schools. They were attending a one-day workshop, organized by the Busan Board of Education.

Questionnaires were administered in Korean at the beginning of the workshop and took approximately 10 minutes to fill out. They included reading habits and self-assessment of English competence. Three questions dealt with the teachers' reading habits:

- (1) When you have free time, do you read English books (like English novels) for pleasure?
- (2) Do you read English newspapers often?
- (3) Do you read English magazines often?

Teachers responded to each question using the following scale: (1) not at all (2) no (3) moderately (4) yes (5) a lot.

As for self-assessment of competence in English, teachers were asked to rate their speaking, listening, reading and writing ability according to this scale: (1) very lacking (2) lacking (3) moderate (4) confident (5) very confident.

The questions used were crude: For reading habits, we did not, for example, ask about number of pages read or time dedicated each day to reading. For assessing competence, we did not administer tests or ask subjects for their scores on standardized tests of English, such as the TOEIC.

The results for books, magazines and newspaper reading were combined; thus, a combined scale was used to interpret scores for frequency of reading, where (3) = not at all, (6) = no, (9) = moderate, (12) = yes and (15) = a lot. This was done because our interest was in the total amount of voluntary reading done, not reading in one particular genre.

Results are presented in Table 1 for elementary, middle school, and high school teachers.

Table 1. Self-reported Reading of English Books, Magazines, and Newspapers

Level	N	Mean (SD)
Elementary school	131	8.66 (2.1)
Middle school	114	8.73 (1.8)
High school	141	8.32 (1.8)

(3 = not at all; 6 = no; 9 = moderate; 12 = yes; 15 = a lot)

The group means are nearly identical, all close to “moderate,” indicating that that these teachers were readers, but not highly dedicated readers of English, and that they read similar amounts in different genres. The size of the standard deviations tells us that there was not a large amount of variation in the teachers’ responses.

Table 2. Self-assessments of Language Competence

	Speaking	Listening	Reading	Writing
Elementary school	3.7 (.74)	3.6 (.86)	3.6 (.76)	3.4 (.77)
Middle school	3.5 (.64)	3.5 (.69)	3.6 (.64)	3.3 (.73)
High school	3.3 (.70)	3.3 (.70)	3.4 (.69)	3.2 (.69)

Based on the results in Table 2, teachers at each level had similar opinions of their competence, and rated themselves similarly on the four skills, between “moderate” and “confident.” The average self-evaluation was about 3.5 or less.

Table 3. Correlations: Reading for Fun and English Competence

	Elementary school	Middle school	High school
Speaking	0.41	0.44	0.34
Listening	0.37	0.36	0.35
Reading	0.41	0.51	0.43
Writing	0.36	0.42	0.35

Correlations between the self-reported amount of reading for fun and self-reported competence in the four skills were moderate, but consistently positive. All correlations were statistically significant ($p < .001$, both one and two-tailed).

Overall, the study described here examined the correlation between both the self-report of the amount of voluntary reading done and self-report of competence in the four skills. It is a small contribution to the vast research confirming the power of reading.

As noted earlier, our questionnaire did not ask for precise information on reading quantity and language competence. We see similar results, however when the impact on other competencies is measured, e.g. spelling and vocabulary (Krashen, 1989), when experimental and quasi-experimental designs are used (Krashen & Mason, 2017), and with more precise measures of reading quality as well as when competence is measured using standardized

tests of reading comprehension (Krashen, 1988), thus adding to our knowledge and confidence in the power of reading.

Studies of journal policy have shown that replication is not highly respected in academia (e.g. Bornstein, 1992). Replication, however, is extremely important for both theory and practice: each replication is another test of a hypothesis, can increase or reduce confidence in its validity and can encourage or discourage applications of the hypothesis.

Of special interest are replications that introduce slight modifications in the design, as we did here, gradually providing more stringent tests of the hypotheses underlying the research, as well as more information about application.

It has been hypothesized that reading for pleasure is the bridge between “conversational” language and “academic” language; it provides the linguistic competence and often the knowledge that helps make academic reading more comprehensible. The data presented here is consistent with this claim, confirming that pleasure reading impacts reading and writing.

Our results also show, however, that reading also impacts the aural aspects of everyday language. Lee (2019) presents evidence that reading can help acquirers cross the bridge in the other direction. She presents a case of an acquirer of English as a foreign language with considerable academic language competence who improved in aural conversational language with the help of pleasure reading.¹

However, multivariate analyses show that when both reading and formal instruction are considered, reading remains a very strong predictor and at times the only significant predictor of second language competence (Constantino, Lee, Cho, & Krashen, 1997; Gradman & Hanania, 1991; Stokes, Krashen, & Kartchner, 1998). Lee (2005) also reported a positive relationship between reading and writing competence in English as a foreign language, and that those with stronger beliefs in the efficacy of instruction did not write better.

Similar results have been reported for frequency of speaking and writing: Neither has a significant effect on second language competence when reading

¹ A problem with all correlational analyses is that other variables of possible importance are not considered. It may be the case that formal instruction, writing, and/or speaking are the real cause of language competence and that the relationship between reading and competence is “spurious”: those who have studied more, speak more, or write more also read more.

is included in the analysis (Lee, 2007 for writing, Gradman & Hanania. 1991, for speaking.)

The consistent correlations found between reported free reading and speaking, listening, reading and writing competence provide not only a replication and confirmation of the “Comprehension Hypothesis,” but also indicate that self-selected reading has an impact on speaking. The results also have practical implications: Before we rush off to invest in expensive and uninvestigated technology, we need to make sure our students have access to interesting and comprehensible reading material.

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