

Application of Sustained Silent Reading in Different Stages of English Learning

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ABSTRACT Reading is an essential part in English learning, and many schools in China are implementing test-oriented reading, which deprives students of the freedom to choose materials and enjoy the reading process. Therefore, this research analyses students in primary school, middle school and high school in China about their learning characteristics and provide alternative ways for teachers to teach reading by adapting sustained silent reading into their classrooms.

1. INTRODUCTION

Reading can broaden ones' horizons, enrich their knowledge and help them form healthy values. According to the New English Curriculum standard for Chinese Senior High School (2003), teachers are expected to explore sources for students' access to extracurricular reading materials, so that students can read at least 230,000 words of reading material beyond school's curricula. However, the actual reading rate in China remains pretty low and most of students regard English textbooks as their primary reading source. The main reason for this is due to the overwhelming pressure of exams and assignments, students barely have time to read extracurricular reading materials and therefore, fail to develop an effective reading habit. Sustained silence reading can help cultivate students' reading habits by allowing students to choose books themselves and enabling them to read in a noninterrupted timescale. This paper aims to discuss the effects of carrying out the sustained silent reading in primary schools, middle schools and high schools in China, and provide some practical suggestions for further improvement.

2. THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF SUSTAINED SILENT READING

2.1. What is Sustained Silent Reading

Sustained silent reading (SSR), is a free and voluntary reading activity carried out by readers for a period of time, during which, readers can choose books they are interested in and the reading should not be interrupted. SSR is also called as DEAR (Drop Everything and Read), DIRT (daily independent reading time), whose purpose is to help students form a reading habit and to motivate them to read more. The idea of SSR was first put forward by Lyman C. Hunt. Jr in 1960s and was later put into further research by the Robert and Marlin Mercury. In 1980s, the American linguist Krashen (1985) came up with a set of well-described theory about the second language acquisition and the core of which—Input Hypothesis, suggesting that language acquisition happens when the learner has access to enough amount of comprehensive input. The theory sets a base for the later research about the effect of reading on language learning. In 2004, Krashen defined SSR as a free reading activity carried out by the teacher and students for 5 to 15 minutes every day [1]. In 2005, Gardiner wrote a book *Building Student Literacy Through Sustained Silent Reading*, in which he introduced the definition, objectives, effects and public opinions in terms of SSR, and proposed to use book record, book talk and one-to-one quick chat to track the SSR. [2]

2.2. Practices on Sustained Silent Reading in China

China is suitable for carrying out sustained silent reading. According to an SSR reading plan created by Mr. and Mrs. Mercury (1971), a well-prepared SSR classroom should be well-equipped with five important elements, whereas Chinese classrooms meet all the prerequisites for the SSR to take place.

First, the teacher and students should participate in the uninterrupted reading. Second, no written form of book report or record is required. Third, time keeper is employed to record time and adjust the length of reading period. Fourth, students are allowed to choose books they like. Fifth, each class has over 10 students. In China, teachers have the freedom to design their own classroom schedule according to students' needs, and thus they can design the rules and forms of the reading activity, the time-keeping setting and the way students to demonstrate their progress in reading. Moreover, the students in Chinese classroom is usually well-disciplined, so most of them are willing to follow the rules during the SSR activity. [3] Last but not the least, in most Chinese classroom, there are around 50 to 60 students, which provides a sound environment for sustained silent reading.

3. Test-Oriented Reading vs Sustained Silent Reading

Test-oriented reading is a training aimed at helping students achieve high scores in reading exams, during which test-taking strategies are usually used to improve students' performance. The concept of test-taking strategy is defined by Cohen (2006) as the strategies selected by test-takers to complete testing tasks and he put forward three different strategies, namely language learner strategy, test-wise strategy, and test control strategy.

Test-oriented reading is a common reading activity held in Chinese classroom. A seven-month survey, which involved 428 students, was conducted in a high school to explore the influence SSR and test-oriented reading have on reading capability and reading attitude separately. After the seven months' experiment, two groups of students both showed an increase in their reading capability and reading attitude. The group that practiced SSR had more impressive progress in both reading capability and willingness to read. Compared with the questionnaires before the experiment (from the sustained silent reading group), the questionnaires received after the experiment demonstrated several obvious discrepancies. For example, students read extracurricular materials more frequently, English reading became much easier and more students formed the habit of reading English magazines, newspapers, novels or online material after class. Eighty percent of students in SSR group showed willingness to prolong the sustained silent reading time, however ten percent of students cancelled the practice due to their worries about the possible negative influence on their studies. On the other hand, the students took part in the test-oriented reading also witnessed an increase in their reading comprehension. But there was little advance in their confidence of reading. Additionally, eighty percent of students of the test-oriented reading group preferred SSR, saying that SSR is more interesting and enjoyable. [4]

From this experiment, we can conclude that both reading practices are conducive to students' reading abilities, but SSR can better help students form a regular reading habit and increase their confidence and interest in reading English materials.

4. Application of SSR in Various Stages of Learning

4.1. SSR Applied in High School

High school students have acquired basic language knowledge after learning English for 6 to 9 years, so they understand English textbook without much difficulty. However, they have limited time to read English materials to their liking. From the research on high school students' characteristics in learning English we can conclude the following. First, most high school students have little time to do English reading. Second, many of them have a low self-efficacy towards English due to the lack of sufficient vocabularies and reading skills. Third, the test-oriented learning and low self-efficacy dampen their enthusiasm for English reading.

When applying the SSR in high school, teachers should do the following. First, teachers should assist students in choosing reading materials by using the "Five-Finger Test" to ensure the book is appropriate for SSR. Second, teachers should control the time used in SSR. Teachers can arrange a

period of 10-15 minutes SSR either in the English class or in the morning reading session to ease students' burden. Also, teachers can help students arrange their assignments in order and with efficiency. Third, teachers need to pay attention to the students reading motivation. Teachers can help by offering students the freedom to choose the materials they like and providing students with uninterrupted reading time to enjoy the content. Also, teachers are encouraged to hold book meetings to give students a platform to share their reading experience.

4.2 A Study Demonstrates SSR among Chinese Students in Middle School

Based on the New English Curriculum standard for Chinese Junior High School, seven-graders are expected to read textbook passages properly and be able to understand the meanings without difficulty. For the eighth-graders, they are expected to read the textbook passages in various genres with great fluency, such as exposition and narration. For the ninth-graders, they are required to read over 150,000 words of extracurricular materials. However, many students' reading ability is not strong enough to enable them to achieve this goal. Moreover, we need to consider the self-efficacy in English reading. In addition, we should take the psychological and emotional states of middle school students into consideration. Since middle school students are emotionally unstable and psychologically immature, they often find it hard to concentrate on reading for a long period of time.

As a result, when introducing the SSR into middle school, teachers should consider the following factors. First, teachers can help students explore their interest by helping them choose reading materials or designing interesting activities after the SSR. Second, teachers can help students build up their self-efficacy through inviting them to share their perspective about certain books and giving them positive feedback.[5] Third, teachers should create a tolerant reading environment. Fourth, teachers can help students develop reading skills like skimming or scanning. [6] Fifth, teachers need to consider the students' relatively unstable psychological and emotional states. It is essential for teachers to create an undisturbed environment for them. Teachers can set rules for the SSR activity or set an example for students by reading with students together.

4.3 A Study Demonstrates SSR among Chinese Students in Primary School

According to the New English Curriculum standard for Chinese Primary School, most students in China started to learn English in first grade, at about 6 years old. Young students are curious about English, such as pronunciation, culture and customs related to the language. And they prefer to read books with pictures. Moreover, academic self-efficacy does not have a great impact on primary school students. However, their small vocabulary and rather short attention span will pose greater challenges for them when reading. Besides, the test-oriented reading also deprived the students' interest towards English reading, thus the majority of primary school students do not have a sound English reading habit. [7]

When introducing the SSR into primary school, teachers should adapt the classroom accordingly. First, teachers can guide students to select age-appropriate reading materials. Second, rules should be set and consistently enforced during the SSR while teachers can give positive feedback to the students obeying the rules. Third, teachers should arrange the reading time rationally. Fourth, a sound reading environment of reading should be built. For instance, teachers can ask students to leave only the book they selected on the desk and do the reading with them. Fifth, teachers can arrange reading meetings from time to time. Primary students will gain motivation from the teacher's positive feedback. Also, teachers can arrange role playing or story retelling to stimulate students' interest in reading.

5. Conclusion

This study discusses the SSR and its influence on students with regards to their reading interest and habits. Also, the study analyses the students from grade one to twelve in China in terms of their

English capability, self-efficacy, learning behaviors and attitudes. The study is aiming to give teachers implications on how to apply the SSR into Chinese setting classrooms in different grades.

The SSR is conducive to develop students' interest in reading and forming a reading habit. However, test-oriented reading is currently the most prevailing and effective reading method in the English class in China. Nevertheless, the study suggests that SSR can also improve students' reading ability and performance in reading exams, as well as increase students' self-efficacy towards reading.

This study offers teachers a new perspective of English reading teaching and a general situation of students' English capability, reading self-efficacy, learning behaviors and attitudes in different grades. Moreover, the study introduces practical methods for the SSR application in different classrooms. Teachers are encouraged to flexibly adapt the SSR teaching methods into individual classrooms.

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