

# 81 Generalizations about Free Voluntary Reading

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I present here a set of generalizations about free voluntary reading. Most are supported by empirical evidence, but some are not, supported only in anecdotal reports. Those in this category are marked with an asterisk (\*). All are invitations for additional research.

The set of generalizations begins with research on free voluntary reading done in school, known as Sustained Silent Reading (SSR). In SSR, time is set aside for recreational reading; students read whatever they like (within reason), and are not tested on what they read.

## RESEARCH ON SUSTAINED SILENT READING

### Language Development

1. Overall, SSR is successful: 51/54 comparisons, readers do as well as or better than comparison students in reading comprehension (Krashen, 2001a). SSR students did better in every comparison in a review of studies (23 comparisons) of SSR among students of English as a foreign language (Krashen, 2007).
2. Longer term studies tend to be more successful (Krashen, 2001a).

**SSR students also do better than comparisons on tests of:**

3. writing (studies reviewed in Krashen, 2004; Hsu and Lee, 2007).
4. writing fluency (Mason, 2007, but see K. Smith, 2007)
5. spelling (in most cases. See Krashen, 2004).
6. vocabulary (Krashen, 2004).
7. grammar (Krashen, 2004; Rodrigo, 2006; Mason, 2007).

### SSR is Robust

8. SSR works for languages other than English: Japanese (Hitosugi and Day, 2004), Spanish (Rodrigo, Krashen and Gibbons, 2004) as FL

9. SSR works for both first and second language acquisition (Krashen, 2004).
10. SSR works for foreign language acquisition, for children (Elley and Mangubhai, 1983; Cho and Kim, 2004, Cho and Kim, 2005), and for college students (Mason and Krashen, 2003; SY Lee, 2007; CK Liu, 2007), for high school (age 15-16) students (K. Smith, 2006), evening college students (K. Smith, 2007), vocational college students (Hsu and Lee, 2007).
11. SSR works for all ages of readers studied so far (Krashen, 2004).
12. SSR often works even if some conditions are not met (SY Lee, 2004, 2007)
13. SSR works with graded readers (Mason and Krashen, 1997)

**The most important question one can ask about any reading activity is whether it helps create a lifelong reader (Calkins, 2004). Results from SSR are encouraging:**

### Establishing a Reading Habit

14. SSR readers report that they read more at the end of the SSR program than at the beginning (Pilgreen and Krashen, 1993).
15. SSR readers report reading more even years after the program has ended. (Greeney and Clarke, 1975)

### Heritage Language

15. Classes that emphasize popular literature and free reading promote Heritage Language Development (McQuillan, 1998a).
16. Second generation speakers of Korean who speak their heritage language better report more free reading in Korean (Cho and Krashen, 2000).
17. Heritage language speakers who have developed high levels of competence in their heritage language despite spending very little time in the country where the heritage language was spoken all report having access to reading materials in the heritage language, and nearly all developed an interest in reading in the language for pleasure (Tse, 1998).

### What is the most effective is also the most pleasant: Affect and SSR

18. Foreign language, second language, and heritage students prefer SSR to regular instruction (McQuillan, 1994; Dupuy, 1997; Lao and Krashen, 2008).
19. A single SSR session can change attitudes (KS Cho and Krashen, 2002)
20. Teachers note fewer discipline problems when SSR is done\* (Johnson, 1961; Petre, 1961; Takase, 2004).

## Do they read during SSR?

21. Observations show that 90% of students read during SSR (Von Sprecken and Krashen, 1998; Cohen, 1999).
22. More reading takes place if books are available in class and students do not have to bring their own reading material every time (Von Sprecken and Krashen, 1998).
23. More reading takes place if the teacher reads while students are reading (Von Sprecken and Krashen, 1998, Wheldall and Entwistle, 1998).
24. SSR may not work if it is done school-wide at the same time each day (Minton, 1980).
25. SSR is not effective if done during the students' lunch period (Maynes, 1981).

## The assumption has been made that SSR is “not enough”: Can SSR be made stronger?

26. Supplementation with writing does not increase the power of reading (Mason, 2004, K. Smith, 2006).
27. Supplementation with writing and error correction does not increase the power of reading (Mason, 2004).
28. Supplemental activities that make reading more comprehensible and interesting can increase the power of reading (Manning and Manning, 1984).

## Results of correlational research are consistent with the results of SSR studies

29. Those who read more read better (Krashen, 2004).
30. Those who read more write better (Krashen, 2004; SY Lee, 2004).
31. Those who read more have better vocabularies (Lee, Krashen, and Tse, 1997; Cho, Park and Krashen, 2008).
32. Those who read more have more grammatical competence (Lee, YO, Krashen, and Gribbons, 1996).
33. Those who read more spell better (Polak and Krashen, 1988).
34. Those who read more read faster (Anderson, Wilson, and Fielding, 1988).
35. Those who read more know more about literature (Ravitch and Finn, 1987; West, Stanovich, and Mitchell, 1983).
36. Those who read more know more about science and social studies (Stanovich and Cunningham, 1993).
37. Those who read more have more “cultural literacy” (West, Stanovich, and Mitchell, 1983).
38. Those who read more have more “practical knowledge” (Stanovich and Cunningham, 1993).
39. More bible reading is related to more knowledge of bible, but more “study” of the bible is not related to more knowledge of the bible (Filback and Krashen, 2002).
40. Those who read more get better grades in writing class (SY Lee and Krashen, 2002).

41. Those who read more do better on the TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) (Gradman and Hanania, 1991; Constantino, SY Lee, KS Cho and Krashen, 1997, see also Mason, 2006).
42. Those who read more have less writing apprehension (SY Lee, 2001; SY Lee and Krashen, 1996, 1997).
43. Those who read more suffer less from writer's block (SY Lee 2001, 2004).

## Additional benefits

44. Older people who continue to read show less memory loss (Rice, 1986).
45. Reading causes relaxation and may help you fall sleep (Nell, 1988).
46. Free voluntary reading is a “flow” experience (Nell, 1998; Massimini, Csikszentmihalyi, Della Fave. 1992)
47. Nearly all eminent people were voracious readers: “omnivorous reading in childhood and adolescence correlates positively with ultimate adult success” (Simonton, 1988, p. 11).

## Encouraging Reading

48. “Reluctant readers” are often those with little access to books (Worthy and McKool, 1996).
49. Those who have more access to books do more recreational reading (Krashen, 2004).
50. Those who have more access to books read better (Krashen, 2004; McQuillan, 1998b; Krashen, SY Lee, and McQuillan, 2008).
51. More access to school libraries is related to more recreational reading (Houle and Montmarquette. 1984; McQuillan and Au, 2001).
52. Children with access to better classroom libraries read more (Morrow and Weinstein, 1982).
53. Better access to public libraries results in more recreational reading (Ramos and Krashen, 1998, Lao, 2003).
54. Children get many of their books for recreational reading from libraries (Krashen, 2004).
55. Children who live in low-income neighborhoods have very little access to books (Smith, Constantino, and Krashen, 1996; Neuman and Celano, 2001).
56. Children who live in low-income neighborhoods have fewer books at home (Feitelson and Goldstein, 1986).
57. Children who live in low-income neighborhoods have less access to books at school (Smith, Constantino, and Krashen, 1996; Duke, 2000).
58. Classroom and school libraries don't always have what children like to read; children from high-income families can find these books elsewhere but children of poverty cannot (Worthy, Moorman, and Turner. 1999).
59. Bookstores with children's and adolescent literature are far more plentiful in high-income neighborhoods (Neuman and Celano, 2001).
60. Students of English as a foreign language often have little access to recreational reading in English (HK Kim and Krashen, 1997).

61. Read-alouds (reading to children) encourage children to read more (Brassell, 2003; Martinez, Roser, Worthy, Strecker, and Gough, 1997; Wang and Lee, 2007; Cho, KS and Choi, DS, 2008).
62. When compelling and comprehensible reading material is available, direct encouragement can result in children reading more (Shin, 2003).
63. Children read more when they have a quiet and comfortable place to read (Morrow, 1983; Greaney and Hegarty, 1987).
64. There is no scientific evidence showing that providing children with rewards increases reading development (McQuillan, 1997; Krashen, 2003d, 2005a).
65. There is no evidence that the use of lexiles or similar means of determining reading difficulty encourages more reading (Krashen, 2001b).
66. Middle school boys who read more comics report more reading in general, more book reading, and interest in reading (Ujjiie and Krashen, 1996).
67. Case histories show that comics can serve as a conduit to “heavier” reading (Krashen, 2004).
68. One positive experience (one “home run book”) can create a reader (Trelease, 2006; Von Sprecken, J. Kim and Krashen, 2000; J. Kim and Krashen, 2000; Ujjiie and Krashen, 2002).
69. Home run book experiences vary widely among children (Ujjiie and Krashen, 2002).
70. Home run books are not necessarily “quality” books (Ujjiie and Krashen, 2002).
71. Prize-winning books are not particularly popular among children (Ujjiie and Krashen, 2005).
72. Peers influence reading (Appleby and Conner, 1985; Wendelin and Zinck, 1983; Worthy, 1998).
73. Book displays influence reading (Morrow, 1982).
74. TV watching, unless excessive, is not a threat to recreational reading (Neuman, 1995).
75. Those who regularly use computers do not spend less time reading (Gallup, 2002). In fact, more time spent on the computer is modestly related to more recreational reading for adults (Robinson and Godbey, 1997) and adolescents (de Haan and Huysmans, 2004)
76. More use of the internet among adolescents in low-income families results in more reading (Jackson et. al. 2006).
77. Contrary to popular opinion, there is no solid evidence of a decline in reading in the USA (Krashen, 2004a).
78. Contrary to popular opinion, children do not lose all interest in reading as they get older (Krashen and Von Sprecken, 2002; Schatz and Krashen, 2006).
79. Reading interests among young readers broaden as they get older (LaBrant, 1938).
80. Good readers tend to be “narrow readers” (Lamme, 1976).
81. “Narrow reading” can stimulate more recreational reading (Cho and Krashen, 1994, 1995a, 1995b).

## GUIDELINES for SSR:

The following suggestions are based on the generalizations presented above as well as on the suggestions of teachers.

1. **Do a little each day, not a lot once a week (distributed, not massed) \***
2. **Less is more; do less than you think they can handle; if you think they can sit and read for 15 minutes, do ten minutes.\***
3. **Make sure plenty of books and other reading material are available.**
4. **Comic books are ok.**
5. **Magazines are ok.**
6. **Graded readers, books written for language students, are ok.**
7. **Let students select their own reading material (SY Lee 2007)**
8. **Impose minimum censorship on what is read\* (for discussion, see Trelease, 2004)**
9. **It is ok for readers to read “easy” books (below their “level”) (Krashen, 2005b).**
10. **It is ok for readers to read “hard” (books above their “level”) (Krashen, 2005b).**
11. **Students don’t have to finish every book they start to read.\***
12. **Sustained silent reading is not for beginners. Beginners need other kinds of comprehensible text. It also will not help advanced readers who have already established a reading habit (Krashen, 2001a).**
13. **Supplement SSR with activities that serve to make reading more comprehensible and interesting (e.g. read alouds, trips to the library, discussion of literature).**
14. **Don’t use rewards for reading, don’t test students on what is read, do not require book reports. Use zero or minimum accountability. When the conditions are right (compelling reading material available, and enough reading competence) direct encouragement can work.**
15. **How about some food and drink? Let’s try eating and reading in the school library.\* (Trelease and Krashen, 1996)**

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