Forced Pleasure Reading May Get You Neither: Comment on Milliner (2017)

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Abstract

Milliner (2017) found no correlation between the number of words read by students in an extensive reading program and gain scores on a general measure of English language proficiency. I would like to argue that these results are probably due to the "forced pleasure reading" design of the study, which failed to follow the principles of effective free reading programs.

Introduction

There is now a large body of evidence supporting the positive effects of pleasure reading on literacy development, including vocabulary growth, reading comprehension, writing ability, and more (Krashen, 2004). Part of this evidence comes from studies on extensive reading (ER) programs. Krashen and Mason (2017) summarized the results of three separate meta-analyses of extensive and sustained silent reading programs. In all three reviews, extensive reading was found to lead to gains in both vocabulary and comprehension. I have summarizedthe three meta-analyses in Table 1 by outcome measure, using the effect size calculations provided by the researchers.

Table 1
Impact of Extensive and Sustained Silent Reading Programs in Three Meta-Analyses

Study	Treatment	Vocabulary	Reading Comprehension	All Measures Combined
Krashen (2007)	SSR/ER		.87	
Nakanishi (2015)	SSR/ER	.18	.63	.46 (Overall) .57 (High school)^ .05 (Junior high)^
Jeon & Day (2016)	SSR/ER	.47	.54	.57 (Overall) .52 (Children) .35 (Adolescents)

Effect sizes are most often reported as the number of standard deviations that separate two groups at the end of the experiment; or for studies with no control group, the difference between the pre-test and post-test scores. Effect sizes are generally considered small when they are .20 or less, medium when they're around .50, and large if they are .80 or more (Cohen, 1988). As can be seen in Table 1, extensive reading treatments in most comparisons yielded a medium to high effect size, whether we look at vocabulary growth, reading comprehension, or overall gain scores.

Milliner (2017)

Milliner (2017) appears to have provided data to support the hypothesis that extensive reading does not lead to language gains that are

proportionate to the amount of time spent reading. He studied a group of intermediate English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students (N=19) at a Japanese university, who were required to read at least 250,000 words from graded readers over the course of two college semesters. Students who read the minimum number of words received 10 per cent credit on their final grades.

Students could choose from more than 500 graded readers at various levels via an online service. Students read the books on their smartphones-a common practice in Japan, according to the researcher. Nearly all of the students (17 of the 19) met the 250,000-word target, reading an average of 263,767 words. All the reading was done out of class.

The online software used for the study tracked the number of hours, pages and books the students read. It appears that students were also required to take post-reading comprehension quizzes (Milliner, 2017, p. 52), although the quizzes do not appear to have counted directly toward their final grades (Table 1). The researcher administered a version of the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) exam before and after the study (December to December) to measure the students' progress in English.

Students did in fact make significant gains on the TOEIC during their year of study-38 points on the overall TOEIC test and 29 points on the TOEIC reading section. Students read an average of 41.4 hours over the two semesters, which works out to be a gain of 0.9 points per hour of reading on the overall TOEIC score.The individual score gains, however, were not significantly correlated with the number of words read for either the total TOIEC score or the TOEIC reading section score (r = .07 and -.18, respectively).

Milliner's results run counter to several studies that have found that the extent of reading is positively correlated to reading gains on the TOEIC (Mason and Krashen, 2017) and TOEFL tests (Contantino, Lee, Cho & Krashen, 1997; Gradman& Hanania, 1991). There are some likely reasons why the results of Milliner's study differed from those of previous ones.

First, there was no control group used in the study, nor were other possible sources of English input students may have received during the year-long study controlled for. Hence, we cannot be sure if any of the gains were attributable to the extensive reading program, a point Milliner makes (p. 56).

Second, the student's TOEIC score counted for just 20 per cent of the final grade, meaning the students had a strong incentive to do other activities to improve their test scores, activities that may have had more impact than reading. Milliner notes that "students completed drills and practice tests from a TOEIC test preparation textbook" (p. 56).

Third and most importantly, none of the reading was "free reading"; it was all assigned, although students could choose their own texts. While assigned reading certainly can lead to gains in reading comprehension, it does not appear that very many of Milliner's students got "lost in a book" or saw it as anything other than another box to tick. Table 2 on page 54 of Milliner's (2017) study shows that nearly all of the subjects read close to the same amount-just over the minimum 250,000 words required for full credit (the standard deviation was 34,904).

The fact that students did the minimum reading also means that their text selections may have reflected the path of least resistance, encouraging them to choose relatively easy books. Milliner himself noted that electronic tracking was done in part to prevent any false reporting of the number of words read-a sign

that there was a low level of student "buy-in": "The researcher was able to monitor post-reading quiz results and reading times to minimize the chances of student chicanery or cheating" (Milliner, 2017, emphasis added).

Though it may appear that the students did a lot of reading in a year's time, in fact the total time spent reading was on average just over an hour a week during the school year, or a little more than 10 minutes a day. Compare this to Mason and Krashen's (2017) subjects, who read on average more than three and a half hours a week in English (see Table 3, p. 473), all without any credit or compulsion.

We do not know for sure, but it is plausible that Milliner's subjects did little more than "go through the motions" of extensive reading by swiping through the pages of an easy book, and reading just enough to pass the test and get their grade. Anecdotal reports(Hill, 2009) on a similar assigned reading program, "Accelerated Reader", indicate that some students make the minimal effort in an attempt to "game the system".

The problem with forced pleasure reading is that you may end up with neither pleasure nor reading. Effective free reading interventions (Krashen, 2004) have minimum accountability, are free of reading comprehension tests, and are not tied to strict reading goals, all of which were done in Milliner's study.

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