



# Stephen Krashen: Pleasure Reading

**Dr. Stephen Krashen is Professor Emeritus of Learning and Instruction at the University of Southern California. He is an expert in the field of linguistics, specializing in theories of language acquisition and development. Recently Dr. Krashen's research has focused on reading and its effects on language acquisition and academic success. In the late 1970s, Stephen Krashen began promoting the "natural approach" to language teaching. He has published hundreds of books and articles and has been invited to deliver over 500 lectures at universities throughout the United States and the rest of the world. In the past five years, Stephen Krashen has fought to save whole language and bilingual education in the United States and has been lobbying for "recreational reading" and better stocked school libraries.**

My friends on the "spiritual path" tell me that there are two paths to spiritual awakening: The path of pleasure and the path of pain. Of the two, the path of pain is faster: Personal suffering and tragedy often causes us to look beyond the mundane concerns of our everyday life and consider larger questions. The path of pleasure (e.g. meditation) also works, but it is slower.

In literacy and language development, however, only the path of pleasure works. Those who are committed to increasing student suffering (for whatever reason) or who are committed to self-flagellation, will be disappointed in the research results. The research, in my view, points strongly in the direction of the Pleasure Hypothesis: What is good for language development and literacy development is perceived to be pleasant by the acquirer and the teacher.

An important qualification is in order: The pleasure hypothesis does not say that anything students enjoy is beneficial, i.e., I am not saying "If it feels good, it is good for you."

This was not true in the 1960's and it is not true now. Rather, I am saying something more conservative: If an activity is good for language and literacy development, then the activity is pleasurable.

I will present some support for the pleasure hypothesis in the area of reading, evidence that reading is both pleasant and efficient. In fact, reading appears to be both more pleasant than competing methodologies, as well as more efficient.

## Reading is Pleasant

Self-selected voluntary reading is so pleasant that readers often report being addicted to it. W. Somerset Maugham, quoted in Nell (1988), is clearly a reading addict: "Conversation after a time bores me, games tire me, and my own thoughts, which we are told are the unfailing resource of a sensible man, have a tendency to run dry. Then I fly to my book as the opium-smoker to his pipe ..." (Nell, 1988, p.232).

In a review of surveys done between 1965 and 1985, Robinson and Godbey (1997) confirm the pleasure of reading: Adult Americans consistently rated reading as enjoyable. In their 1985 survey of 2,500 adults, book and magazine reading was rated 8.3 out of 10 in enjoyment, compared to 7.5 for hobbies, 7.8 for television, and 7.2 for "conversations."

In Nell (1988) pleasure readers were asked to read a book of their own choice, while their heart rate, muscle activity, skin potential, and respiration rate were measured; level of arousal while reading was compared to arousal during other activities, such as relaxing with eyes shut, listening to white noise, doing mental arithmetic, and doing visualization activities. Nell found that during reading, arousal was increased, as compared to relaxation with eyes shut, but a clear drop in arousal was recorded in the period just after reading, which for some measures reached a level below the baseline (eyes-shut) condition.

The ability of reading to relax us may explain why bedtime reading is so popular: It is arousing, but then it relaxes you. Consistent with these findings are Nell's results showing that bedtime reading is popular. Of 26 pleasure readers he interviewed, 24 read in bed every night or most nights.

Those who discover reading in a second language clearly find it pleasant when they can find interesting and comprehensible reading material. Kyung-Sook Cho (Cho and Krashen, 1994, 1995a, 1995b) reported that adult ESL acquirers in the US became dedicated and enthusiastic readers of Sweet Valley High novels, written for teenage girls. Pilgreen's high school ESL students (Pilgreen and Krashen, 1993) were quite positive about sustained silent reading (SSR): Of Pilgreen's subjects, 56% reported that they enjoyed SSR sessions "very much," while 38% said they enjoyed them "some" and only 7% reported that they only enjoyed them a little.

## What about children?

Conventional wisdom says that children like to read when they are young and then lose interest. But Krashen and Von

Sprecken (2002) reviewed studies using reading attitude surveys and concluded that contrary to popular opinion there is no decline in interest in reading as children get older. Older children and adolescents have more time pressure than younger children do, and have other interests, but interest in reading remains strong (see also Bintz 1993; Krashen, 2001).

### **EFL students: They like reading better**

There is ample evidence that students participating in free reading programs in school prefer free reading to traditional language arts instruction (Krashen, 2004). The same appears to be true for those reading in a second language.

McQuillan (1994) asked university level foreign and second language students participating in recreational reading programs this question: "Given a choice between reading popular literature and studying grammar, which would you prefer to do?" Eighty percent (n = 39) said they would prefer reading popular literature. Additional very positive reactions to free reading from foreign language students are reported by Rodrigo (1997) and Dupuy (1997, 1998).

A series of studies done by Kyung Sook Cho and her colleagues confirmed that reading is more popular than traditional instruction among children studying English as a foreign language in Korea. We discuss these studies below.

### **Reading is effective**

The effectiveness of self-selected recreational reading is very well-established (Krashen, 2004). The strength of the research rests on two impressive facts: Studies supporting reading have been done in a variety of ways, using different methodologies, and have been done with different kinds of subjects in different situations.

### **Correlational studies**

The power of reading has been confirmed using "correlational" studies. These studies consistently show that those who read more show more literacy development. I reviewed a number of these studies in detail in Krashen (1988) that relied on simple correlations. The results of such studies are reassuring and consistent with the view that reading results in language and literacy development, but of course correlation is not causality; it is quite possible that those who read better, as a result of more direct instruction in school, then go on to do more recreational reading.

More recent studies in second language acquisition make this interpretation less likely, and point to reading as the cause of literacy development. These studies consistently report a positive relationship between the amount of free reading done and various aspects of second and foreign language competence when the amount of formal instruction students had is statistically controlled (Y.O. Lee, Krashen, and Gribbons, 1996; Stokes, Krashen and Kartchner, 1998; Constantino, S.Y. Lee, K.S. Cho and Krashen, 1997; S. Y. Lee, 2005).

### **Case histories**

Case histories provide convincing verification of the power of reading. While not considered by some to be "scientific," they clearly are, because in many cases one can only attribute

gains in literacy and language development to recreational reading; there are no plausible alternative explanations for the obvious development that took place.

In Krashen (2004) I described a number of case histories, including Malcolm X and Richard Wright, both of whom achieved very high levels of literacy, and both of whom attributed their literacy development to self-selected reading.

Case histories of successful second language speakers who give reading the credit for their competence include Bishop Desmond Tutu.

More recent reports include the Sweet Valley studies, mentioned earlier (Cho and Krashen, 1994, 1995a, 1995b): Adult second language acquirers made obvious and impressive progress in English as a second language simply by reading books from the Sweet Valley series, novels written for young girls (Sweet Valley Kids, Sweet Valley Twins) and teenage girls (Sweet Valley High). Subjects did not attend ESL classes; their main source of English was the novels. All subjects had lived in the US for a considerable amount of time before starting their reading program, and had made little progress in English.

### **In-school free reading**

Studies of in-school free reading are considered the gold standard for demonstrating the effectiveness of recreational reading, because they include a comparison group that engages in traditional instruction while the experimental group does free voluntary reading. There are slightly different models of in-school free reading (sustained silent reading, self-selected reading, extensive reading) but they all have this in common: Students can read whatever they want to read (within reason) and there is little or no accountability in the form of book reports or grades.

In my reviews of the research on in-school free reading (Krashen 2004), I have concluded that with very few exceptions, students in these programs progress in reading at least as well as those in comparison groups, and often do considerably better. The most successful studies are those that last for longer than one academic year. Short-term studies produce positive but less spectacular results, most likely because it usually takes readers some time to settle in and find suitable reading material.

As noted above, the evidence comes from a wide variety of situations. The bulk of the research deals with English as a first language, but includes studies using children in elementary school as well as teenagers (including juvenile delinquent boys in reform school; Fader, 1976).

In addition to earlier studies (e.g. Elley and Mangubhai, 1985; Mason and Krashen, 1997), a new wave of studies from Asia confirms the power of reading for EFL students: In studies done in Korea, children in EFL classes that included reading interesting stories from the internet gained more in English than comparisons did (Cho and Kim, 2004).

In another, EFL elementary school children did classroom activities related to reading newspapers written for EFL students. Nearly all those in the newspaper class voluntarily read the newspapers in their free time at school, and the class made significantly better gains in English than a comparison group (Cho and Kim, 2005). In both studies, readers were more enthusiastic about English than were comparison students in traditional classes.

Studies done in Taiwan have provided consistent results showing that self-selected reading works for university level EFL students. In two different studies each lasting one academic year, students in classes that set aside time for reading or that encouraged reading outside of class did better than those in several different comparison classes (S.Y. Lee, 2006; Liu, 2005).

## Conclusions

Self-selected recreational reading may not, by itself, be enough to guarantee students' reaching the highest levels of competence in another language. But there is no question that it is effective, that time spent in free reading is more efficient in terms of language development than a similar amount of time spent in traditional instruction.

The studies and observations reviewed here are only a tiny portion of the evidence supporting the power of reading, but they are, nevertheless, very good news: They support the hypothesis that the most efficient way of developing competence in a language is also the most pleasant. For language acquisition, at least, the path of pleasure is the best path.

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