

# The Classroom Library and Sustained Silent Reading

by Nancy McKeand

The year 1998 found me teaching in China - my first experience in Asia. My training and prior experience had prepared me for this to some degree, but this situation was unlike any I had taught in before. The classes had as many as 48 students. The chairs were bolted to the floor. I was to teach extensive reading using a book that looked intensively at a wide variety of largely out-dated and generally boring articles. In addition, my students, all training to be English teachers but many without much interest in the subject, were used to having all their English classes taught in Mandarin Chinese and had difficulty understanding spoken English. Having just completed an MA TESOL six weeks before I went to China, I was filled with good ideas. I knew about activating schema, about how to present vocabulary. I knew all about reading strategies. I knew the difference between extensive and intensive reading. I knew a lot. Unfortunately, I was unsure as to how to implement those good ideas in the environment in which I found myself. What I knew was that I had to do something that would make my students interested in reading and, as a result, better readers. It took awhile, but I eventually stumbled onto something. That 'thing' was a classroom library and Sustained Silent Readings (SSR).

Actually, I had become acquainted with the concepts long before 1998. I had read *Hooked on Books* by Daniel Fader many years before. In that book Fader describes how he flooded his students' environment with reading material of all types - newspapers, magazines, comic books, and all sorts of paperback books. The results of this effort were astounding. He shows that students will read if they are given enough access to the right kind of reading material. The 'right kind' of material, in Fader's view, is anything the students want to read. Watching my own children devour any kind of reading material they could find, I had seen first hand the power of comic books, magazines and even cereal boxes to attract and maintain interest in reading. I was convinced that giving children interesting materials to read was the best way to get them to read.

Like journal writing, the goal of SSR is to develop fluency, to get students to enjoy reading enough to do it in their spare time. As a teacher I know that my students will benefit greatly from their enjoyment of reading, and I want to do anything I can to promote their recreational reading. Some years earlier, when I had been teaching Spanish in a small high school in the United States, the school district implemented a weekly period of Sustained Silent Reading. I saw how difficult it was for students to get used to the idea of just reading (not studying) for fifteen minutes but how much they enjoyed it once they had acquired the habit. I was definitely a theoretical proponent of both classroom libraries and SSR prior to my own experiment with them. I had no experience with either a classroom library or SSR at

the college level, however, and I had no idea if they would work or not.

My classroom library came into being through the changing interests of my then eleven-year-old son. Being an avid reader and having a lot of experience moving to new countries, he had been more interested in what he would read in China than anything else. As a result, he had packed more books than clothes. Nonetheless, after a few months there, he had read all of those books at least three times. He was definitely bored with them and wanted new reading material. At the same time, he had finally made friends with a neighbor boy and was a little less dependent on his books to fill his spare time. It was not impossible for us to replenish his book supply, so we bought him a few books and added some more new reading material. With the beginnings of a new library, he was content and even happy to give up his old collection. As a result, I suddenly had almost fifty used books at my disposal. They were mostly books aimed at 10-12 year old children - *Goosebumps*, some classics in abridged versions, and a variety of other books. Once I had the books, the question became what to do with them.

My first thought was whether or not these books would be appropriate for my students. I was not worried about the difficulty of the books as the reading level was certainly below that of their reading text. But could they relate to the somewhat immature stories? Could they understand the cultural information that was presented without explanation? I had read a few of these books and wondered if my students would find them interesting or not. I was worried, but I decided that these books were what I had available, so they would have to do.

The next problem was how to use the books. I remembered my experience with SSR and decided I would have my students read silently at the beginning of every class. But how could I do that with three reading classes with a total on more than 100 students when I had fewer than 50 books for them to read? Since I had no office, no permanent classroom, I had to be creative. I ended up carrying the books from home to class each time. I would then distribute the books to the students. They were asked to choose a book to read in the first class. In subsequent classes they could have the same book if they wanted or change books if they didn't. While a number of students seemed to change books each class meeting, many of them continued to read the same one for the entire semester. Those students would dutifully record the name of the book and the number of the page they stopped on so they would know where to start the next time. Some students were very good about writing the information down but then would lose the paper before the next class. The solution then was to look at the artwork on the cover. Since the artwork was

often one of the reasons a student chose a particular book in the first place, it was fairly easy for him to remember it from class to class.

After distributing the books, I would allow the students to read for approximately fifteen minutes. I felt that I could not dedicate more time than that to SSR because I was expected to teach from the textbook, as well. This did not allow enough time for most of the students to finish a book, but a few actually finished the first one and started on a second. At the end of those minutes I would

collect the books and stow them away on their carrying bags. I did not require students to report on what they read in any way. I did this for two reasons: I wanted the reading experience to be as pleasurable as possible without requiring anything else of them and I was reluctant to take any more class time for the activity. A few students, ones who were fairly comfortable speaking English, approached me from time to time to tell me about the book they were reading, but that was the only reporting that was done.

Because they were old and well read, I did not have to worry about the books in my classroom library. With new books or if I knew I had no means of replacing them, I might have been more concerned. Would the books be destroyed? Would they disappear? I have to say that my Chinese students were very gentle with the books. None of the books disappeared, even though some students asked for and were given permission to take their books home to finish them before the next class. All my students seemed to understand that the entire project depended on how they handled the books; if the books were damaged to such a degree that they could not be read again or if they disappeared entirely, the freedom to read a book they wanted to read would have to disappear as well.

Was this experience worth the trouble of lugging the books from one side of campus to the other every time we had reading class? Did the students get enough out of it to justify taking the time from their regular classroom activities? I believe so. My students were actively engaged in reading in English each time the class met. Most of them expressed to me that they enjoyed the books they were reading. Even if they didn't really like a particular book, they enjoyed the fact that they were reading a book in English. It increased their confidence, as well. Because I am convinced of their value, I have continued to use a classroom library and SSR wherever I am teaching.

The task of establishing a classroom library may seem daunting, but I believe it is not impossible. The biggest advantage is that you do not really have to worry about what kinds of books you put in it; anything can work. What matters is that there are enough books or magazines to offer each student a choice of reading material. If you are in an English speaking country, this should be an easy task. Outside of an English-speaking country, it would involve getting books from every passing tourist or English-speaking

resident. Your collection might be even more eclectic than mine, but I can almost guarantee that your students will appreciate it.

The question might arise, 'Why would I want to have a classroom library if I teach in an English-speaking country where books in English abound?' The answer is simple. You can easily stock your library with books that your students wouldn't otherwise read. At the US college where I currently teach, I have a classroom library filled with almost every kind of book imaginable. There are mysteries, classics, spiritual books, biographies, and other types of fiction and non-fiction books as well as magazines. Some of the books are remnants of my son's outgrown library; others have been purchased second-hand. The books present a wide variety of levels of linguistic difficulty, so there is something easy enough for everyone to read and something difficult enough to challenge even the most advanced reader. A number of my students have read their first entire book in English out of this library. I feel very strongly that it is a tremendous asset for my students.

Another possible question, of course, might center on the value of Sustained Silent Reading. Does it really help students? According to Dr. Stephen Krashen, it does. In reviewing a report from the National Reading Panel on what helps students read, he states (2001) that research shows that 'At worst, the impact of free reading seems to be the same as traditional instruction.' He maintains that since free reading, specifically SSR, is much more enjoyable for both students and teachers and since it produces the same or better results than reading instruction, teachers should consider using it in their classrooms. Just a few minutes each day can have a tremendous impact on our students.

Having used a classroom library and SSR in both an EFL and an ESL environment, I cannot recommend them too highly. I have seen how they increase my students' interest in reading while also improving their

ability to read and understand the English language. Access to books and time to read the books they want also improve their vocabularies and their mastery of grammar. I invite you to give it a try, to see if a classroom library and Sustained Silent Reading work for you and your students. You have very little to lose, and your students have a lot to gain!

### References

- Fader, D. (1976). *The New Hooked on Books* New York: Berkley Books.  
 Krashen, S. (2001). *The NRP Report on Fluency: More Smoke and Mirrors - A*

*Critique of the National Reading Panel Report on Fluency.* Phi Delta Kappan,83(2), 119-123.

*Additional articles on the value of free reading can be found at Dr. Stephen Krashen's web site:*  
<http://www.sdkrashen.com>

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