

READING IN ENGLISH BY CHILDREN IN KOREA: FREQUENCY, EFFECTIVENESS, AND BARRIERS

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Abstract

A study of the English non-textbook reading of fourth graders in Korea revealed that about 80% had done at least some reading, confirming that there is enthusiasm for English reading. About half, however, had read only five books or fewer. Non-readers said that the reason they did not read in English was the difficulty of English texts. Those who read more did better on a test of English spelling and vocabulary.

Keywords: English non-textbook reading; Enthusiasm for English reading; English texts; English spelling and vocabulary

INTRODUCTION

Research clearly supports the “power of reading.” Study after study has shown that free voluntary reading, or reading because you want to, is the major source of reading ability, writing ability, vocabulary, spelling, and the ability to handle complex grammatical constructions. Studies confirming these relationships include correlational studies, case histories, and experiments, and have been done with children, adolescents and adults, for both first and second language development (Krashen, 2004).

It has been suggested that free reading may be the cure for “English fever.” Because of the growing importance of English world-wide, the desire to acquire English as a foreign language has also increased dramatically. Studies in English as a foreign language confirm that free voluntary reading can make a powerful contribution to English ability among children (e.g.

Cho & Kim, 2004; Cho & Kim, 2005) as well as among older students (Mason & Krashen, 1997; Lee, 2007; Liu, 2007).

The purpose of this study is to determine to what extent children in an EFL situation engage in reading of non-textbook material, and to what extent they are enthusiastic about reading. In addition, it was important to determine why some children do not read more. Finally, the study also attempts to confirm the relationship between reading and literacy.

METHOD

Subjects were 626 fourth grade students of English as a foreign language enrolled in eight different elementary schools in the Busan area in Korea, from a wide range of socio-economic backgrounds.

All students were asked to fill out a short survey in Korean dealing with their English reading habits and attitudes toward English reading. Details of the questionnaire will be presented below along with the results.

In addition, students took an English vocabulary/spelling test consisting of 29 items. The test consisted of ten words which students were asked to translate into Korean, nine items in which children were asked to choose four words with a different meaning from the others (e.g. *yesterday*, *piano*, *tomorrow*, *today*), and ten items asking children to provide the correct spelling of an English word. For the spelling part of the test, the Korean translation was provided, and children only had to provide one missing letter of the target word, e.g. *pen_il*. Reliability for each portion of the test was high (Cronbach alpha = .87 for first 19 items, alpha = .89 for the last ten items (spelling). The two sections of the test correlated highly with each other ($r = .8$) and were thus combined into one measure for the initial analysis. The mean score for the test for the entire sample was 14.27 (sd = 8.55), (49% correct), indicating that there was no danger of a ceiling or floor effect.

Students were categorized as readers or non-readers depending on their answer to the following question: "Have you ever read books in English other than textbooks?" A substantial 77% of the subjects (485/626) had done at least some reading in English, and 23% (141/626) had not.

Not surprisingly, the two groups differed in their responses to a question about attitudes toward reading, with the reading group showing much more enthusiasm (Table 1). Combining categories 1 and 2, and 4 and 5, the difference between the groups is highly significant (chi square = 111.26, $p < .001$). It is encouraging that over 90% of the readers and 87% of the entire sample were at least moderately interested in reading in English.

TABLE 1
"How interested are you in reading in English?"

Degree of interest in reading	Readers	Non-Readers	total
	N(%)	N(%)	N(%)
1. I really want to read in English	132(28.0)	7(5.1)	139(22.9)
2. I want to read in English	167(35.5)	21(15.4)	188(31.0)
3. moderate	141(29.9)	59(43.4)	200(32.9)
4. I do not want to read in English.	25(5.3)	30(22.1)	55(9.1)
5. I don't want to read at all	6(1.3)	19(14.0)	25(4.1)

(translated from Korean)

Despite their enthusiasm, the readers had not read that much in English. As presented in Table 2, half the subjects reported having read five or fewer books in English. There were, however, a few dedicated readers in English, reporting having read more than 21 books.

TABLE 2
Amount of reading in Readers Group

Number of books	Number of Subjects	%
1~5	250	52.4
6~10	72	15.1
11~15	51	10.7
16~20	38	8
above 21	66	13.8
Total	477	100

To allow correlational analyses, responses were quantified on a 1-5 scale, with those who indicated "want to read really" receiving a score of 5. Responses related to amount of reading done were quantified in the same way, with those reporting the least reading given a score of one. As

expected, interest in reading and amount of reading done were highly positively correlated with each other, $r = .662$.

Those in the non-reading group were asked the reasons for their abstention from English reading, choosing from the reasons listed in Table 3. The most frequently mentioned reason was the perception that English books were too difficult. Only 12.7% said they did not have enough access to English books.

TABLE 3
Reasons for having no reading experience

	N	%
1. No interesting books available	16	12.7
2. English books are difficult to read	61	48.4
3. Teachers & parents never introduced me interesting books in English.	16	12.7
4. not interested in English	30	23.8
5. others	3	2.4
Total	126	100

Correlations between scores on the vocabulary/spelling test and amount of reported reading were run for the reader group only, as non-readers reported too little reading to produce meaningful results. The correlation between the amount of reading done and performance on the vocabulary test was $r = .575$, which is statistically significant, positive, and substantial. Similarly, those with greater interest in reading did better on the vocabulary/spelling test ($r = .541$). In agreement with the correlational results, the reader group did significantly better on the vocabulary/reading test than the non-reading group (mean of reader group = 16.28, $sd = 8.21$; for non-reader group, mean = 7.37, $sd = 5.56$; $t = 14.84$; $df = 624$, $p < .0001$).

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

About 80% of fourth graders had done at least some reading in English other than textbooks, and those who had read in English showed significantly more enthusiasm about English reading than those who had not. About half of the readers had read only five or fewer books. When asked why they did not read in English, about half of the non-readers responded that English books were too hard. Fewer than 13% said that there were no interesting books available to them. Readers did better on a vocabulary/spelling test than did non-readers, and among the readers, there was a significant positive correlation between the amount read and vocabulary/spelling test scores.

The results confirm that there is some enthusiasm for reading in English: about half the entire sample had a clear interest in reading in English, and very few students were strongly negative: only 9% of the entire sample said they were not interested in reading in English (Table 1, item 4) and only 24% of the non-readers said they were not interested in English at all (Table 3, item 4).

Some of the enthusiasm for English reading might have been due to actual experience reading: The correlation between the amount read and reading enthusiasm was quite high ($r = .662$), which suggests that more reading resulted in more enthusiasm. This correlation also could be interpreted as showing that those who liked reading more sought out more reading material. Most likely, both directions of causality exist.

The desire to read in English could also be due to the tremendous emphasis on the acquisition of English as a foreign language in Korea, or "English fever." Additional research can confirm whether fourth graders are influenced by English fever as much as their parents are.

It is also possible that the children's enthusiasm for reading in English is simply a reflection of the interest children have for reading in general. Table 4 compares the results of this study with the results of a survey done in England in which a question similar to the question posed here was asked of 422 primary and secondary school students concerning reading in their first language, English (Clark & Foster, 2005). The results are nearly identical. In both studies, few children expressed no interest in reading, and over half were clearly enthusiastic.

TABLE 4
 Responses to “How much do you enjoy reading?” (England) and
 “How interested are you in reading in English?” (Korea)

England		Korea	
very much	22.30%	I want to really	22.90%
quite a bit	28.70%	I want to	31%
a bit	38%	moderately	32.50%
		not at all	13.20%

England data from Clark and Foster (2005)

An important difference between the study described in this paper and Clark and Foster (2005), however, is that in this study, difficulty of texts was considered to be the major barrier to reading. In the Clark and Foster study, this was not the case: When asked if they would read more “if I found reading easier”, only 18% of the reluctant readers said they would. An obvious reason for difference between the two studies is that the students in this study had far less competence in English, being EFL students in grade four.

An aspect of this study that deserves more attention is the finding that about half of the non-readers said that books in English were “too hard.” It could be the case that in at least some cases, this is a perception and not reality: Non-readers may be unaware that comprehensible texts are available to them and/or may have incorrect ideas about reading, e.g. they may think that readers need to know every word when reading in English. A brief exposure to interesting and comprehensible texts and a brief explanation of reading strategies may be enough to solve this problem and create enthusiastic readers (Cho & Krashen, 2002). It could also be the case that the children are right: Texts available for free voluntary reading in English are too hard, a situation that can be improved.

The positive correlation found between the amount of reading done and scores on the vocabulary/spelling test does not establish that reading is the cause of vocabulary and spelling development, because correlation does not determine causality. It is, however, consistent with previous results supporting this hypothesis (Krashen, 2004).

To return to the research questions posed in the introduction, this study has demonstrated that some reading in English is clearly taking place among school children in Korea, and that there is considerable enthusiasm for reading. The perceived difficulty of texts appears to be the biggest barrier to reading. Finally, two different analyses confirmed that more reported reading was clearly associated with better scores on an English

vocabulary and spelling test, consistent with the results of experimental studies done both in Asia as well as elsewhere.

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