

Improvement in English after a 15 Week Read-Aloud Program in Third Grade EFL Students in Korea

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Abstract

This study examines the impact of reading stories aloud to third graders in EFL classes in Korea at the beginning (second semester) level. Experimental students were read to for only a few minutes three days a week for 15 weeks and significantly outperformed comparisons on aural and written vocabulary and sentence comprehension tests. There was no difference on spelling tests. Students in the experimental group also showed significantly better attitudes and confidence toward English while comparison students declined.

Keywords: read-aloud, language development, English as a foreign language, vocabulary, attitudes

Introduction

Second language pedagogy for young second and foreign language students is dominated by skill-based approaches based on conscious learning. Nevertheless, a growing body of research shows that there are more effective, easier and more pleasant ways. At the core of these methods for children in beginning stages is the practice of teachers reading aloud to children.

Thanks largely to the enormous impact of Jim Trelease's *Read Aloud Handbook*, now in its sixth edition (2006), reading aloud to children is widespread in North America, and with good reason. The professional literature in first language development shows that reading aloud to children results in greater gains in aural and written language development: Children who are read to regularly at school or at home outperform those read to less on measures on vocabulary and listening comprehension, which leads to greater gains in reading comprehension. First language studies include Eller, Pappas, & Brown (1988), Leung & Pikulski (1990), Senechal & LeFevre (2002), Stahl, Richek & Vandevier (1991), and "Reach out and read" studies described in Krashen (2011).

Research has also reached the unsurprising conclusion that children like to be read to, and even ask their parents to buy copies of books read in class (Feitelson, Kita, & Goldstein, 1986).

The second/foreign language research literature is not as extensive as the first language literature, but so far, results are consistent. Studies by Cho and colleagues (Cho & Choi, 2003; Cho & Seo, 2001) have documented that students of English as a foreign language (EFL) in elementary schools in Korea who have been read to make better gains in reading, writing and vocabulary, and show more interest in reading. Lee, Lee and Krashen (2013) contribute a case history demonstrating the effectiveness of reading stories to an eight-year old student of English in Taiwan. Hsieh, Wang, and Lee (2011) have shown that the content of storybooks is far richer and more sophisticated than found in textbooks.

Beniko Mason (personal communication) has suggested that the core material necessary to teach beginning language is a good storybook.

The goal of this study was to extend the research to students at the very beginning stage, third graders who had had only one semester of traditional instruction in English.

Method

Subjects

Subjects were students in two 3rd grade classes, selected as equivalent groups from four different classes based on pretests. There were thirty-four (34) children in the experimental group and thirty-four (34) children in the comparison group. Students were in their second semester of English instruction and were thus beginners.

Treatment

Both groups had one regular English class per week, following the traditional national English curriculum. This study evaluated the impact of activities done during an additional 15-minute period, three days a week. During this time, the experimental students were read to, while comparisons did additional worksheets and activities. The duration of the study was fifteen (15) weeks.

The read-aloud sessions. The books used for the read aloud sessions were *Spiders, Spiders Everywhere!* (Williams & Harris, 1995), *Where's Spot?* (Hill, 1994), *It Looked Like Spilt Milk* (Shaw, 1992), and *The Enormous Turnip* (Arengo, 2000).

Before the actual reading took place, children were asked to predict the content of the story on the basis of the illustrations. Also, a few words thought to be unfamiliar to the students were explained. There was only enough time for four books, as students did other activities during the 15-minute sessions, and students had little competence in English.

A small size copy of each book was provided to each student. During reading aloud, children were given the option of following along in the printed text while listening.

Following the book reading, which generally took about five minutes, students participated in a variety of whole-class activities, including a "speed word quiz" (a word guessing game in which students try to guess words that other students act out), bingo, jigsaw reading (constructing sentences with words cut from a sentence in the story and then reading the sentence), a memory game (students were shown a scene from a storybook using an overhead projector, then they were asked what they had seen in the scene), role-play, and bookmaking.

Bookmaking included drawing the most interesting scene of the book and, if possible, providing the English words that accompanied the picture. Activities used the words from the books they heard. Children were also invited to write comments on the book they just heard, in Korean.

The comparison group. As noted above, the comparison group did worksheets during the supplementary 15-minute periods. Most of the materials were selected from *The Kids' Big Book of Games* (Anderson, 1990) and *Role-Play in English* (Busan Board of Education, 2001). The materials were altered so that they included the same words the children in the experimental group heard in the stories. In addition to doing the worksheets, the comparison students did activities in class such as speed quizzes, memory games, bingo, group word games, jigsaw reading and role-play, activities similar to those done in the experimental group, using similar vocabulary words.

Thus, both the experimental and comparison groups were exposed to the same vocabulary words, including those words included in the stories as well as those covered in the textbook. An attempt was made to use all vocabulary with the same frequency, but this was not confirmed empirically.

Measures

The Aural Test. The aural test consisted of a total of twenty-five (25) items. In the spelling subtest (6 items), children were asked to select a missing letter. For example, students would hear the word "pot" and were provided with "p_t". They would then select the missing letter from among "a, o, i and u". This subtest clearly required spelling knowledge in addition to listening comprehension ability.

In the vocabulary subtest (11 items), the children heard a word and were then asked to choose an appropriate picture (3 items), write a word with the same meaning as a word presented in Korean (6 items), and choose a word (out of four choices) in Korean corresponding to the category of the words presented in English (e.g. students were presented with "jacket, pants, shirts, and coat" in English and were expected to choose "clothes" in Korean (2 items).

In the sentence comprehension subtest (8 items), children were asked to choose a translation corresponding to the presented sentence (out of four choices; 4 items), and were asked to choose the right answer in Korean out of four choices (4 items) corresponding to a conversation.

Of the twenty-five (25) words on the listening test, sixteen were from the textbook used in EFL classes and nine were words common to the worksheets and activities in the comparison group and the stories the experimental children heard and activities they participated in.

Reliability of the test was high (Cronbach's $\alpha = .91$). The same test was used for the pretest and posttest, but the order of items was changed.

The Written Test. The written test consisted of twenty-five (25) items that covered spelling (6 items), vocabulary (12 items) and sentence comprehension (7 items). On the spelling subtest, students were asked to select the right spellings of a word related to a picture. On the vocabulary test, students were asked to translate English words into Korean, match a word with a given picture and select a word that did not belong in the same category (e.g. banana/pear/sheep/grape).

The sentence comprehension test asked students to select an appropriate English translation of a presented Korean sentence and they were asked to complete a sentence that corresponded to a picture.

Of the twenty-five (25) words on the written test, seventeen were from the textbook used in all EFL classes, and eight were common to both the worksheets and activities in the comparison group and the storybooks heard by the experimental students and the activities they participated in. None of the words tested on the listening test were target words on the written test. Reliability of the written test was high (Cronbach's $\alpha = .91$). The same test was used for both the pretest and the posttest, but for the post-test the order of the items was different.

Attitudes. Students filled out a questionnaire written in Korean probing their interest and confidence in listening and reading. The same questionnaire was used as the pretest and the posttest, but the order of the items was changed.

Fourteen (14) items focused on interest and confidence in listening and fourteen (14) items focused on interest and confidence in reading. Responses were on a five-point scale (1 = *not at all*, 2 = *Yes*, 3 = *Moderate*, 4 = *Not really* and 5 = *a great deal*). Reliability of the questionnaire was high (Cronbach's $\alpha = .93$). The "confidence" items were, in a sense, a self-evaluation of the students' English competence, e.g., "I can understand when the teacher reads out loud." The questionnaire is presented in table 1.

Table 1: Interest and Confidence Questionnaire

| Number | Item |
|--------|--|
| 1 | I want to listen to tapes in English. |
| 2 | I can understand when my teacher speaks English. |
| 3 | I love English reading in school. |
| 4 | It is easy to read in English in class. |
| 5 | I want my teacher to read aloud to us. |
| 6 | I like reading in English. |
| 7 | I can understand when the teacher reads aloud. |
| 8 | I am able to read the English textbook very well. |
| 9 | I read better than my friends do. |
| 10 | I want my parents to read English books to me. |
| 11 | I would like our class library to be filled with lots of English books. |
| 12 | I want to read English books to my friends or my parents. |
| 13 | I want to buy English tapes. |
| 14 | After listening to English sentences, I can express them with my body movements. |
| 15 | I want to have more English listening time. |
| 16 | I can read in English in front of others very well. |
| 17 | I want my friends who do well in English to read English books to me. |
| 18 | I can understand when my friends talk in English. |
| 19 | I want to get English books for my birthday. |
| 20 | I am confident taking English listening tests. |
| 21 | I like listening to storybook reading. |
| 22 | I am confident taking English reading tests. |
| 23 | I want to buy books at bookstores. |
| 24 | When I hear an English word, I know what it means. |
| 25 | I can read and understand simple English words in newspapers or magazines. |
| 26 | I am generally able to understand spoken English. |
| 27 | Once in a while I want to read English books aloud. |
| 28 | I want to read lots of English books. |

Table 2 is the key to the questionnaire, providing information on which items correspond to which construct as well as the reliability of each component.

Table 2: Key to Questionnaire

| Subset | Total numbers | Item number of questionnaire | Cronbach's α |
|-------------------------|---------------|------------------------------|---------------------|
| Interest in listening | 7 | 1,5,10,13,15,17,21 | 0.8 |
| Confidence in listening | 7 | 2,7,14,18,20,24,26 | 0.9 |
| Interest in Reading | 7 | 3,6,11,19,23,27,28 | 0.83 |
| Confidence in Reading | 7 | 4,8,9,12,16,22,25 | 0.86 |
| Total | 28 | 1~25 | 0.93 |

For the experimental group only, an open-ended questionnaire in Korean was distributed at the end of the study. It focused on interest in story reading, awareness of the benefits of listening and reading, and the students' favorite activity during reading aloud time. In addition, students' comments were solicited after each story reading session.

Results

Tables 3 and 4 present the results of the aural and written tests. Effect sizes were calculated using the method described in Morris (2008), which takes pretest scores into consideration: The formula is simple: Effect size = The difference between the experimental and comparison gains divided by the pooled pre-test standard deviation. It was important to use a method that considered pretest scores, because experimental students in some cases scored higher than comparisons on pretests.

Table 3: Gains on the Aural Test(N=68)

| Subset | N (34/34) | Pretest M(S.D) | Posttest M(S.D) | t:gain scores | Effect size |
|---------------------------|--------------|-------------------|--------------------|------------------|----------------|
| Spelling | Exp | 4.06(1.92) | 4.74(1.48) | 0.19 | 0.04 |
| | Cont | 3.35(2.20) | 3.94(1.59) | | |
| Vocabulary | Exp | 5.91(2.11) | 8.32(1.98) | 4.21*** | 0.82 |
| | Cont | 6.50(2.43) | 7.06(2.52) | | |
| Sentence Comprehension | Exp | 5.94(2.07) | 7.35(0.81) | 2.64* | 0.61 |
| | Cont | 5.21(1.82) | 5.44(1.89) | | |
| Total | Exp | 15.91(5.15) | 20.44(3.74) | 3.46** | 0.57 |
| | Cont | 15.06(5.52) | 16.56(5.28) | | |

*:p<0.05, **:p<0.01, ***:p<0.001

In table 3, except for the spelling subtest, experimental students showed significantly better gains in vocabulary and sentence comprehension than those of the comparison children.

Table 4: Gains on the Written Test (N=68)

| Subset | N (34/34) | Pretest M(S.D) | Posttest M(S.D) | t: gain scores | Effect size |
|---------------------------|--------------|-------------------|--------------------|-------------------|----------------|
| Spelling | Exp | 4.47(1.73) | 4.97(1.17) | 0.47 | 0.1 |
| | Cont | 4.00(1.72) | 4.32(1.43) | | |
| Vocabulary | Exp | 6.44(3.45) | 8.56(2.78) | 2.89** | 0.38 |
| | Cont | 6.21(4.01) | 6.91(3.85) | | |
| Sentence Comprehension | Exp | 3.06(2.04) | 5.18(2.14) | 4.56*** | 1.14 |
| | Cont | 4.00(2.12) | 3.74(2.27) | | |
| Total | Exp | 13.97(6.45) | 18.71(5.41) | 4.29*** | 0.59 |
| | Cont | 14.21(7.26) | 14.94(6.75) | | |

*:p<0.05, **:p<0.01, ***:p<0.001

On the written test (table 4), the experimental group's gains were again significantly larger than those of the comparison group in every case, except for the spelling subtest. The large advantage for the experimental group on the written sentence-comprehension subtest is in part due to the fact that the comparison group declined.

Table 5: Changes in Attitude (N=68)

| Subset | N (34/34) | Pretest M(S.D) | PosttestM(S.D) | t:gain scores | Effect size |
|----------------------------|--------------|-------------------|----------------|------------------|----------------|
| Interest in listening | Exp | 3.31(0.94) | 3.56(0.63) | 3.20** | 0.83 |
| | Cont | 3.44(0.73) | 3.01(0.68) | | |
| Confidence In listening | Exp | 3.44(0.83) | 3.60(0.62) | 1.55 | 0.34 |
| | Cont | 3.18(0.75) | 3.07(0.66) | | |
| Interest in reading | Exp | 3.44(1.12) | 3.61(0.64) | 3.42** | 0.74 |
| | Cont | 3.59(0.82) | 3.04(0.69) | | |
| Confidence in reading | Exp | 3.31(0.93) | 3.61(0.65) | 2.54* | 0.52 |
| | Cont | 3.20(0.85) | 3.04(0.69) | | |
| Total | Exp | 3.36(0.75) | 3.57(0.64) | 3.80*** | 0.78 |
| | Cont | 3.36(0.63) | 3.03(0.68) | | |

*:p<0.05, **:p<0.01, ***:p<0.001

In table 5, experimental students showed significantly better gains in interest and attitude, while comparisons' interest and attitude declined in every case.

Results of the Survey (Experimental Students Only)

In response to a question on storybook interest, 82.4% (28 students) said that the stories were interesting or very interesting, and 17.6% (6 students) said they were moderately interesting. None of the students responded negatively. These results are nearly identical to those reported in Cho and Seo (2001).

After the book reading program was finished, 73.6% (25 students) of the experimental students said they asked parents to buy storybooks and 26.4% (9 students) responded they did not. Similar results for first language reading aloud were reported by Feitelson, Kita, and Goldstein (1986).

The teacher of the experimental group also noticed that after the children were done with writing their comments, they went back to reading their storybooks.

Experimental students' comments. After experiencing reading aloud sessions, a majority of children commented that they enjoyed reading time. Children who were reluctant to read in English at the beginning of the study said that they became more interested in reading because of the storybooks (Comments translated from Korean):

At first, I didn't want to read and hated reading in English. But I got interested in reading after reading and reading. I wish I could get the same book that my teacher had. I wanted to have more reading time in class.

While most children said they wanted to get more reading aloud time in class, there were some students who didn't want to have it because they felt that English was hard to understand and English itself was difficult.

In response to the question about their favorite activity in reading class, children frequently mentioned games, teacher's reading aloud, bookmaking and reading together among peers.

Regarding language benefits, most children mentioned that they improved in listening and reading. A few students mentioned pronunciation improvement as well. One student commented that vocabulary could be increased without going to after-school classes. The following comments were typical:

From my teacher's reading aloud storybooks to us, my listening and pronunciation have improved.

I didn't like listening to English at first, but now I can understand so I want to have more reading aloud time.

Since I am able to understand aural language, I feel English is fun. At first only my teacher could read it, but now I also can read, too.

Besides listening and reading improvement, some students commented that listening to and reading stories also improved their writing.

In addition, several months later after the read-aloud program ended, the teacher who participated in this study noticed that some children were using English during lunchtime, using what they had acquired in the read-aloud sessions. This teacher wrote this in her observation record:

Today is solstice. Lunch menu was red bean porridge, turnip, dumplings, vegetable, and pancake. Lunch duty children shouted in English, "We have turnip today." And they asked their friends in English, "What's this?" Only those who gave a right answer got the turnip. I noticed that some children couldn't get the turnip because they couldn't give the right answer. I stepped in to help them, so every child could get the food at the same time. Everybody was happy and all the students seemed to be trying to use what they had learned from reading class.

Summary and Discussion

Third graders in EFL class heard stories for about five minutes, three times a week, for fifteen (15) weeks, and did story-related activities. They clearly outperformed comparison students on vocabulary and sentence comprehension tests containing the vocabulary used in textbooks that both experimental and comparison students used, as well as vocabulary contained in the stories the experimental groups heard and activities both groups did. There was no difference between the groups on spelling tests.

The teacher observation of spontaneous use of English in the lunchroom is consistent with the hypothesis that speaking is a result of obtaining comprehensible input (Krashen, 1982).

Hearing stories was the crucial difference between the groups, it is thus highly likely that storybook listening was the cause of the difference.

Children in the experimental group also showed significantly better attitudes and confidence in using English.

These results are especially impressive given the small amount of time spent actually reading aloud to the children.

The results are consistent with previous studies of the impact of read-alouds in both first and second language acquisition. The lack of a difference between the groups on measures of spelling is not a surprise, as children hearing stories typically do not pay much attention to the print, and even efforts to direct their attention to print yield unimpressive results of measures of print awareness (Krashen, 2013). Note that in this study students were given the option of reading along while listening, but this had no effect on spelling test scores.

The experimental group's gains in attitude and confidence are, in our view, the most important results of this study. Better attitudes and more confidence in listening to and reading English means more comprehensible input in English in the future, which means continuing progress. The fact that the comparison groups declined in these measures is distressing.

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