

# The Effect of Sustained Silent Reading on Dyslexic Students' Reading Comprehension in ELT

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**Abstract:** In this study, the researcher investigated the effect of sustained silent reading on the comprehension performance of learners with dyslexia (LD) and compared it with normal students undergoing a similar language learning activity. This reading program provides students with a chance to choose and read books silently for a specified period of time. The mixed-method used in the study includes a survey which is made up of open-ended questions and Likert style questions to examine the group of 20 English students. This group was divided into two groups; the first group included ten dyslexic students (experimental group), and the second group contained ten normal students (control group). As this study is conducted to compare the students' reading comprehension before and after treatment, the treatment included two pre-reading activities a) pictorial context b) vocabulary teaching, and a post-test which was done at the end of the sustained silent reading process. A significant difference in the reading comprehension performance of the experimental group students compared to the control group is expected. The researcher found that there is an increase in dyslexic students' reading performance as the number of factors in their reading difficulties was lower. Thus, the problems with separating speech sounds within a word or identifying the way how letters represent those sounds decreased. The researcher predicted that EFL students in both groups recognized the importance of participation in daily sustained silent reading.

**Keywords:** Dyslexia, EFL, Sustained Silent Reading.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

All over the world and in this age of globalization, struggling to learn a foreign language takes place in daily communities. A reading which is one of a lifelong skill improves by continuous practice. SSR is thought to be an important source of reading fluency, knowledge of language systems, vocabulary growth, and the learners.

Krashen (2004) states that when students are free to choose their own reading materials they become more engaged so their knowledge and vocabulary increase. Moreover, SSR offers strategies to increase student reading comprehension. It is based on the theory that the more a learner reads, then the better she or he will be able to comprehend what she or is reading (Krashen, 2004).

According to Potter and Wetherell (1987), silent reading time is 15 minutes per day. It frees students' minds to make reading enjoyable based on their own selection of materials. In this study, the researcher gave the opportunity for students of control and experimental groups to choose their reading material. Throughout the process, students needed to view SSR

as a process where they would have total control. Students' interests in a book or specific topic can be a strong motivator to achieve the goal.

A study by Chua (2008) found that SSR creates a relaxed atmosphere where the students enjoy reading. For many learners especially students with dyslexia, SSR is a low-stress approach to reading. In learning English as a second language (L2), dyslexic students also face a set of difficulties which are: remembering how to spell new words, memorizing vocabulary, and matching letters to sounds. However, Tabrizi (2007) claims that dyslexic learners are doing well in practical work, such as making things, drawing, and inventing. Because of this, these learners need to be taught by an explicit and systematic method to develop word recognition skills by structured practice. SSR is a method to help these learners become autonomous as it doesn't depend on the teacher's correction or outside direction.

### 1.2. Significance of the problem

Dyslexia is characterized by disabilities or difficulties with fluent word recognition and by poor decoding abilities or spelling. Based on this, the researcher investigated the reading situation of students with dyslexia in different domains and compared it to normal students' performance. Moreover, the researcher explored their attitudes towards reading, which can be affected by learning styles as "affective, cognitive, and physiological affections that are measured of how learners comprehend, interact with, and respond to the learning environment" (Keefe, 1979, p. 4).

The purpose of this study is divided into two parts. The first purpose is to measure the changes in dyslexic students' attitudes towards reading performance. The second purpose is to explore the idea that applying Sustained Silent Learning over an eight-week period will improve learner's reading performance. This study gives examples of specific techniques and strategies that are appropriate and effective for students to encourage them to read more.

### Research Questions

The study aims to answer the following questions:

- i. What is the effect of Sustained Silent Reading on students' attitudes towards reading?
- ii. Compared to non-dyslexic students' reading comprehension, how does SSR affect dyslexic students reading comprehension?

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Background of the study

During the previous decades, full classrooms have been the standard of the education of students with dyslexia that affect functional and academic skills including the ability to perform language skills. According to Riddick (2006), students with dyslexia have the ability to learn to read in their L1, but they have a lack of input or exposure to written and spoken English as a second language, which affects the development of English literacy and skills. Augustyniak, Murphy, and Phillips (2005) have suggested that learning difficulties appear to be based on a more complex set of vocabulary learning than other kinds of language items. It matches with Chomsky's idea about the level of adequacy in the study of language "principled basis, independent of any specific language, for the selection of the descriptively acceptable words of L2" (Chomsky, 1964, p.63).

Two of these studies (Parker & Paradis, 1986) addressed that learning difficulties are linked to academic achievement, dyslexic students' knowledge of L2 words might not include an understanding of the way that words can be modified. As Brumfit (1992) pointed out, with so many grammatical forms and accessible meanings for L2 words, it is the context the word occurs in which defines which of these meanings is being referred to. However, Henry La (1999) found that straightforward presentations of words are included clear visual clues for meaning and when students are asked to categorize words helps them to think about what they learn so that they can use them in their L2 reading activities.

### 2.2 Early identification of dyslexia

The importance of early identification of learners who are at risk for reading disabilities can be led to the development of measures that are useful for those students to overshoot this risk. Otherwise, those who are poor readers in the first classes continue to read poorly. For example, Juel and Leavell (1988) observed students' reading development during the first grade and they found that learners who were poor readers in first grade remained poor readers in fifth grade, too.

### 2.3 Importance of Sustained Silent Reading

The research on sustained silent reading programs since the 1950s and 1970s have shown that students' reading comprehension is increased as well as their attitudes towards reading are improved. Stephen Krashen states that SSR has worked for both foreign language learners and English second language learners throughout the world, so it is suggested to include SSR in the normal classroom curriculum.

According to Krashen (2004), Sustained Silent Reading is neither a comprehensive reading program nor a literature study, it is a supplementary activity. So, if free reading is interesting and comprehensible, vocabulary growth will be excellent. Most of the previous studies suggest that a 95-98%-word recognition level is necessary for vocabulary acquisition and comprehensible input. In addition, Krashen found that when learners discuss their reading with parents it helps learners to practice the reading comprehension strategies, develop the dialogue, and to draw conclusions. He suggested that some acquired strategies are helpful in making reading more comprehensible when taught early. Moreover, R.McCracken (1971) established some rules to be followed in the SSR program, the rules are: the teacher must read, each student must read silently, learners should have a chance to choose their reading material, and a timer is used. Thus, Allington (1975), states that the SSR process should provide students with the time, and a chance to practice reading. Also, Benedict (1982) noted that usually teachers were successful in monitoring reading activities when they give students time to read so students will be able to determine their reading purpose and set their own pace.

### 2.4 Is the reading skill continuum a cause of dyslexia?

As dyslexia has to deal with IQ and reading achievement, there are arguments against dyslexia in terms of a) difficulty in differentiating between poor readers with high and low IQs, b) difficulties in phonological processing, c) response to reading intervention programs (Aranha, 1983). According to that, many studies have addressed that there are functional differences in the brains of students who have dyslexia and those identified as average readers. For example, performance on phonological tasks distinguishes poor and good readers from an early age.

## 3. RESEARCH METHOD

### 3.1 Participants

This study utilizes 20 English students from Huda International School in Istanbul, Turkey. This group of students was divided into two groups; the first group included 10 students with dyslexia (treatment group) and the second group was with normal students (control group). Both groups read for 15 minutes three times a week within the eight-week trial period.

### 3.2 Procedure

#### *Before Treatment:*

In this study, the mixed method was used, including a survey which was made up of open-ended questions and attitude questionnaire to examine the group of 20 English students. Before the silent reading process began in the classes, both dyslexic learners (experimental group) and normal students (control group) had to answer the questionnaire questions to know what they think about reading. It was distributed among the students of different educational levels, and social backgrounds. It helped to recognize what students feel about the reading when they read inside and outside of school.

#### *During Treatment:*

This study is conducted to compare the students' reading comprehension before and after treatment. The treatment included two pre-reading activities a) pictorial context b) vocabulary teaching. The experimental group received treatment, while the control group didn't participate in the pre-reading activities. Different pictures about the reading content were shown to the dyslexic students, they were asked to describe the content of the pictures, finally, they guessed what the reading passage was about.

In the vocabulary pre-reading activity, students were taught many vocabularies from the reading text. The new vocabularies were presented in meaningful sentences, students read these sentences and predicted the meaning of words. After pre-reading activities, all students read independently without help from the teacher. Finally, different comprehension questions were asked for students to recognize their understanding levels.

### *After Treatment*

After completing the SSR sessions for a period of 8 weeks, the both groups underwent a final examination; which consisted of pre-reading comprehension questions and then the reading text which students had to read and answer its questions. The measures in pre-reading tasks were based on two factors: syntactic complexity and semantic difficulty which is based on a learners' vocabulary. But as the learners encountered the same vocabulary, again and again, it became more familiar. While syntactic complexity which is based on sentence length shows that long sentences are stored in long-term memory. Miller & Smith reported that when these two factors take place in learners' learning process, they will be able to increase a Lexile score that affects their reading ability. The post-test measured the reading performance of the students to see if the treatment made any difference in the reading performance. The post-test included a text with different comprehension questions. Each group was asked to answer the questions in 15-20 minutes. At the end of the study, the researcher was able to compare the reading performance of both groups and look for a difference in whether dyslexia has any effects.

Finally, the survey questions were asked for the experimental group (dyslexic learners) whether their habits are changed or not due to the sustained silent reading method, and all the dyslexic students were asked to participate in it. They were asked questions about their attitudes towards reading and about the SSR process after participating in post-task. But this time it was easier for dyslexic learners to specify their weak points, for example, the speed of reading or if the word recognition takes place.

## 4. RESULTS

### 4.1 Dyslexic students' achievement

As the measures in tasks were based on two factors: syntactic complexity and semantic difficulty which is based on a learners' vocabulary, a Lexile score is increased. Reading performance of dyslexic students was increased. At the end of the treatment they became able to analyze words into syllables and letters, practice silent reading with understanding and comprehension, and absorb sentences or phrases on a page.

### 4.2 Control group students' achievement

Some students were naturally quicker than others, but, the ability to speed read could mean that students double the rate of reading words per minute (more than 250 words). Thus, the words that a student reads correctly per minute are also increased. Moreover, students start more concentrating on reading to understand it as they don't pay attention to the pronunciation of every word. Their fluency, vocabulary and motivation are increased as well as comprehension. When students were reading silently, they observed different writing styles and structures that could affect their own writing styles. Since learners are able to concentrate on the sentences and words they're reading, spelling and grammar typically improve.

### 4.3 Results from survey questions:

Most of the participants enjoyed SSR sessions. 80% agreed that they liked sustained silent reading and they liked the idea that it was allowed to select their reading materials. 15% of the students formed the neutral group while 6% of the participants did not enjoy sustained silent reading.

Moreover, most of the students strongly agreed that they were motivated to read and that students should be given more opportunities to participate in the SSR program. The remaining 10% formed the neutral group.

87% of the participants found that SSR have them a chance to recognize more words, comprehend better what they read, and helped them to read better. 10% of the students formed the neutral group while 3% disagreed that SSR improved their reading abilities.

Finally, almost 75% of the students stated that while reading in an SSR session in class they felt more relaxed, comfortable, and confident. 25% of the participants remained neutral.

## 5. CONCLUSION

It was interesting to understand how students with dyslexia behave towards reading, and to know the degree of their efficiency in this process while some factors had effects on it. Moore, Jones, and Miller (1980) assert that dyslexia is characterized by disabilities or difficulties with fluent word recognition and poor decoding abilities or spelling. A deficit in the phonological component of language is a cause of these difficulties which can impede the growth of the background knowledge and language items.

Dan Slobin (1971, 1986, 1997), established that in all languages semantic learning depends on intellectual development, and that sequence of development is shaped more by semantic complexity than by structural complication. While Bloom (1976, p. 37) likewise noted that "people will acquire the information that they know". That is what is related to learners' acquisition of the language functions as well as the relationship between the forms of language and those functions.

On the other hand, learners still have many reading difficulties in their studies when they are faced with the problem of studying English. By eliciting students' attitudes towards English and consequently to ascertain their competence, the researcher recognized the fact that all students know English no matter the level of proficiency, although of the linguistic distance between English and their mother tongue. So to encourage students to become lifelong readers and to develop reading habits, it is suggested to apply sustained silent reading in the most educational setting. It provides a strategy for students to increase their reading comprehension. As mentioned before "effective English teachers create time for silent reading every day". It means that students will have a chance to respond to literature, so their reading and vocabulary skills will be improved.

As it is known, reading is a process of relating written symbols to oral language, of constructing meaning from written text (Gardner, 2001), or "making sense and deriving possible meanings from the printed words" (Rutter, 1978, p. 20). During this study, the researcher observed that when the students were reading, they interacted with the text, bringing their knowledge of the world, of language, and of discourse or specific text types (a fairytale, newspaper article, poem, essay, or report) to what they read. Their understanding increased or lessened depending on their background knowledge, knowledge of the language, and their experience with discourse and text structure.

In investigating the effects of the SSR method on the comprehension performance of EFL 20 students the results are that the reading performance of 10 dyslexic students is improved. Additionally, the attitude of reading of the experimental group was increased when compared with control group's attitude towards reading. Both groups had positive attitudes towards silent reading. As the researcher considered the student's performance in reading task, it was shown that some dyslexic learners did well in reading, and spelling tasks when they were provided with excellent instruction, since the language skills such as grammar, writing essays and speaking items were required, students with dyslexia started having problems and hard experience in learning. This group of learners started feeling less capable than they actually were, so trouble in reading ability takes place in the learning progress. Schools can play an important role to help dyslexic learners succeed, for example, they can be given extra time to complete specific tasks and help them with taking notes in order to achieve learning goals. Abrahamsson and Hyltenstam (2009) found that by applying the SSR method at schools a student's growing capacity will be defined by his or her ability to comprehend and understand new text and lexicon.

Many studies have studied the effectiveness of a silent reading program in different classrooms. According to the National Council for Agricultural Education (NCAE) (2003) learners start focusing their interests on specific areas they don't read well, which makes some teachers avoid classroom reading because their students do not read. On the other hand, students' struggling process in reading activities is very important, as the NCAE (2003) has described that struggling is a complex journey. Struggling readers try to disguise their reading abilities and their problems to comprehend what they read. Also, Austin (1962) described different categories of readers: "reluctant, powerful and proficient" (p.41).

It was found that to be able to read, a learner has to: 1) Understand the alphabet, decode, 2) develop sight vocabulary to read fluently (with automaticity), 3) develop strategies to help with comprehension and fluency, 4) read texts that match his/her reading level and interests, and 5) Engage in extensive reading (independent reading of a variety of texts).

English-speaking students know that fairytales begin with "Once upon a time". Learners hearing these words (and maybe even repeating them with the person saying them) have a whole set of experiences and understandings that help to guide their understanding of the text. Those experiences and that background information are known as schemata (plural of

schema). They help students to make sense of the world and of what they read. It is because of more developed schemata that they can understand and remember much more about a cultural tradition in their own country. It is much harder to understand and remember what they are reading when the topic is a cultural tradition of another country. To develop student's vocabulary, background knowledge, and to help them make sense of written texts, the units of the topic where content and language are recycled must be build.

As reading skill is developed through practice, L2 learners should use all appropriate reading strategies to identify which method will help them to achieve learning goals. Noland (1976) suggested that to increase the chances of success, students must know the reasons why they should read. When SSR is used correctly, the students' reading ability increases. Teacher's teaching strategy and student's choice of an appropriate material that meets his or her comprehension level play an important role in SSR to be applied correctly (Crandall, 2000).

In conclusion, one of the most perplexing problems in learning strategies research is the multiplicity of each student's differences that attempts to construct a model or theory of second language acquisition. It seems that dyslexic students are different from one another in an infinite number of possible ways, so many that recognizing the components of such a theory are frustrating yet at the same time is worth keeping track of challenge.

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