

Sustained Silent Reading: A Useful Model

Inserting time for learners to do individualized reading was the right choice for a program that uses group instruction

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Teaching reading, writing, and math while allowing learners to stay focused on their individual goals requires careful planning, time management skills, and flexibility. This is no easy task when an instructor sees her students 10.5 hours a week or less. So why, you might ask, would our program set aside an hour and a half of instructional time every week to have our students engage in sustained silent reading?

Read/Write/Now is a small library-based ABE program in Springfield, MA. We offer beginning to pre-GED group instruction, led by professional teachers and supported by trained volunteers, in a classroom setting. We currently serve about 75 students who range in age from 18 to 70 years and come from many countries, including the United States, China, Guatemala, and Jamaica.

When I began teaching at Read/Write/Now in 1992, the practice of having students read silently for sustained periods was already in place. I cannot take any credit for being innovative in this regard; however, I embraced this model.

Read/Write/Now's original purpose in setting aside sustained silent reading (SSR) time was to get students accustomed to reading and to help them build fluency. This reasoning was supported by the research of Jim Trelease, author of *The Read-Aloud Handbook* (2001), who writes, "SSR is based upon a single simple principle: Reading is a skill — and the more you use it, the better you get at it" (p. 140). We have found that SSR also enables us to provide students with time to read the content they need to meet their individual learning goals: information about the Commercial Driver's License, child development, or history or civics content needed to pass the citizenship test. We allot 45 minutes of class time, twice a week, for independent reading.

The Process

During independent reading time, every student is asked to spend that 45 minute session engaged in SSR. All classroom instruction ceases and talking among the students is minimal.

Because our program is part of the library, we have ready access to its resources. Teachers assist their students in finding books from our classroom library or the regular library. During the independent reading session, teachers briefly check in with each learner to answer questions or make changes if the reading materials selected seem too difficult or uninteresting. I try to find out whether a book is too difficult by asking students to keep count of the number of words they do not know on the first page of the book. If they write down more than five words and cannot give a simple summary of what they read, I suggest finding a less difficult text. If something at a lower level cannot be easily found, accommodations can be made using a scanner and the computer.

Technology Helps

Almost every kind of printed document can be made accessible by using either tape recordings or software programs. Because the reading level of the driver's manual is difficult, we recorded it so that students can listen to it on cassette tape. We also used commercially produced books with cassette tapes such as the *FYI* series by New Readers Press for CDL instruction, citizenship preparation, and learning about health topics. Students follow along in the text while listening to the cassette tape using head phones. In addition, we use a variety of computer software such as Read Please (www.readplease.com), Scan and Read Pro (www.incrediblehorizons.com/scan-read-pro.html), and CAST eReader (www.enablemart.com). These programs convert text into speech so that students at all levels can benefit from them. The software programs are installed on our computers so they can be used frequently. With Read Please or CAST eReader, students decide on a text document that can be opened on the computer. This includes on-line documents saved as

text files, e-mail text files, web pages, or word-processed files. The student opens the software program, opens a text document or cuts and pastes a document into the program. The program begins reading the print aloud when the student clicks on the play button. Using networked computers and individual headsets, a number of students can use these programs, each with different documents. Students have used computer-assisted technology during SSR to prepare for the US citizenship test or the CDL test, read articles from the newspaper, and read Bible passages.

About a third of our learners choose to read books on tape or books from the *Start to Finish* series, a set created for literacy students (www.donjohnston.com). These books come with a cassette tape and a CD ROM. Students can listen to the book via computer or read the book on the computer screen without sound. If they come to an unknown word or phrase, they can select it and listen. Students can access sound immediately so that comprehension is not lost.

Reading for Pleasure

Some students do not identify mastering certain subject matter as one of their reading goals, saying, instead, that they want to read a book from beginning to end. "I want to read like 'other people' read," is a common response to the intake question "Why do you want to read better?" Reading for pleasure is one way in which some students use their SSR time. Janice L. Pilgreen, author of *The SSR Handbook: How to Organize and Manage a Sustained Silent Reading Program* (2000), writes that "...for an SSR program to be of value to the students the silent reading periods should be between 15 and 45 minutes [and take place] at least two times a week. This allows reading to become a habit and not just an academic exercise" (p. 14).

Overcoming Resistance

Many students begin with preconceived notions of how reading should be taught to them. Some expect that instruction will focus on decoding words and reading out loud with the teacher's guidance and correction of every mispronounced word. Some have to be convinced that learning to read better requires active reading practice using those skills taught in the group but practiced individually. Fortunately, most do accept the theory that good readers read for a variety of purposes that require them to engage in silent reading. When working on goal-setting with students, I explain that the SSR session is an independent reading time during class for them to work on a self-identified goal. Some have expressed concern that their reason for being in school is to get reading instruction; if they could read by themselves, they would not be here. I find that making sure the learner has chosen a book that is accessible, interesting, and targets a goal he or she has set helps. Students who do well with this model are often those who realize that they can make significant progress on their own goals during this time. When students make progress, they feel their time and efforts are being rewarded, especially when they reach their goals. They are in control of what they read during SSR: they can experience ownership of their own learning.

Conclusion

I highly endorse the practice of using instructional time for SSR. Once students experience success and accomplish their goals, they realize the positive impact that this reading session can make. Students keep in their personal portfolios as evidence of progress. Students have shown evidence of learning in other ways as well. They participate in discussions, answer questions about what they have read, or write a list of questions to help them learn more about a particular topic.

References

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