Possible Effects of Sustained Silent Reading in an EFL context: Learner Perceptions

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This qualitative study aims to explore the possible perceived effects of a short-term sustained silent reading program (SSR) implemented in a university setting. The participants were 42 university students in the Turkish EFL context, and the SSR program was conducted over a four-week period as a part of an undergraduate freshman course. Data came from qualitative instruments and the analysis of the results illustrated the perceived advantages as well as disadvantages associated with the SSR practice. The results of the reflections that the participants wrote before, during, and after the treatment, as well as focus group interviews demonstrated that the SSR treatment had several positive effects as stated by the participants. The participants noted they not only improved their attitudes towards reading in English but they were also motivated to read more. The advantages and disadvantages of implementing a sustained silent program are also discussed in light of the findings.

Reading competence is a critical factor in students' academic lives. Particularly for students whose academic success depends on their achievement in a second or a foreign language (L2) (e.g. the students enrolled in a program in which the medium of language is English), having a good command of L2, particularly in reading and writing skills, becomes even more critical.

Reading as a rich source of input has been considered to be an important factor in affecting L2 acquisition (Krashen, 1989; Krashen & Terrell, 1983). In foreign language reading classrooms, one of the aims of reading teachers is to extensively expose students to reading texts, and one way of doing this is extensive reading (ER). As Grabe (2009) pointed out, extensive reading

can be defined as "reading extended texts for long periods of time" (p. 311), and it refers to "either 'silent reading' in the classroom, or reading done unsupervised in the library or at home, the aim being pleasure or practice, or both" (Urquhart & Weir, 2013, p. 216). The use of ER for instructional purposes dates back to the 1920s (Day & Bamford, 1998), and this practice preceded the use of "bookflooding" (Elley & Mangubhai, 1983) or of Free Voluntary Reading (FVR) (Krashen, 1993) as outside class assignment in EFL/ESL classrooms to be used for the purposes of ER in the classroom context.

In the 1950s, reading specialists recommended the practice of engaging students in uninterrupted sustained silent reading (Hunt, 1970) in the classroom context, which has come to be known as USSR or Sustained Silent Reading (SSR) (McCracken, 1971; McCracken & McCracken, 1978, as cited in Grabe, 2009, p. 314). The basic distinction between SSR and ER is that in SSR

instruction the students merely engage in reading for a certain period of allotted class time without any after-reading requirements or assignments such as book reports or summaries. Thus, SSR can be defined as classroom-based extensive reading as a daily reading routine, where "a set time each day when every pupil and the teacher read silently for a substantial period of time without interruption" (McCracken & McCracken, 1978, p. 406) is integrated into regular class hours. The origins of SSR, in fact, date back to elementary school classrooms in the U.S., implemented with native speakers of English in L1 contexts, and the literature on SSR is thus dominated by L1 research studies. However, in the ESL/EFL reading literature, positive outcomes of this type of ER have also been cited (Collins, 1980; Garan & DeVoogd, 2008; Pilgreen & Krashen, 1993; Wiesendanger & Birlem, 1984).

Review of Literature

Studies conducted both in ESL/EFL contexts on ER and SSR provide evidence for various benefits of these practices in comparison with traditional "skills-building" reading programs. For the purposes of the study, we will briefly discuss the benefits of ER, followed by a more detailed discussion of the benefits of SSR.

The literature on ER in ESL contexts has reported positive effects of ER on reading comprehension (e.g., Hafiz & Tudor, 1989) and vocabulary (e.g., Pitts, White & Krashen, 1989). And in EFL contexts, further benefits were presented: increases in grammatical accuracy (e.g., Mason, 2003), reading comprehension (e.g., Suk, 2017), reading rate and reading fluency (e.g., Beglar, Hunt & Kite, 2012; Huffman, 2014; Taguchi, Takayasu-Maas & Gorsuch, 2004), vocabulary growth (e.g., Suk, 2017),

writing skills (Mermelstein, 2015), and motivation to read more (e.g., Suk, 2017; Takase, 2003, 2007; Yamashita, 2004).

On the other hand, despite the overwhelming empirical evidence in the literature which demonstrated the effectiveness of ER on cultivating language learners' reading motivation and abilities, there are comparatively fewer empirical SSR studies in ESL/EFL contexts. Moreover, studies in university contexts have drawn rather limited interest.

However, when the literature in the ESL domain is reviewed, findings of these SSR studies in ESL contexts indicated that SSR had positive effects on reading comprehension, vocabulary, and reading motivation (e.g., Petrimoulx, 1988; Pilgreen & Krashen, 1993). In the EFL domain, on the other hand, improvements in reading comprehension (e.g., Sims, 1996), silent reading rate (e.g., Matsui & Noro, 2010), vocabulary (e.g., Hsu & Lee, 2009), and attitudes toward and motivation for reading (e.g., Lin, Choo, & Pandian, 2012) are among the benefits cited in the literature on SSR. The effect of SSR on comprehension was indicated by Sims (1996) in a study with Taiwanese EFL university students. SSR (extensive reading for pleasure) was compared to skill-based instruction, where the former engaged in one hour of in-class reading per week and were allowed to read outside of class as well. Sims reported that the experimental group scored "significantly higher" (p. 74) on reading comprehension than the control group. Furthermore, findings of the study conducted by Mason and Krashen (1997) with Japanese EFL university students indicated "many of the once reluctant students...became eager readers" (p. 93). The effect of SSR on vocabulary has also been reported in earlier studies. The findings of a study with university level

Japanese EFL learners by Day, Omura and Hiramatsu (1991) indicated the experimental group outperformed the control group in the vocabulary test. Similarly, empirical data by Hsu and Lee (2009) with Taiwanese EFL college students indicated positive outcomes of SSR on vocabulary gains after a three-year study. Moreover, Lee's (2006) one-year SSR study with Taiwanese EFL university students indicated that the experimental group, who read in class for approximately one and a half hours per week, had better gains on vocabulary than the control group participants. On the other side of the coin, to our knowledge, there are very few studies with negative findings regarding the effectiveness of SSR in an L2 context (e.g., Ducy-Perez, 1991).

As can be seen, there is scant knowledge available in the literature regarding the effects of SSR in university settings in EFL contexts. Moreover, in EFL contexts such as in Turkey, although students need to read a lot to improve their reading abilities, it is generally difficult to assign them ER. SSR as an in-class ER application can be a more viable means of engaging students in reading large amounts of "extended texts for long periods of time" (Grabe, 2009, p. 311).

The Present Study

This study aims to investigate the possible effects of SSR on university students' reading abilities in an EFL context. Specifically, the following research question is the focus of this study:

> What are the advantages and disadvantages of SSR as perceived by Turkish EFL learners?

Methodology

Setting and Participants

A total of 42 freshmen students sharing a similar background in terms of their English learning experience and enrolled in the Faculty of Education Department of Foreign Languages Education at a state university in Turkey participated in the study; i.e., they were prospective EFL teachers. At the time of the study, they were taking a compulsory freshman academic English course – Reading and Writing Skills II. The participants had mixed-abilities regarding their English proficiency level, yet all of them had met the requirement of having a minimum B2 level (of CEFR) in English for the department is English-medium. At the beginning of each Fall semester, the newly-registered students are required to demonstrate their English proficiency level, by taking the in-house English proficiency test or documenting a corresponding score (which is equivalent to TOEFL IBT 80 out of 120 points). The in-house proficiency test is a test comprising the four-skills and is scored out of a total of 100 points, and the students who score above the cutoff score (80 out of 100) start taking freshman courses in the department.

For the purposes of effective instruction, the participants were divided into three groups with the same instructor, who is one of the authors of this study. She is an experienced EFL teacher who has been teaching English at tertiary levels for seven years and is also a doctoral candidate in TEFL. She made sure that none of the participants had taken part in SSR before. The classes were not streamed for ability; instead, the participants were randomly assigned to the groups.

Materials and Treatment

A selection of 24 graded readers in two levels [Level 5 (1800 headwords) and 6 (2500 & 3000 headwords)] published by Oxford University Press (Oxford Bookworms series) and Pearson Education Limited (Penguin Readers series) was borrowed from the university library for the purposes of this study. There were unfortunately limited resources in the library, and all the available graded readers at Level 5 and above (*N* = 24) were borrowed from the library. These levels (Level 5 and 6, corresponding to B2 and C1 levels, respectively) were purposefully chosen considering that the participants were freshman English-major students who had achieved at least the B2 level of proficiency (i.e., upper-intermediate) in English. All the groups met for three classes twice a week (six classes per week, 50 minutes each class) over a 14-week academic semester and the course focused on EFL academic reading and writing activities. Each week, the first three hours were allocated to academic reading activities and the second three hours to academic writing activities during the first seven weeks. In light of the course schedule, the reading activities comprised reading academic papers including journal articles in the EFL field, whereas the writing activities included paraphrasing and summarizing activities, and writing reaction, response, and argumentative papers based on these readings. Following the midterm week (Week 8), the three hours involving academic reading activities were replaced by SSR instruction. Succinctly, from weeks 9-13, they had three class hours of sustained silent reading instruction and three class hours of academic writing instruction each week. The SSR program was implemented for a total of four weeks (or 12 hours in total) due to the constraints of time and the course schedule. Each SSR session consisted of three class hours (3 hours x 50 minutes) per week during a four-week period of time. For SSR instruction, in contrast to the suggested reading period generally lasting up to 20 minutes, we had approximately three class hours of SSR instruction due to the weekly schedule. The class met only twice a week, and it was an academic reading and writing course; therefore, the instructor had only three class hours per week to allocate for SSR instruction, in which she allocated the remaining three hours for academic writing instruction. During the treatment, the students were required to self-select graded readers and read them during the class time, and they had to return their books to the instructor at the end of each session; i.e., they only read in the classroom environment and no reading homework was assigned to them. That is, they merely engaged in reading during SSR sessions. Meanwhile, the instructor also read a book while also monitoring and guiding them whenever they needed help. Depending on the length of the books, some participants read one book and some two or three during the SSR period. It must also be noted that SSR was practiced as a non-credit activity, i.e., their reading performance did not affect anything related to their course grade, and the researchers made sure that they self-selected graded readers and were free to change them with another one at any point if they did not enjoy them.

Data for this study came from pre-, during-, and post-treatment reflections, and post-treatment semi-structured focus group interviews. The participants wrote online reflections after the class and emailed them to the instructor in the 24 hours following each SSR session. Prior to the treatment, the instructor had an orientation session with the students and briefed them about the procedure as well as the necessary instructions regarding how to write reflections. After the orientation, the students were asked

to write their pre-treatment reflections and reflect upon this procedure as well as their expectations. Their during-treatment reflections were guided by the following prompts: (1) What are your thoughts about your SSR experience today? (2) What were the most effective learning moments and the most challenging moments, and what made them so? Please explain. At the end of the treatment period, the prompt "Did you enjoy reading in the classroom? Why/why not? What are its benefits and drawbacks?" was provided for post-reflection. The participants were free to reflect upon their experience in whichever language they wished, and all of the participants chose to reflect in English. There were not any requirements such as an optimum word count, yet they were encouraged to elaborate on their thoughts in as much detail as possible. Moreover, a semi-structured focus group interview with each group was conducted at the end of the treatment to investigate the students' attitudes toward their SSR experience. In the interview sessions, all of which were audio-recorded, the participants were asked the following open-ended question: What are the positive and negative aspects of your SSR experience?. This data from interview sessions was used for triangulation purposes.

Data Analysis

Data coming from reflections were classified as pre-, during-, and post-SSR period, and interview data were first transcribed and then analyzed. The qualitative data were inductively analyzed according to Hatch (2002) to determine meaningful patterns to be interpreted, by analyzing the recurring themes throughout the reflections and interviews. We first read all the data several times and summarized the main ideas by looking for patterns, categories, and relationships. Then, we coded the data in light of the identified patterns, and categorized them into sub-themes and themes, and calculated the frequency of each.

Findings

As a result of the qualitative data analysis, two main themes emerged: the advantages and disadvantages of SSR instruction.

Reflections

Results of reflections the participants wrote before, during, and after treatment are summarized in Table 1 below.

As indicated in Table 1, the number of perceived advantages outnumbered the negative or neutral ones before, during, and after the treatment. The details are provided in the following sections.

Pre-treatment Reflections

Results of the pre-treatment data analysis indicated that participants held positive views toward the intervention that they would receive. They reported several self-perceived expected effects on various aspects of L2 competence. Some of the comments are as follow:

> *"I liked the idea of reading books in English and I totally support it since I think that it will contribute to our reading and writing skills as well as our vocabulary knowledge and general world knowledge."*

> *"I am very happy to hear this. I normally like reading books a lot in Turkish as well. With this program, I think our vocabulary knowledge will improve."*

> *"Starting to read in a foreign language is a great advantage. As most of the other friends, we do not have the habit of reading in English. I think that this will improve*

Table 1. Reflections on SSR

	Themes	Sub-themes	Frequency (f)
Pre			
	Advantages		14
		Reading comprehension	4
		Writing	2
		Vocabulary	4
		Reading habit	3
		Effective teaching techniques	1
	Disadvantages	-	-
	Neutral	-	-
During			
	Advantages		39
		Willingness and motivation to read	12
		Reading comprehension	11
		Fluency	5
		Vocabulary	8
		Writing	2
		Self-awareness	1
	Disadvantages		13
		Poor collection of books	5
		Length of each SSR period	8
	Neutral		4
Post			
	Advantages		40
		Reading habit	8
		Reading comprehension	5
		Fluency	3
		Writing	2
		Vocabulary knowledge	7
		Motivation to read	9
		Attitudes toward reading	6
	Disadvantages		18
		Reading duration	5
		Little variety of books	3
		Not having the chance to read outside the class	3
		Sleep and concentration problems	4
		Uncomfortable physical environment	3

our writing and reading comprehension skills."

"I liked the idea of reading books because I do not make time to read any book, but now I get the chance to improve my reading habit."

"Good readers are good writers. I strongly agree with the idea that being a good reader is primary to writing effectively."

"It was great news to hear that we would be reading books in the classroom since the other activities that we had been doing earlier in the other reading courses were a bit boring for me. In my opinion, reading books will be beneficial in terms of the richness of our general world knowledge as well as improving our reading skills."

"In my opinion, reading books will be much more useful and fun for us. This program will help me learn a technique to teach EFL reading to my students in the future."

From the above extracts, the participants thought that the program would be beneficial and advantageous for developing their reading comprehension, writing competence, vocabulary knowledge, reading habit, and for effective teaching techniques. On the other hand, as for the disadvantages, participants did not indicate any disadvantages of this specific program.

During-treatment Reflections

The analysis of the during-treatment reflections illustrated that the attitudes of the participants toward the sustained silent reading practice throughout the treatment were as follows:

"I am glad to read books in class and I liked the book that I read today. I believe these

kinds of activities encourage us to read books in English."

"I want to read more because books make me feel good. I feel myself in another world and I find myself in different events. This is nice and relaxing."

"I liked the book I chose because it was about a mystery, so it was very exciting. I wished to read much more since I am really curious about the things that will happen in the further pages. Because I like to read books in my daily life, I was quite happy about this task."

"Free choice of books makes me willing to read."

"I really like silent reading in the class. It is motivating and the best way to improve our reading comprehension skills."

"While reading, I sometimes encounter unknown words but I pass them. I try to guess the meaning of the word with the following utterances, not to lose the flow of my reading."

"Personally, I am very glad to read the books in the classroom. It helps me follow the fluency in a book and I can imitate this. I mean the coherence in the book makes me pay attention to my writing. Good readers are good writers. This is exactly what I mean."

"As I said beforehand, I liked reading thanks to this way. It is useful for me in terms of vocabulary because I learned some vocabulary which I did not hear before."

"The reading activity is quite beneficial for us in order to learn new vocabularies and the structures."

As again indicated in the above statements, the participants described the advantages of SSR regarding the improvements in their willingness and motivation to read, reading comprehension, fluency, and their aware-ness of what to do for fluency, writing competence, and vocabulary knowledge as perceived by them. However, the par-ticipants also pointed out certain disad-vantages as indicated in the following comments:

> *"Yet, I must say that I could choose books that would interest me more if we had a larger variety of books. The book I am currently reading is more about fantastic issues. For I don't love reading fantastic subjects I'm looking forward to finishing this book and starting to read a new one which is more realistic and true-to-life."*

> *"We had too much time to read, sometimes I felt sleepy because too much reading causes a feeling sleepy suddenly. For this reason, we can keep that time shorter. I mean we had better read max 30 minutes."*

Hence, apart from the perceived advan-tages, the poor collection of books provided to the participants and the length of each SSR period were among the disadvantages of this specific SSR program.

Post-treatment Reflections

In relation to the post-treatment reflec-tions, the following participant comments may represent the advantages of the SSR program:

> *"I enjoyed reading in the class because I love reading. The lesson that we read makes me happy because I could not have time to read because of my assignments given to me by my teachers."*

> *"Because of our busy lives we cannot read anything regularly, yet thanks to this reading class we had a chance to read books."*

> *"Yes, it was such a quality time to read in the classroom as I had no exact time and energy to read outside the classroom."*

> *"It was a good activity because we had lots of courses and those three hours was the only time when we felt relaxed. To be honest, if it was homework to read books, I would not read them."*

As can be seen from the participants' comments, in addition to the benefits of SSR as mentioned above, some participants also thought that because they didn't have much time for reading as an extracurricular activity, SSR program provided a reading opportunity to them. However, at the end of the treatment, there were also comments in relation to the disadvantages of this specific program, which are as follows:

> *"In my opinion, reading in the classroom is enjoyable, but sometimes it gets boring. I cannot focus on the things I read, and my attention is distracted easily in the class-room. I think that the disadvantages of reading in the classroom are more than its advantages."*

> *"I need comfortable places to sit and maybe our classroom lacks this comfort because of the chairs we have."*

> *"The only drawback for me was that the classroom was too quiet. I am a person that enjoys reading or learning with music or some non-disturbing background sound."*

> *"I enjoyed it but the time of reading could be a bit shorter. If the reading is too long, I,*

personally, get bored and feel sleepy because of reading too much."

"To be frank, reading books in classrooms make me always sleepy."

"In addition, I found reading during the whole class time a bit tiring, because the environment was so silent that it made me feel too sleepy."

"The only bad side is the limited selection of books because of lack of opportunities about having books at our university."

All in all, drawbacks put aside, the majority of the participants reported experiencing the advantages of this specific SSR treatment. They reported improvements with regard to their reading habit, reading comprehension and writing skills, fluency, vocabulary knowledge, motivation to read and their attitudes toward reading. They considered SSR as a free activity compared to controlled and boring assignments assigned in other reading courses.

Focus-Group Interviews

The findings of the focus-group interviews confirmed those of the pre-, during-, and post-treatment reflections both in terms of the advantages and disadvantages of the SSR treatment. Table 2 below illustrates the frequency of the advantages and disadvantages of the SSR treatment, according to the participants:

As for the advantages, the participants stated the following:

"When we first started reading, I thought that I would not understand anything. However, as I kept reading the book, I understood that this was not the case. My awareness increased."

"Reading books increased our self-confidence in terms of language."

"It affected me like this: I think the more you read, the better you comprehend."

"In the first week, I remember reading the same page three times, but later on it just flows."

"If you could find your book - for example, mine was very good - that was very effective. I got so relieved while I was reading. After a long week, we had this class. I got so relieved and improved myself at the same time."

"It was as if I had been coming to the class to get relieved."

"While having a discussion in the lesson, I felt like I was improving my speaking skills as well. I felt like I started speaking more comfortably."

"I feel more comfortable in this class. By reading books, we both develop ourselves and it is a part of the class."

In addition to the advantages uttered by the participants, some criticisms were also raised:

"I think that the range of books could have been wider, for you to find a book which would appeal to you."

"Since four weeks is a short period of time, I could not see a difference in myself."

As can be seen, similar to the findings of the reflections, in the focus-group interviews the students pointed out that they experienced a number of advantages of SSR, particularly affective factors, their self-confidence, self-awareness and self-development, and

disadvantages: limited treatment time, limited variety of book selections, and length of each reading session. In other words, there could be more frequent but shorter periods of SSR sessions.

Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore the attitudes of tertiary level Turkish EFL students toward a sustained silent reading program as well as to investigate the advantages and disadvantages of this specific program as perceived by them. The results overall illustrated a positive sustained silent reading experience over a four-week period.

Given the results of the study, the participants reported several advantages such as the effect of SSR on their reading and writing skills, fluency, vocabulary knowledge, attitudes toward reading, reading motivation, speaking skills, self-awareness, and self-confidence. The participants stated that SSR contributed toward fostering their reading skills, which is in line with earlier studies (Pilgreen & Krashen, 1993). Moreover, it helped them improve their reading fluency, an outcome presented by past studies (e.g. Matsui & Noro, 2010). According to the participants, SSR was also effective in terms of improving their vocabulary knowledge and helping them attain word-attack skills. These results also concur

Table 2. Frequency of Advantages and Disadvantages of SSR (Interviews)

Themes	Sub-themes	Frequency (*f*)
Advantages		
	Reading comprehension	6
	Reading fluency	5
	Vocabulary and word-attack skills	4
	Writing	2
	Speaking	3
	Self-confidence	5
	Reading motivation	7
	Relaxing experience	7
	Seeing the use of language	2
	General world knowledge	1
	Total	42
Disadvantages		
	Reading abridged versions	2
	Long reading periods	4
	Sleep and concentration problems	4
	Little variety of books	2
	Not being allowed to continue reading outside the class due to having been collected	2
	Total	14
Neutral	No difference	3
	Total	3

with the results reported in the literature (Hsu & Lee, 2009; Lee, 2006). Furthermore, the participants reported that SSR had an effect on their writing skills, and similar results were obtained by other researchers in the field (Hsu & Lee, 2009). Similarly, the finding that sustained silent reading has a positive effect on participants' motivation to read is consistent with the results presented by past studies in the literature (Cho & Krashen, 2001; Lin et al., 2012). As stated by Grabe (2009), it can be "more motivating for students than more traditional textbook-oriented reading instruction" (p. 313). Motivation is one of the crucial factors which plays a pivotal role in learning a second and/or foreign language since it is the "internal drive which pushes someone to do things in order to achieve something" (Harmer, 2007, p. 98). Therefore, it is important to motivate language learners to read more and more. Another benefit that participants perceived of SSR is that they felt they were acquiring new language and this had an effect on their attitudes toward reading, which is in line with earlier studies (Matsui & Noro, 2010; Pilgreen & Krashen, 1993). Moreover, the result that SSR helps develop reading habits concurs with the findings of earlier studies (Lin et al., 2012; Wiesendanger & Bader, 1989). The finding that SSR has positive effects on speaking skills, on the other hand, has not been discussed in any of the empirical studies in L2 settings thus far. Therefore, the results obtained from this study have only a suggestive role.

However, the disadvantages of SSR were the limited variety of books, the length of each SSR period, and the short period of treatment time. The findings obtained from the analysis of participant reflections and interviews demonstrate that there should be a richer collection of books so that students can find a book which would suit their own interests.

All in all, this study provides evidence for more perceived advantages of this four-week SSR intervention than its disadvantages, not forgetting about the disadvantages and limitations of this program to be implemented for future studies.

Limitations and Suggestions for Further Studies

There are several limitations of this study and the findings of the study should be interpreted with these limitations. The small sample size of the participants, short period of treatment time, lack of a wide range of books to be used for treatment, lack of reading logs, and length of each session in the treatment are among the limitations of this study. Therefore, taking the above limitations into consideration, the effects of SSR programs in various contexts can be investigated in further studies.

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