

## SUSTAINED SILENT READING AND READING RATE GAINS OF FEMALE PAKISTANI EFL LEARNERS IN A RURAL HIGHER SECONDARY SCHOOL

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### ABSTRACT

*Reading speed has long been recognized in scholarly literature as an essential component of reading fluency and successful reading. A variety of instructional techniques and activities are used to improve reading speed of learners. Sustained Silent Reading (SSR) is one such way that encourages the development of reading fluency and reading speed. This study investigated the impact of SSR on reading speed of female Pakistani EFL learners. A nine-week long SSR program was designed with 10 minutes timed-reading activity to improve students' reading rate. Using random sampling procedures, fifty female students were selected to participate in the study. After the pre-test, twenty five students were kept in treatment group and twenty five in control group. Results of the study show that the experimental group's average reading speed considerably increased from 115.60 wpm to 347.60 wpm after the intervention which indicates positive impact of SSR on reading speed of the participants. Statistically significant differences were found in reading rate gains between the two groups. Interestingly, a slight increase was also noted in the reading speed of students in the control group. The findings of the study indicate that SSR is a very effective instructional technique in developing EFL learners' reading rate.*

**Keywords:** Reading rate, Fluency, Sustained Silent Reading, Reading fluency, EFL learners, Pakistan

### INTRODUCTION

Pakistan is a multilingual country where different languages are spoken. English is enjoying the status of official language of Pakistan along with Urdu. It is used in many domains of life in Pakistan such as administration, bureaucracy, judiciary, media, government offices, and educational institutions (Shamim, 2008). Despite this wide range of uses of English in Pakistan, research literature shows an unsatisfactory and bleak picture of the teaching of English language and its learning situation (Muhammad, 2011). English is used as the medium of instruction and the materials that students read even at secondary level are in English (Muhammad, 2013, p. 1403). Thus, the ability to read seems to have a strong impact on all learning at secondary and beyond secondary levels in Pakistan.

Reading is an important skill for success in today's literate society as well as in academic settings. Citizens of modern societies are expected to be good readers to function well. Individuals' future opportunities of success and prosperity increase with skilled reading abilities. Although reading skill does not guarantee success for anyone, success is quite hard without being a skilled reader. In educational settings, people engage in reading to learn and part of that learning requires learners not only to read but also to use, synthesize, evaluate, and interpret a variety of text types and information. All this requires higher level comprehension skills. Such goals and tasks make reading quite demanding in academic and professional contexts (Grabe, 2009, pp. 4-5). Successful reading

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comprehension and skilled reading abilities require effortless processing of text and fluency in reading which in turn require faster reading speed (Grabe & Stoller, 2019).

Leading second language (L2) reading researchers acknowledge that reading fluency is a key component of reading comprehension abilities and reading speed is one the most important building blocks of fluency. These researchers also show that little research has been conducted on fluency and fluency development. Both fluency in reading and improvement in reading speed or rate come with exposure to large amount of input in the target language, word recognition skills, and reading for an extended period of time or sustained silent reading (Grabe, 2010, p. 71; Beglar & Hunt, 2014). Slow reading speed has been pointed out in the scholarly literature to be making reading a suffocating and slow process for many L2 or EFL learners. Reading speed between 180 to 300 words per minute (wpm) has been reported as optimal reading rate for L2 readers. Although rapid reading is an essential skill, it is more often neglected in classrooms (Anderson, 1999, pp. 2-3; Nation, 2005).

One certainly and absolutely would agree that understanding what is read is the end game for all reading. Reading rate or speed cannot be ignored either as an indicator of reading fluency or more precisely; as evidence of successful reading comprehension. In view of empirical evidence, it reasonable to assume that faster and more accurate reading rate leads to effortless reading and better reading fluency leads to successful reading comprehension. A number of classroom techniques such as extensive reading, repeated reading, timed-reading, oral re-reading, pleasure reading, and Sustained Silent Reading (SSR) have been used and reported effective for developing reading fluency, especially reading speed in both L1 and L2 contexts.

SSR is a free-voluntary reading, where students read silently in a designated time period. It refers to a quiet period of time during the instructional day in which students are given the opportunity to read without interruption and without holding them accountable for understanding the main ideas or specific details as it happens in the traditional reading instruction (Guo, 2020). According to Yoon (2002), SSR has been a familiar part of most reading programs as it promotes a love of reading and supports students' achievement in reading rate and comprehension. However, Garan and DeVoged (2008) suggest that SSR is more than just an enjoyable activity for student as it encourages learners for independent reading.

L2 learners are expected and required to have sound vocabulary knowledge, word recognition efficiency, reading fluency, motivation, and cognitive skills to better comprehend variety of texts (Grabe, 2009; Grabe & Stoller, 2001). However, they are not often provided sufficient time and opportunities to develop their reading abilities and it is true of L2 English or EFL learners in Pakistan (Grabe & Stoller, 2019, p. xiv; Muhammad, 2013, p. 1404). Within this context, the present study investigated the effects of SSR on reading rate of female Pakistani EFL learners, being a neglected population; in the rural outskirts of District Mansehra in order to support their literacy and reading fluency development and see how much effective is SSR in enhancing their reading rate.

### **Research Questions**

1. With what reading speed do secondary level female Pakistani EFL learners who participated in the study read English text?
2. How much do the reading rate gains of the students in the experimental group after the SSR instructional intervention differ from those in the control group?

### **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

Reading fluency refers to rapid reading with ease and accuracy which requires automaticity in word recognition, fast reading rate, and accurate comprehension (Grabe, 2010). According to Grabe (2009), fluent reading means quick and efficient text processing. Fluent and skilled reading skills involve the ability to recognize and syntactically parse words and form meaning for better comprehension. Fluent and active readers interpret text to decide what it should mean to him/her which gives long-term memory information to the learners (Kintsch, 2012). Fluency is not a very old concept. It appeared recently in the history of education in not many different forms. Fluency does not mean to read slowly with a lot of repetition of words, even if the reader achieves higher level of comprehension. It involves faster pace and comprehension. It is an essential part of reading development. Research suggests that oral reading in addition to training in word recognition and the use of strategies, or oral re-reading, paced reading, repeated reading or timed reading, and sustained silent reading also improve the desired rate of reading. Hasbrouck (2006) suggested three techniques: close reading,

choral reading, and partner reading that can be used to help learners' develop reading fluency and reading rate.

Fluency is one of the defining characteristic of good readers and a lack of fluency is a common characteristic of poor readers (Hudson, Lane, & Pullen, 2005). Reading practice is thought to be a powerful contribution to the development of fluent and skilled reading abilities. Reading rapidly and with faster pace is very helpful for L2 learners. By practicing fluency, one's comprehension improves which is helpful for L2 readers in order to understand and interpret the text. Fluency and reading rate instruction improves both the reading achievement and reading speed of L2 learners (Kuhn & Stahl, 2003).

Silent reading programs or sustained silent reading has many different names in both L1 and L2 reading literature, including SSR (Sustained Silent Reading), FVR (Free Voluntary Reading), DEAR (Drop Everything and Read), DIRT (Daily Independent Reading Time), USSR (Uninterrupted Sustained Silent Reading), SSRW (Sustained Silent Reading and Writing), LTR (Love To Read), WART (Writing and Rereading Time), FUR (Free Uninterrupted Reading) and POWER (Providing Opportunities with Everyday Reading). Although, all these programs are not same in format and implementation, the basic principles are same. Sustained silent reading is inexpensive and more effective as it strongly focuses on reading rate development and the enjoyment of reading (Gardiner, 2001).

SSR stands for sustained silent reading. All reading teachers recognize the joy that one gets when they and their students are lost in the pages of a good book. They fondly recall the books that inspired and changed them as children and that still influence them as adults. As teachers, they want to recreate that love of literacy in their students and invite them to experience that love of reading in classrooms because they all want their students to grow into skilled, passionate, habitual, and critical readers (Garan & DeVoogd, 2008). Sustained Silent or Free Voluntary Reading has been one of the most popular and effective ways for not only teaching reading but also all the skills related to reading. The main theory behind SSR is that students read and enjoy it more the same way that drives the basketball player to stand at the free-throw line after practice each day and shoot hundred free throws. Like the basketball player and his team, readers in SSR classrooms share the reading experience with their classmates and teachers. They talk about their books, their readings, and have discussions with their fellows which keep them all engaged in the reading process (Gardiner, 2001).

Sullivan (2010) reported significant effect of SSR on reading achievement. Although better reading habits and valuable reading practices can be encouraged as early as birth by parents and other adults as they provide the necessary building blocks for emergent readers, sustained silent reading helps in improving or developing a wide variety of reading skills such as comprehension, vocabulary acquisition, fluency, and even writing skills (Stobbe, 2011). In addition to supporting learners improve their reading rate, SSR also enhances the students' choice of text type, text variety, fluency, comprehension, and reading attitude etc. Dwyer & West (1994) explored the effect of SSR on reading rate among college students in which they took 76 college participants in a university in the south-eastern United States. This study program lasted for five weeks for a total of 15 minute each day. During this study, subjects were asked to record reading rate in words per minutes after reading. Subjects were allowed to read self-selected books during the SSR, but each book must be consist of 150 pages in length and data were arranged in chronological order from the first to 25<sup>th</sup> reading. Repeated measures analysis of variance was used. After the first week mean score was 242.15 words per minutes and standard deviation was 71.64 words per minutes of first five reading and reading rate increased 19 words per minute in two weeks. Results showed approximately the same level of comprehension but students' average reading speed increased from 210 words per minute (WPM) to 348 WPM.

Sustained silent reading presents a strategy to increase the reading comprehension of the students. The theory about SSR is that the more a student reads, the more he or she will be able to comprehend. Chow & Chou (2000) found that when participants are allowed to select their own material, the effects of SSR are more prominent. Stone (2013) conducted a study to explore attitudes of teachers regarding positive aspects of SSR and evaluate effectiveness of sustained silent reading. The researcher found that 96% teachers reported SSR to be important and effective. The basic and first goal of silent reading has always been to increase participants' enjoyment of reading and improve students' attitude towards reading and the participants who feel enjoyment in reading also read more

books and develop better skills in reading comprehension, vocabulary, and spelling (Gardiner, 2001). The prominent feature of SSR is that the conspicuous absence of interaction around or accountability for what student read and SSR suggested that allowing children time for unfettered, self-selected silent reading practice would increase student' motivation and engagement (Bryan, Fawson, & Reutzel 2003). Silent reading is a practice reading in which students recognize and celebrate their skills as reader (Trudel, 2007). Consistent and purposive opportunities of sustained silent reading in and outside the classroom increase not only students' comprehension but also help them improve their reading speed (Hiebert, Wilson, & Trainin, 2014).

## **MATERIAL AND METHODS**

This study was a quasi-experimental study; using pre-test and post-test design, within the quantitative research paradigm. The principal researcher administered treatment, engaged participants of the experimental group in SSR reading activities, and administered a pre-test and the post-test to participants in both groups to see within and between the group differences in their scores. Students in the experimental group participated in a daily 10-minutes practice of SSR wherein they were given a fixed period of time to read material given by the researcher. Different interesting and informative passages were used during the treatment period, related to the thematic content of the units in the textbook of the students. Descriptive statistics and the *t* test were used to analyze data.

### **Participants and Sampling Procedures**

The participants in the current study were 50 secondary level female students who were studying in the Government Girls Higher Secondary School Baffa, located in the rural surroundings in District Mansehra. They were assigned to two groups, i.e., experimental group and control group using systematic random sampling procedures in which every 2<sup>nd</sup> student, sitting on their seats in the classroom on the day the main researcher visited to select participants for the study; was assigned to the experimental group. The remaining 25 students were assigned to control group. There were three sections of 10<sup>th</sup> classes (Section A, Section B, and Section C). The researcher took section 'A' because of the large numbers of students than the other sections, having 71 students in both arts and science strands. Of those students, 50 were arts students and 21 were science students. The researcher selected the arts group of the class. After selection of the students and group assignment, the researcher conducted the pre-test. The average age of each group was 15 years. Except one student (whose mother tongue was Punjabi), all the remaining students were native speakers of Pashto and Hindko languages.

### **Materials and Instrumentation**

The principal researcher selected 29 texts on different topics of daily life, currents affairs, and history. The selected passages were informative and interesting. Typically, experimental group participants were engaged in the reading for ten minutes and three days a week, followed by discussion around the reading. They would read it silently and after that participants were divided into small groups and allowed for discussion with group members. Two tests were administered; one before the start of the intervention and another at the end of the treatment, to obtain data. To measure participants' reading speed and evaluate the effect of the SSR program on their reading speed, a speed reading test was administered to the participants in both groups before (i.e., in week 1) and after (i.e., in week 9) the experiment. The formula (i.e., total number of words read by students in one minute) was used to assess reading speed of the participants.

### **Procedures**

Prior to the commencement of the study, the principal researcher visited the site of the study and discussed the purpose and benefits of the study and SSR intervention the head and teachers of the school to obtain formal permission. Later on, the main investigator held a meeting with teachers to outline the purpose of the treatment, the concept and the guideline of the SSR activity, and the testing and scoring procedures. Then the main investigator conducted a 9-week SSR treatment. Every day during the break time, a daily time of 10 minutes (11:55am 12:05pm) was designated as the reading treatment period. Approximately reading 29 passages were selected from online resources and some informative and interesting books that were checked out from school library (English, Science, Social Studies).

To increase precision and consistency of treatment implementation, the investigator selected the participants and assigned students into the experimental and control group, using systematic

random sampling procedures. This was followed by conducting the pre-test to obtain reading speed of all the fifty students. Students in the experimental group participated in a 10-minutes daily practice of sustained silent reading. During those 10 minutes, each student sat quietly at her desk and read the given passage. In reading time, participants were not allowed to leave their desk and the desk of every student had to be free of all things except the passage they were reading. All participants were supposed to adhere to the following guideline: (a) read silently (b) the activity should begin with whole class (c) a timer should be used. Before reading they had been given the following instruction: (1) start reading when asked to start, (2) read silently (3) stop reading when asked to stop, and (4) put a star at the word you read at the time you are asked to stop.

## **RESULTS**

The purpose of this study was to obtain a reading rate profile of the participants of the study and evaluate the effect of SSR on reading speed of the secondary level female Pakistani EFL learners in selected school. The main objective of the study was to see whether or not the reading activities of the 9-week long SSR program help in increasing reading speed of the students in the treatment group more significantly as compared to their reading rate before the SSR treatment and in comparison with the reading speed of the participants who did not take part in the SSR activities. The initial research question asked to find out per minute reading speed of the secondary level female Pakistani EFL learners with which they read English text. In order to answer this question, reading speed scores of all participants were calculated and their reading rates were outlined in the form of profile before and after the SSR Program. Participants' reading speed (number of words read per minute) is given in the Table 1 before and after the instructional intervention.

**Table No. 1 Per Minute Reading Speed of Secondary Level Female Pakistani EFL Learners**

| S. No | Cntrl. Pre-test | Cntrl. Post-test | Exp. Pre-test | Exp. Post-test |
|-------|-----------------|------------------|---------------|----------------|
| 1     | 64              | 198              | 120           | 144            |
| 2     | 139             | 159              | 178           | 559            |
| 3     | 92              | 211              | 131           | 301            |
| 4     | 101             | 135              | 66            | 155            |
| 5     | 71              | 122              | 71            | 585            |
| 6     | 115             | 157              | 43            | 349            |
| 7     | 73              | 155              | 131           | 325            |
| 8     | 148             | 250              | 80            | 228            |
| 9     | 84              | 100              | 101           | 348            |
| 10    | 120             | 155              | 185           | 377            |
| 11    | 96              | 97               | 113           | 491            |
| 12    | 135             | 206              | 84            | 188            |
| 13    | 52              | 140              | 123           | 241            |
| 14    | 24              | 125              | 84            | 348            |
| 15    | 163             | 188              | 156           | 196            |
| 16    | 101             | 140              | 101           | 172            |
| 17    | 93              | 170              | 84            | 205            |
| 18    | 101             | 156              | 131           | 188            |
| 19    | 131             | 211              | 105           | 544            |
| 20    | 84              | 155              | 70            | 481            |
| 21    | 189             | 290              | 77            | 325            |
| 22    | 216             | 211              | 200           | 480            |
| 23    | 179             | 288              | 200           | 566            |
| 24    | 175             | 315              | 113           | 540            |
| 25    | 131             | 270              | 143           | 352            |

A quick analysis of results indicates that reading speed of each and every student in the experimental and control group after the intervention increased. Results also indicate that it is not only students in experimental group whose reading speed improved significantly after the SSR intervention but also the students who did not receive the treatment show sign of improvement in their reading rate

gains. This increase in the reading speed of students in the two groups suggests certain interesting and very important points related to the general benefits of reading, SSR, and reading speed. The initial simple analysis of the results; indicating improvement in the reading speed as a result of the SSR program demanded a closer look and the in-depth analysis. Thus, for a robust analysis of data and a clearer picture, average scores of all students' reading speed were computed. Though, participants in both groups started with almost the same average reading rate (i.e., 115.60 and 115.08 respectively) before the SSR intervention, average reading rate score of the participants in the control group was not higher after intervention i.e., 187.44 than their score before the SSR. However, there was a very high increase in the reading speed of students in the treatment group from 115.60 words per minute before the intervention to 347.60 words per minute after the intervention (i.e., SSR program).

The second research question was asked to find out the statistically significant difference in the reading rate gains of students in treatment group before and at the end of the intervention as well as in comparison to the reading speed of those students in the group that did not receive the treatment. Results of the *t* test and average reading rates of students in both groups in the table below (i.e. Table 2) show that mean score of participants in the treatment group considerably improved from 115.60 wpm to 347.60 wpm after the SSR intervention ended. Analysis of the of the *t* test's results show a statistically significant difference in the reading rate gains of students in the treatment group before and at the end of intervention as the ( $t = -7.64$ ,  $df = 24$ ,  $p = 0.00$ ).

**Table No. 2 Difference in the Reading Speed of Students Who Received the Treatment and Students Who Did Not Receive Treatment**

|                  | N  | M      | Sd     | df | t     | p    |
|------------------|----|--------|--------|----|-------|------|
| Exp. Pre-test    | 25 | 115.60 | 42.92  | 24 | -7.64 | 0.00 |
| Exp. Post-test   | 25 | 347.60 | 146.23 | 24 | -7.64 | 0.00 |
| Cntrl. Pre-test  | 25 | 115.08 | 45.90  | 24 | -4.54 | 0.00 |
| Cntrl. Post-test | 25 | 187.44 | 66.90  | 24 | -4.54 | 0.00 |

The statistically significant increase and difference in the reading rate gains of the experimental group also indicate the positive impact and effectiveness of SSR in reading fluency development, especially reading speed.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study aimed at finding out the reading speed of the secondary level female Pakistani EFL learners and the effect of the SSR program on the reading rate gains of the participants. A close examination of reading speed of each and every student in the two groups; before the SSR program started and after the SSR program ended, indicates high increase in the reading rate/speed. Analysis of the average reading rates (i.e., 115.60 and 115.08) of the participants in the experimental group and the control group respectively at the onset of this study indicate that students in both group started with almost the same reading speed. However, the average reading rate of participants in both groups at the end of intervention (i.e., 347.60 and 187.44) is different from what they started with. It was not only the experimental group that improved significantly in its reading speed after the SSR intervention but reading speed of students in the group that did not receive treatment also improved. This increase suggests that (i) SSR really helps in improving reading speed of those learners significantly who read silently for an extended period of time or even as few as 10 minutes daily (ii) reading and routine work for class preparation and assignments coupled with the development in language proficiency affect and improve reading speed of students. One can reasonably argue that participants in the experimental group must have improved their reading speed due the instructional intervention. However, the slight increase in the reading rate of students in the control group is interesting, but not surprising as their own daily English lessons and reading for their assigned school work seem to have improved their reading speed. Moreover, the substantial increase in the reading rate gains of experimental group shows that there is a major difference in reading rate over the time period of intervention which suggests that SSR is highly effective to enhance reading rate of EFL learners. These findings support research findings related to the effects of gradual language proficiency and reading development on reading fluency.

Sustained silent reading has attracted attention from researchers and practitioners as a very useful form of foreign language (FL) or L2 instruction for improving reading speed of slow and

struggling readers. Based on findings of this study, some implications can be drawn. First, findings of the study validate the general belief that selection of the text is very important aspect of the successful SSR program. Instructional materials need to be interesting and relevant to students' interest and learning needs in order to motivate them to read and be active. Second, findings of the study suggest that SSR has certain benefits for EFL students that are hard to be achieved in such a short period of time with other techniques perhaps in that it improves reading speed of those students who struggle with reading and also helps students enjoy reading. Third, it can be safely said on the basis of the findings that if learners had continued to read over a longer period of time, they would have improved their reading rate more. SSR needs to be implemented for a longer period of time and on regular basis for better results and robust improvement in reading fluency, especially reading speed. A successful SSR program also needs consistency and research-based knowledge. Lastly, teachers need training to effectively implement SSR instruction which include the selection of appropriate reading materials, knowledge of informal ways of assessing progress of students' reading performance, and awareness about such a classroom environment which is conducive to reading and becoming an active reader to help learners with their growth and development.

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