

# **Sustained Silent Reading and Comprehension**

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## **Teaching Context**

I have been teaching English language learners for four years at Lincoln Community Center in Mankato. In that time I have taught pre-literate, beginning, intermediate and now advanced.

What has really shaped my teaching in the last four years is empowering the learners to find what works for them. What I find most interesting about teaching adults to read is that it's not stagnant. It changes and adapts to meet their needs. Adults use all their abilities to engage in the written word. Culture, prior educational background and even their daily schedules all play into the facilitation of English. Currently, in my advanced class we attempt to tackle English on four fronts: speaking, listening, reading and writing. Even my reading instruction needs to be multi-faceted.

The class involved in this research met from 8:30 to 10:20, Monday through Thursday. Students have the opportunity to attend several other classes that follow until the morning session concludes at 1:55 p.m. The advanced integrated class size varies day to day, but typically there are between 10-15 students.

## **The Problem**

While all the levels I have taught have been different, one thing is constant: all of my learners want more from their reading instruction. One would think that reading would become easier as the learner advances and masters more skills. However, my experience has been that while reading may become more fluent as learners increase their vocabularies and reading skills, they still face challenges that prevent their ultimate comprehension and their ability to transfer and internalize what they are reading.

Like other programs in the state, our immediate goal is to teach learners life skills and survival English. We use the CASAS Life Skills assessment to measure reading comprehension as it relates to life skills. As this is the assessment tool by which the learner's progress is measured, traditional instructional methods are encouraged, and teaching reading is typically limited to content of the standardized test. Over the past year, many of my learners have been transitioning from ESL to GED, vocational training and college courses. In class we have addressed this academic goal. That has raised a dichotomy over the content of our class. Many of the learners are struggling, studying science, literature, and social studies on their own, or with limited supervision in GED classes. Despite their English level, they do not have the comprehension skills to master the content necessary for independent study.

It came to my mind that we should not limit our reading to the content required of a standardized test. Perhaps if we implemented new strategies of understanding vocabulary in context and reading comprehension skills, students' reading would improve not only in the contexts of life skills and employability, but also in the more academic contexts of science,

literature and social studies. They would improve on the tests and goals mandated by our program and the state and also progress in their transitional studies. If I could provide my students a supportive, instructive environment where we could practice strategies for reading comprehension, they could acquire strategies that work best for them and apply them to the reading context of their choice. This approach is termed constructivism: "a theory of learning in which people learn when they relate new information in a supportive environment, and get feedback on their performance." (Prevedell, 2003)

According to Malcolm Knowles, adults view education as "life-centered, task-centered or problem-centered." (Prevedell, 2003). By centering the reading curriculum of our class in contexts that meet their motives, such as preparing for the GED, studying for the TOEFL or vocational training, the learners' reading skills would improve, because they would be empowered and motivated by selecting the topics of study. Because they become the experts of what they need to study, reading instruction would be more gratifying and immediately applicable to their goals. This is called a "learner-driven approach." The direct relevancy should not be limited to the content of the curriculum but should be incorporated into the delivery of instruction. Providing them strategies to overcome comprehension barriers in their reading is critical to getting them to their fundamental task -- understanding what they're reading.

My experience with my learners has moved me also in the direction of the "comprehension-driven model" of reading. Surrounding learners with the written word and giving them strategies to manage their comprehension barriers provides them the immediacy they crave, while it teaches them as they go. In this model comprehension is the goal and learners much be immersed in whole texts that are self-chosen. The learner's understanding of the process of engaging with a text to find personal meaning and relevancy is stressed rather than reading accuracy. Readers can only improve by practicing the act of reading over and over again until the cyclical process becomes automatic.

## **Research Question**

These two theories, the learner-driven approach and the comprehension-driven model, have led to my research question: **What happens to reading comprehension and the ability to independently incorporate successful methods when I teach comprehension skills and provide daily sustained silent reading using materials in contexts that are learner-driven?**

To address my research question I used the following strategies.

I assembled a library of materials. Using responses to a student survey, I gathered materials that students could use during the daily sustained silent reading time. Texts ranged from fourth grade reading level up to post-secondary reading level. There were a variety of texts related to math, literature, social studies, world cultures, accounting, nursing assistant training, and several novels. The library was located on a cart within our classroom. This became a reading center within the classroom, complete with a sofa, small table, and lamp.

I performed this research from January to May with my Advanced Integrated class, a combination of reading, writing, listening and speaking skills.

**Instruction in reading strategies** typically lasted 45 minutes to 1 hour each day. The remainder of the class time was spent in sustained silent reading, generally 30 to 45

minutes. During this time students would select a text from our library and would **independently read**. At the end of the class period, students wrote in their **journals**, usually for 20 minutes. Here, students were asked to reflect on what they read, the reading process and what strategies worked for them. I did not correct their spelling or grammar, but only made suggestions. All types of writing were encouraged.

I used the following **reading comprehension strategies**: making inferences and predictions about a text before reading; posing content questions (who, what, where, when, why, how); identifying the main idea, subject matter, supporting details, and clarifying devices of the passage; drawing conclusions; understanding vocabulary in context, and applying prior knowledge and experience to interpret meaning.

## **Data Collection**

I collected the following data:

- CASAS pre- and post-test score
- A reading comprehension assessment from a pre-GED book, Pre-GED Critical Reading Skills, (Contemporary, 1988), administered in January and in May. This assessment offers pre- and post-tests, and has an evaluation chart that isolates critical reading skills that helped me to diagnose the learners' reading challenges and gains.
- A written survey with these questions was completed:
  - What are your goals for reading?
  - Why do you need to read?
  - What do you want to read?
  - What about reading is difficult for you?
- A student journal

## **Data Analysis**

In the process organizing data, two groups that emerged from the study. In my data I have distinguished between the two groups by labeling the students the Completed Group and the Early Exit Group.

I compared the following data:

- Initial reading goals in the written survey.
- Daily journal reflections on what strategies they implemented in their reading.
- CASAS pre- and post-test scores
- Comprehension pre- and post-test scores

## **Findings:**

- Post-test scores increased for both groups in both assessments. (See Appendix A, Table 1.)
- The Completed Group had the greatest gains in their CASAS post-tests with an average increase of 19.6 points, and a 2.2 point average increase in the comprehension post-test.
- The Early Exit Group's CASAS scores improved an average of 6.8 points, even though they did not complete the full intervention.
- Unfortunately, the six students in the Early Exit Group left the program before taking the Comprehension post-test, so data remain incomplete for that assessment.

## Conclusions

- Correlation between attendance and improved reading comprehension seems to be supported by a pattern of higher scores in the Completed Group.
- It seems the more exposure to reading, comprehension strategies, sustained silent reading and journaling, the better the scores.
- Students did not want to stop reading! Initially, I was worried that students would be bored by independent reading, or they wouldn't feel like they were learning English, or worse, their CASAS scores would go down! But, I found that students welcomed a chance to customize their learning and wanted more time to engage with English using texts that sparked their interest.

## Next Steps

- I plan to continue to use the reading comprehension strategies and curriculum in my classes. I especially liked the ease and tracking methods used in Six-Way Paragraphs in the Content Areas. Their stand-alone passages and comprehension questions are easy to incorporate into other units and lessons, so they are not overwhelming to explain or to complete.
- I would also like to integrate sustained silent reading into the classroom several days a week. I think 30 minutes of reading followed by 15 minutes of reflective journaling is effective for learners to find what comprehension strategies work for them. Daily strategy instruction and sustained silent reading may compete with other important English lessons, but it does give more learner-driven opportunities for students to be actively engaged in their learning goals.
- This research has reinforced the need to help adult students manage their learning and make the difficult transition from ESL to employment or post-secondary studies. Our

program is currently developing a competency-based diploma in order to bridge that gap. Using standards developed through Equipped for the Future, our ESL learners will be able to complete projects that draw on their employment, family and citizenship experiences and provide them with a Mankato Area Public Schools Diploma.

Completed Group CASAS Test Scores (n= students)					
Pretest	224	218	194	219	207
Post-test	<u>230</u>	<u>224</u>	<u>222</u>	<u>241</u>	<u>243</u>
Total Points Improved	+6	+6	+28	+22	+36
Average increase in post-test scores: 19.6 points					
Pretest median:	218				Post-test median: 230
Pretest mean:	212.4				Post-test mean: 232
Standard Deviation	9.52				

Table 2

Completed Group Comprehension Test Scores (n=5)					
Pretest	24	21	16	23	26
Post-test	<u>22</u>	<u>23</u>	<u>23</u>	<u>23</u>	<u>28</u>
Total Points Improved	-2	+2	+7	0	+2
Average increase in post-test scores: 2.2 points					
Pretest Median:	23				Post-test Median: 23
Pretest Mean:	22				Post-test Mean: 23.8
Standard Deviation	2.8				

Table 3

Early Exit Group CASAS Test Scores (n= students)						
Pretest	216	229	218	215	225	221
Post-test	<u>218</u>	<u>237</u>	<u>211</u>	<u>238</u>	<u>232</u>	<u>222</u>
Total Points Improved	+2	+8	-7	+23	+7	+1
Average Increase in post-test scores: 6.8 points						
Pretest Median:	219.5	Post-test Median:		227		
Pretest Mean:	220.6	Post-test Mean:		226.3		
Standard Deviation:	4.3	Standard Deviation		9.3		

Table 4

Early Exit Group Comprehension Test Scores (n=6)						
Pretest	11	17	7	24	12	13
Post-test	Unable to complete post-test					
Pretest Median:	12.5	Post-test Median:		NA		
Pretest Mean:	14	Post-test Mean:		NA		
Standard Deviation:	4.3					

Table 5

Attendance (hours) January to May (n=11 students)						
Completed Group	139	102.5	98.25	56	63.25	-X-
Early Exit Group	99.5	83.5	54	107.5	61	38.5
Completed Group			Early Exit Group			
Median:	98.25	Median:			72.25	
Mean:	91.8	Mean:			74	
Standard Deviation:	25.72	Standard Deviation:			22.8	

**Baseline Readings Morning Level 4A**

**Baseline and Post Readings Evening Level 4A**