

# Why Don't EFL Students Read More? Because *“We are tested on what we read in class.”*

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**Key Words:** Pleasure reading, Acquisition of English, Testing

## Abstract

Only 11% of university students enrolled in university classes in English education in Korea considered themselves to be pleasure readers in English. Nearly all agreed that a reason for this is that they are tested on what they read. We argue that comprehension testing on reading results in less reading, less comprehension and less acquisition of English.

## Introduction

It has been firmly established that self-selected pleasure reading has a very positive impact on language development (e.g. Krashen, 2011; Smith, 2006; Lee, 2007; Mason and Krashen, 2017; McQuillan, 2019). The question of how and why some young people become readers and remain readers is therefore central (Cho and Krashen, 2016).

## Method and Results

We review here data on attitudes toward reading in English among university students training to be elementary school teachers enrolled in classes in English language education in a Korean university. Five groups participated in the study, from five university classes taught in different years at the same university.

All subjects were in their third year in the university. All were majoring in elementary education and minoring in English education. They had studied English in school as a foreign language for 12 years.

Students in all five groups filled out a questionnaire at the beginning of the semester. We present each question followed by students' responses.

Question 1: *Do you consider yourself to be a pleasure reader in English?*

Table 1. Non-readers and readers among students

Group	N	Non-reader	Reader
1	26	25	1(4%)
2	27	24	3(11%)
3	29	27	2(7%)
4	24	20	4(17%)
5	21	17	4(19%)
Total	127	113	14(11%)

Overall, only 11% (14/127) considered themselves to be pleasure readers in English. There was no significant difference between the groups with the highest percentage and lowest percentage of non-readers (groups 1 and 5),  $p = .16$ , Fisher's Exact test).

Subjects were also asked: *If you don't read in English, why?*

They were given a choice of responses:

1. *Reading in English is difficult.*
2. *Reading in English is no fun.*
3. *Lack of access to interesting books*
4. *We are tested on what we read in class.*

Table 2 presents the number of students who selected each option. Students were allowed to choose more than one option.

Table 2. Reasons: Why not reading

Group	1	2	3	4	5	Total (127)
N	26	27	29	24	21	
Difficult	12(46%)	13(48%)	13(45%)	15(63%)	13(62%)	52%
No Fun	4(15%)	7(26%)	7(24%)	6(25%)	7(33%)	24%
Access	7(13%)	8(30%)	14(48%)	4(17%)	7(33%)	31%
Tested	17(65%)	21(78%)	24(83%)	24(100%)	20(95%)	84%

Note: Group 1 from Cho (2017); numerical errors corrected. Group 2 from Cho (2018)

Responses to the first three questions (reading is difficult, no fun and lack of access to interesting books) produced similar results with one-fourth to one-half of respondents agreeing that they were factors that influenced their English reading habit. All three, it can be argued, are the result of assigned reading of demanding texts that are only comprehensible with a great deal of effort, an approach inconsistent with what is known about language acquisition, that reading material should be comprehensible and interesting. This approach is also inconsistent with Cho and Krashen's (2016) conclusions: They

reviewed factors that successful long-term pleasure readers in English as a foreign or second language had in common: In four out of six cases, readers disclosed that they clearly had sufficient access to books, and all six engaged in self-selected reading.

*"We are tested on what we read in class."*

This item was by far the most frequently chosen reason for not reading more in English, selected by 84 percent of the students. In two classes, all or nearly all the students selected this option.

There have been no studies documenting the frequency of post-reading comprehension testing, but it appears to us to be very common. The assumption seems to be that testing for content is the only way we can determine that students are really reading and that they understand what they read. We suggest here that testing prevents comprehension, and with it, enjoyment and the desire to read.

*If we test comprehension, the result is less comprehension*

Comprehension testing forces readers to try to remember what they read while they are reading. We hypothesize that this reduces involvement with the story or ideas in the text, which not only results in less enjoyment but also, ironically, less remembering of what is read.

The traditional view is that we remember things better when we retrieve them more

frequently from memory. Frank Smith has pointed out, however, that this applies only to facts and concepts that are irrelevant to us. Studies supporting the "laws of learning" are based on subjects' trying to remember nonsense words (Smith, 1988). Rather, we remember what is relevant and interesting. This is supported by a series of studies showing that "incidental learning" can be more powerful than "intentional learning" (studies reviewed in Krashen, 2003; 2016).

Thus, being tested on reading is the opposite of what is needed for remembering. Ironically, the books we remember most are those we found highly interesting, not those we were tested on.

We also suspect that anticipation of a test on what we read kills the pleasure of reading. If we were tested on everything we read, many of us would never read voluntarily at all.

It seems that testing can have a devastating effect on attitude, and thus on language acquisition, because it results in less voluntary reading. Other forms of comprehension checking may have a similar effect (Krashen and Mason, 2019).

Testing was mentioned in four of the six cases in Cho and Krashen's study of long-term pleasure readers in English as a second or foreign language. Three had not experienced testing, and one young reader refused to take reading and vocabulary tests that came with the books his mother ordered for him. He reported that he "hated them" (Cho and Krashen, 2002).

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