

Free Voluntary Reading: a Win-Win Proposition for Teachers and Students (article title)

by Barbara S. Andrews

Have you ever felt frustrated that your students—although they can recite all the grammar rules you taught them—don't seem to be able to use them in their speaking and writing?

It's so discouraging! You've repeated the rules so many times and done drill after drill, and yet it just doesn't seem to be getting through. What more can you do?

Language researcher Stephen Krashen says that language is acquired by comprehensible input, which can be obtained by listening (TPR, TPRS, the Natural Method, etc.) or reading. He believes language teachers should be doing more to encourage students to read.

According to his research, more reading results in better

- writing style
- vocabulary
- spelling
- reading comprehension
- grammatical development.

And don't forget the one that will impress your administrators: better test scores!

In his book, *Explorations in Language Acquisition*, Krashen reports that in-school reading programs are slightly more effective or equally as effective as traditional reading instruction. And since reading for oneself is a lot more fun than skill-building drills and error correction, he suggests that teachers take advantage of it by (1) incorporating more Free Voluntary Reading (FVR) in their classes, and (2) by encouraging students to read outside of class.

What is Free Voluntary Reading? (bold subtitle)

Free Voluntary Reading is simply students reading for pleasure for a short time in class. "Voluntary" implies that there is no student accountability: no questions to answer, book reports to write, words to look up. Students have the right to get up and exchange books whenever they wish, much like we do when we go to a bookstore or library.

That doesn't mean there isn't a place for assigned reading and class discussion. However, our primary purpose should be to help students acquire the desire to read outside of class. The very act of reading tends to make us want to read more, and the more we read, the better our language skills become.

Suggestions for implementing Free Voluntary Reading (bold subtitle)

Provide access to books (indent, italics)

Students must have books that are interesting and appropriate to their level, the more the better. Consider applying for grants such as OFLA's Teacher Grants to purchase books for your classroom. Suggest some titles to your school librarian.

Don't overlook online sources like <www.readinga-z.com> where books in English, Spanish, and French can be downloaded, printed, colored, and stapled into little books for your students. The \$29.95 fee for a six-month subscription is a bargain when you consider the cost of ordering books from France!

If computers are available, beginning students can read online on such web sites such as <<http://www.storyplace.org/>> (Spanish/English, animated with audio) and <<http://www.miscositas.com/>> (French/Spanish/English).

"Don't worry about grammatical structures," advises Susan Gross, foreign language consultant. "Go for high-interest. One thing you need is a selection of magazines. Try to find ones about roller-blading and cars—things that appeal to your nonreaders. You need to have the 'A is for Apple' kind of thing; you need to have lots of books that they remember from their childhood, but now in Spanish; you need to have books that have lots of pictures and very little text, and you need to have books with a paragraph per page, and you need to have some with no pictures. All of it."

A common problem is that most authentic books in the target language tend to be too difficult for our beginning students. Most students will become discouraged if they don't know at least 75% of the words (90% is better).

- Acquire a variety of children's books. Browse eBay for books, then children's books, then type in "French" or "Spanish" or any other target language.
- Color-code the books as to level of difficulty to help students know which to choose.
- Buy picture books with few or no words and write a very simple, repetitive story in the target language with a marker. "Good Night Gorilla" is a good way to initiate a discussion on colors, sizes of animals, open/closed, follow, loud/quiet, friends, helping, sleeping, etc.
- Have your intermediate or advanced students write stories, corrected by the teacher, to be read by the beginning students. Krashen calls these "handcrafted books." After a couple of years, you will have a plentiful supply of reading material!

Students will be more attracted to reading if the books are appealingly displayed in an area that is partitioned off and quiet. Bean bag chairs, carpet swatches, and pillows are desirable as well. Some teachers find having a "Kindergarten Day" (see below) every now and then helps motivate students to read more.

To create attractive and inexpensive book displays, Jim Trelease, author of *The Read Aloud Handbook*, suggests attaching roof gutters to the walls in your classroom.

Read aloud to your students and discuss the story (indent, italics)

Studies show that reading aloud has a direct effect on literacy development. Jim Trelease says that all high school teachers should be reading aloud to their students, that it is crucial for students—especially the low-performing ones—to have the experience of being read to with nothing but the pure joy of reading.

Be an effective role model (indent, italics)

Children read more when they see other people reading. You may be tempted to use that time to grade papers, but remember that actions speak louder than words. If they see you working while they're reading, they'll get the impression that reading isn't really all that important and want to do homework instead.

Limit rewards (indent, italics)

Sometimes students can be enticed into reading by extrinsic rewards such as stickers or prizes, but too often rewards become the primary motivation. The very act of reading should be reward enough.

Provide light reading materials as well as more challenging choices (indent, italics)

Magazines, comic books and teen romances, contrary to popular opinion, will not only not hinder literacy development, but tend to lead to more serious reading.

Encouraging free reading should be one of our major goals. (bold subtitle)

We're not talking another promotional campaign once a year with bumper stickers and contests. We need to take steps to get kids started reading and keep them coming back for more. Krashen says:

“There is overwhelming evidence for recreational reading as a means of increasing second-language competence. In fact, it is now perhaps the most thoroughly investigated and best-supported technique we have in the field of second-language pedagogy. Only one aspect of recreational reading remains uninvestigated: Why isn't it used more frequently in second-language programs?”¹

References:

Krashen, Stephen. 2003. *Explorations in Language Acquisition*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

¹ Krashen, Stephen. 2003. *Explorations in Language Acquisition*, p. 26.

Krashen, Stephen. 1993. *The Power of Reading: Insights From the Research*. Englewood, CO: Libraries Unlimited, Inc.

Trelease, Jim. 2001. *The Read-Aloud Handbook*. Penguin Books.

Notes:

Jason Fritze's "Reading Rainbow" web site offers a number of tips and resources on children's literature. <www.comprehensibleinput.com>

Susan Gross offers book lists and resources on her web site: <<http://www.susangrosstprs.com/lessons.htm>>.

Jim Trelease's Read Aloud site: <www.trelease-on-reading.com>.

Kindergarten Day (article inset in main article)

Some teachers are incorporating what they call "Kindergarten Day" into their curriculums—yes, even in high school! Part or all of the class period is set aside for various reading activities, in particular for the teacher to read aloud to the class and foster a group discussion in the target language.

Teachers are finding that many high school students who are normally "too cool" to participate in childish activities are suddenly eager to sit on the floor around the teacher and offer to bring stuffed animals or milk and cookies to class.

"Be careful that they don't get too carried away with their snacks or their stuffed animals," warns Susan Gross. "I heard about a teacher who was observed during Kindergarten Day and the administrator observed that the kids played with the animals and whispered to each other and did not pay attention. I never had that problem, but then I was an experienced teacher with good classroom management in place. I think that teaching effectively means that we respond to the individual kids, not to a rigid schedule."

Harriet Greaney recently described her Kindergarten Day plan on the moretpers listserv².

"I have a 45-minute period. I divide it into four activities. Always 1 or 2 stories. Always a kid's song, like the Itsy Bitsy Spider, Hokey Pokey, etc. Then a video clip from a cartoon, a craft, or a game. Finally, we have a snack. Vanilla wafers, graham crackers and Sprite or apple juice. Have water available too. If I have a minute or two left, I turn

² The moretpers listserv is a Yahoo listserv for teachers interested in the TPR Storytelling methodology. To join the listserv, send an e-mail message to: <moretpers-subscribe@yahoogroups.com>.

off the lights for a nap. I do these days as special treats. The kids beg for them all the time. Midwinter is always good. . . . I do about three official Kindergarten Days a year. I move all the chairs out of my room. . . . I let them take their shoes off and I leave my stuffed animal props out around the floor. Never any tests. Never a problem with administration, fellow teachers, or parents.”

Cindy Walsh talked about her experiences with Kindergarten Day:

“This past week I read ‘Froggy Se Viste’ to my Spanish 3 students. I have 84 minute blocks and I save the story for the end of class. I allot about 15-20 minutes for this. I have 24 students and 10 rugs so some are sitting on the floor, some at the desks surrounding the group. I sit in a regular chair and they surround me. They were totally thrilled that I was going to read to them. They listened to every word. I read it in Spanish and showed them the pictures. If there was a word I knew they didn’t know, I’d ask if they could guess what it might mean just by the sound of it or the story. Lots of times they understood. When I finished reading the book, they clapped!”

Whether you decide to create your own version of the Kindergarten Day or try something else, it is clear that motivating kids to read more in the target language can be a very effective—and fun—way to help them develop their language skills.