

# Access to Books and English Reading: A Virtuous Circle

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## **Abstract**

The hypothesis explored in this paper is whether a “virtuous circle” can be established to promote English language development: providing access to interesting and comprehensible reading material, which in turn will increase reading English books, which in turn will promote English competence and in turn more reading of English books. Specifically, we seek to determine if those with more access to English books at home and through visits to bookstores show more interest in reading, and in turn are more supportive of having an English library at their school. Analysis of responses of sixth graders at four schools in Korea revealed little access to English reading material, but supported the virtuous circle hypothesis, suggesting that the path to high English competence may be easier to establish than we have imagined.

**Keywords:** access to books, bookstores, books in the home, English library, pleasure in reading

## **Introduction**

There is widespread agreement on the importance of English throughout the world; English classes and ads for electronic devices to teach English are advertised everywhere. Korea is no exception. In fact, an editorial in the Korean Herald proposed that English become a second official language in South Korea (Park, 2016).

Korean parents agree: Parents attending an education seminar in Busan were asked how interested they were in their children’s English language development. Only 2% rated their interest in English education low or very low, and 77% rated their interest in English education as high or very high (Cho & Krashen, submitted for publication).

Over the last few decades, a substantial amount of research has been done strongly suggesting that students can reach very high levels of competence in another language without leaving their own country and without suffering through complicated and tedious grammatical exercises. The crucial component is obtaining rich and compelling comprehensible input (Mason & Krashen, 2019).

A major source of rich and compelling comprehensible input is reading, especially reading books and articles that are selected by the reader. Studies show that reading is the path to reading

ability, vocabulary knowledge, the ability to write using an acceptable writing style, and much of our spelling ability. These studies include experiments, correlational studies and case histories. Here are citations of just a few of the many publications confirming “the power of reading” (Cho & Krashen, 1995; Krashen, 2004; Lee, 2005; Mason & Krashen, 2017; Renandya, Rajan, & Jacobs, 1999; Sullivan & Brown, 2013; Yeo, Ghim-Lian Chew, & Krashen, 2016).

Clearly, to take full advantage of “the power of reading,” readers need a large selection of books to choose from, in order to make sure that the readings are interesting to them and comprehensible, starting with very easy reading material especially made for language acquirers and leading to “authentic” reading. Sodam’s case confirms that extensive access is important, described in detail in Cho (2017).

### ***Sodam***

While in grade 4, Sodam, an elementary school student in Korea, had low competence in English. Sodam’s mother started looking for English books for her, in reaction to Sodam’s school new reading program. The entire family became members of Busan’s English library so Sodam could take out as many books as she wanted to.

Between grades 4 and 8, according to her mother Sodam may have read as many as 4,000 books in a variety of genres, including books written for English learners, such as books in the Oxford Bookworm series, as well as “authentic” English books, especially the Harry Potter series and books by Roald Dahl.

In addition to reading, Sodam took the regular English classes her classmates did. She did not have a tutor, did not attend a “cram school,” nor did she have many friends who spoke English.

### ***Sodam's progress in English***

After starting her reading program, Sodam won nearly every possible major prize for mastery of English awarded to young people in Korea, including the grand prize for middle school students in the Nationwide English contest, based on her performance in writing and public speaking.

One of her English teachers, a native speaker of English, made this observation about Sodam’s competence: “She is very well-spoken and her reading comprehension skills are second to none among her classmates .... When I talk to her I almost feel as if I’m speaking to another native English speaker.” The second author of this paper, also a native speaker of English, had a similar reaction, after an informal conversation with Sodam over ice cream in Korea last year.

### ***Hypothesis***

There is a clear realization of the importance of English language development in Korea, but there is little realization of how to do it. The traditional grammar-based methods still dominate in the public schools, supplemented by “cram schools” that supply more of the same, despite the strong evidence supporting a more pleasant and more effective path.

Our hypothesis is that students who are more interested in self-selected reading will have more interest in an English library in their school, because they enjoy reading and/or they realize the positive impact of self-selected reading on English language development.

We also hypothesize that those who have more access to English books will be more likely to like to read in English, and, we infer, will thus be more likely to want to have access to English reading material via an English library in their school.

## Method

Participants were elementary school students in Korea in the sixth grade in four different schools. Three of the four were classified by the local board of education as “middle class” and one (“class B” in the tables below) was in a lower-income neighborhood.

Children in Korea begin English instruction in grade 3, and have 40-minute English classes three times a week. By sixth grade, students have acquired sufficient English to begin reading at least some books in English.

A questionnaire written in Korean was administered to four intact classes of students by their classroom teachers, who also gave explanations of each item. All teachers involved in the study were former students of the first author and we thank them for their help.

We present the questions and students’ responses below. The entire procedure took about 15 minutes.

## Results and Discussion

We present the English translations of the questions here, along with mean responses in each of the four classes.

### *Not enthusiastic readers*

**Table 1. Like reading in English; interest in English library**

<b>Class</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>B</b>	<b>C</b>	<b>D</b>
<b>N</b>	32	22	28	31
<b>1. Like to read</b>	2.20 (1.06)	2.36 (1.43)	2.64 (1.03)	2.12 (.92)
<b>2. Want library</b>	2.28 (1.04)	2.68 (1.17)	3.17 (1.17)	2.55 (1.2)
<b>R</b>	0.61	0.61	0.63	0.68

1. I like reading in English books (storybooks & others)

1) not at all 2) no 3) moderate 4) yes 5) very much

As indicated in table 1 (“like to read”), all four groups were in close agreement. All mean responses were between “no” and “moderate,” tending to be closer to “no.” The mean unweighted response was 2.3. These students are not enthusiastic readers.

### *Liking to read in English and English library*

2. I want my school to have an English library with lots of storybooks/CDs in English.

1) not at all 2) no 3) moderate 4) yes 5) very much

As indicated in table 1 (“want library”), interest in having an English school library ranged from slightly above “no” (class A) to slightly above “moderate” (class C). The unweighted mean was 2.67. The students were slightly more enthusiastic about having an English library

than they were about reading in English.

The third line of table 1 presents correlations between liking English reading and wanting an English library. The results are consistent: the correlations in the four classes are nearly identical and all are statistically significant, well beyond the .01 level (one-tailed). Those who like reading were more likely to want an English library in their school.

**Access to English books and reading attitudes**

The next question examined the relationship between access to books and attitudes toward reading in English. Two sources of English books were included: the home and bookstores.

Students were asked:

3. Approximately how many English books are therein your home (such as storybooks and others)?  
 1) none 2) 1-5 books 3) 6-10 books 4) 11-20 books 5) 21-30 books 6) 31-40 books 7) more than 40 books.

Responses were consistent among the four classes: few English books are available in the homes of these students (table 2, line 1, Books Home). The unweighted mean was 2.48, between one and five books in English, with no indication whether any were appropriate or comprehensible for sixth graders.

**Table 2. Access to English books**

Class	A	B	C	D
<b>3. Books Home</b>	2.27 (1.57)	2.59 (2.08)	3.01 (1.32)	2.45 (1.48)
<b>r (like to read)</b>	0.38	0.72	0.44	0.02
<b>4. Bookstore</b>	1.46 (.57)	1.96 (1.05)	1.96 (.92)	1.58 (.72)
<b>r (like to read)</b>	0.76	0.68	0.49	0.64

Question 4 dealt with visits to bookstores (table 2, line 3, bookstore).

4. I go to bookstores often to buy books in English.

1) not at all 2) no 3) occasionally 4)yes 5) very much.

As shown in table 2, visits to bookstores to buy English books don't occur very often (unweighted mean = 1.74, between no visits and "not at all"). Of course, for sixth graders trips to distant bookstores are probably dependent on parents.

The encouraging statistics in table 2 are the correlations between access to English books and liking reading, lines 2 and 4. With one exception (Class D) all are positive and in some cases they are quite high.

***Impact of English books at home and visits to bookstore***

Table 3 addresses the question of the independent impact of the two sources of reading material using multiple regression, a technique that allows us to see the power of each predictor with others held constant as well as their combined power.

The numbers in table 3 are "standardized regression coefficients" (called "betas"), telling us the strength of each predictor. In each case, visits to bookstores to buy English books had a larger effect on liking English reading than the number of English books in the home did, possibly because at the bookstore the children were more likely to be able to select the books they wanted.

**Table 3. Multiple regression analysis. Predictors of "liking to read" (standardized regression coefficients)**

School Class	A	B	C	D
<b>Books Home</b>	0.27	0.19	0.26	-0.04
<b>Bookstore</b>	0.82	0.38	0.36	0.49
<b>r<sup>2</sup></b>	0.61	0.47	0.29	0.41

The r<sup>2</sup> tells us the combined strength of the predictors. In class D, for example, r<sup>2</sup> = .41. This means that if we know the number of books in the home and the frequency of visiting bookstores to buy books in English for these children, this gives us 41% of the information we need to predict their attitude toward reading in English.

There were no obvious differences among the groups; class B, considered to be of a lower social class, scored similarly to the others.

**Conclusion**

Our analysis shows that there is only weak interest among grade 6 students in pleasure reading in English (question 1) and only slightly greater interest in establishing an English library in their school (question 2). But in all four classes we included in our study, students who had a stronger English reading habit were more likely to favor having an English library in their school.

The answers to questions (3) and (4) suggest that access to English books helps students get interested in reading in English. While few students visited bookstores to buy English books

and few reported having many English books in their homes, those who did were more interested in reading in English. Of course, bookstores and the home may not be the only sources of English reading material for these students but we suspect they are a significant source.

Increasing English proficiency might be much easier than we have imagined. Exposing children to good reading material in English will increase the likelihood that they will read some of the books available to them and will be interested in having access to other English books. The result will be increased English competence and even more interest in reading in English, a virtuous circle.

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