

Special Contribution

**Parent Support for English: A Weak Predictor of Parent and Student Pleasure
Reading in English**

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Abstract: To study the extent of Korean adults' and their children's English reading habits, parents responded to a questionnaire while attending a school workshop on English development. Parents were enthusiastic supporters of English education, but neither the parents nor their children had an English reading habit. Parent reading and support for English were only weakly related to frequency of children's reading in English. Other factors, such as access to English reading material and the nature of English instruction are possible predictors of English reading among young people in Korea.

Keywords: pleasure reading, comprehensible input, reading habit, parents, instruction

Introduction

There is wide agreement that English is important throughout the world, and Korea is no exception: There has been a strong push for English in Korea and it has even been suggested that English become an official language in Korea (Korea Herald, 2014).

When we look at the published research, the path to high levels of English competence appears to be clear: Studies done over the last several decades have consistently

demonstrated that we acquire language when we receive “compelling comprehensible input,” that is, highly interesting messages that we understand. A very efficient and pleasant way of providing these messages is through reading, and the best way to make sure the reading is of interest is to encourage and prepare young readers to eventually select their reading material themselves. The research literature is filled with studies confirming “the power of reading” in first and second language development (e.g. McQuillan, 1994; Lee, 2005; Krashen, 2011; Cho, 2016, 2017; Cho and Krashen, 1994; Krashen, S. and Mason, B. 2017.)

This study has the following goals:

1. To confirm that Korean parents value English language education.
2. To determine whether parents are taking steps to improve their own English through pleasure reading.
3. To determine the role of family income in influencing parents’ English reading: It is reasonable to predict higher amounts of reading in wealthier families, those more able to afford buying books.

We also investigated parents’ views on how much their children read in English, as well as the effect of the frequency of three predictors of children’s reading of English: parental attitude toward English, parental reported frequency of reading in English, and income.

Method and Results

Subjects were 220 parents of elementary schools and middle school students from a single school district in Busan, Korea. Parents were participants in a Parents’ English Education program provided by the board of education in the city. The program gave the parents information on how to help their children improve English, which included some information on the value of pleasure reading, and it ran for five days. The majority of the parents were mothers.

A questionnaire in Korean was distributed to parents before starting the parents' English Education program and was collected after the program ended. We present the questions below, followed by the subjects' responses.

SES: Socio-economic status

Subjects were asked to indicate their financial position on a one to five scale. Analysis revealed that the group consisted largely of middle-class mothers (table 1).

Table 1. Financial status of subjects. (n=220)

		N	%
1	very poor	12	5
2	poor	53	25
3	middle	139	63
4	rich	16	7
5	very rich	0	0

The mean ranking was 2.72 (sd = .68), just below the "middle" category.

Interest in English

The parents were asked how interested they were in their children's English language development, on a scale of one to five (table 2).

Table 2. Level of interest in English education for their children. (n=220)

		N	%
1	very low	2	1
2	low	2	1
3	moderate	47	21
4	high	118	54
5	very high	51	23

Only 2% of the parents rated their interest in English education as low or very low (combining (1) and (2) responses), and 77% rated their interest in English education high or very high (combining (4) and (5) responses). The mean response was 3.97 (sd = .75), about 4 out of a possible 5. Clearly, parents in this group were very supportive of English education.

Parent reading in English

Parents were asked “Do you read in English (novels, magazines, non-fiction, etc.) for fun?” (Table 3)

Table 3. Do you read in English? (n=220)

		N	%
1	not at all	77	35
2	no	127	58
3	yes	15	7
4	a lot	1	< 1

The mean response was 1.73 out of 4 (sd = .603). A total of 204 of the parents said they did not read in English (93%), the vast majority.

Discussion

Despite being very supportive of English language education, very few parents were English readers. There are several possible reasons.

- (1) A lack of proficiency in English combined with the difficulty of English books. If the former, it points to a problem in English language education in Korea. English has been a required subject in Korea schools for decades.
- (2) The expense of English books. One possible predictor of the frequency of English reading is income level.

(3) It may be that only those with the most interest in English education would become English readers, the others interested in their children's English language development but not necessarily their own.

Two of these potential predictors (2 and 3 above) were examined in a multiple regression analysis (table 4).

Table 4. Predictors of English reading among parents. ($r^2 = .025$)

Predictor	B	T	P
Income	0.0915	1.53	0.064
Interest	0.1164	2.17	0.016

As predicted, those with more interest in English education were significantly more likely to be English readers, and those who reported higher incomes tended to be more likely to be English readers, with the results approaching significance (one-tailed). The combined effect of these two predictors, however, was small, accounting for only 2.5% of the variation in reported reading. ¹

For poverty, $b = .0915$ (table 4), which means that for every increase of one point on the income question, parent reading was predicted to increase .0915 points on the parent reading question. If we compare a parent who rates their income as very low (1 on a scale of 5) with a parent who rates their income as very high (5 in question 2), this predicts a difference in amount of reading of only 1/3 of a point on the amount of reading scale of one to four ($.0914 * 4 = .37$). In other words, the wealthiest parent is predicted to read only 1/3 of a point more than the least wealthy.

For Interest in English education, $b = .1164$. For each increase of one point on the Interest scale, reading increases .1164 points on a five-point scale. The most enthusiastic supporter values reading only .47 points (out of 5) more than the least.

The r^2 for both predictors combined was very low: $r^2 = .025$, accounting for less than 3% of the variation in reading interest among parents.

Students' English Reading Habit

Table 5 presents responses to "How many English books (Storybooks and others) does your child read in a month?"

Table 5. Books read per month. (bks = books read per month)

	bks	n	%
1	0	96	44
2	1	61	28
3	2	35	16
4	3	9	4
5	4	9	4
6	5+	10	4

Most parents reported that their children read no or one book in English per month (72%). Very few were dedicated readers.

Influences on Students' Reading Habits

Parents' reading habits were a significant but weak predictor of how much English reading was done by their children ($r = .24$; $p = .002$, one tail). Parents' support of English (Interest) was an even weaker predictor ($r = .17$; $p = .006$, one tail).

Combined, using multiple regression, these two predictors accounted for less than 7 percent in the variation of scores of children's reading ($r^2 = .067$).²

Summary and Conclusion

The Korean parents in this study were very supportive of English. This level of enthusiasm may not be true of all Korean parents: Our subjects were voluntary participants in a school program about English language education.

Despite the parents' enthusiasm for English, neither the parents nor their children showed signs of developing a pleasure reading habit, despite findings showing reading to be a powerful means of increasing competence in language (e.g. especially Mason and Krashen, 2017). Neither parental support for English nor having an English reading habit had a large influence on the amount of reading their children did.

What are the Missing Factors?

It is highly likely that our questionnaire missed several crucial factors: First, access to reading material. The relationship between access, actual reading done, and reading achievement has been thoroughly documented; books in the home and library quality are consistently positive predictors of reading achievement in the first language (Krashen, 2004). It is reasonable to assume this relationship holds for foreign languages.

Studies examining the availability of English books in Korea have yet to be done. We need to know how many English language books are available in public libraries in Korea, as well as the prevalence of libraries dedicated to English books (for information about the English library in Busan:

http://www.bel.go.kr/site_eng/lib_intro/?tgt=data).

Another possible reason is the nature of English instruction in Korea. No surveys of English instructional methods have been done. We have only scattered reports from those who have been students or teachers in the system, but these reports lead to the conclusion that Korean English teaching has not embraced the research results mentioned above (Cho and Krashen, 2019): It appears that there is either no knowledge about comprehensible input and the power of reading or Korean pedagogy has deliberately rejected the Comprehension Hypothesis. (Also, it is likely that few parents are aware that there are alternatives to traditional teaching that are more effective and more pleasant.)³

Research needs to examine the English print environment and the nature of current English teaching in Korea. If studies confirm that there is insufficient access to interesting and affordable English books and other reading material and confirms that English pedagogy in Korea is still a prisoner of traditional methodology, these problems must be dealt with before making pious pronouncements about the importance of English, before raising English standards and before proclaiming English to be an official language.

Footnotes

1. Calculation of Pearson correlations produced similar results: For Income and English reading, $r = .12$; ($p = .038$, one tail), for Interest and English reading, $r = .15$; ($p = .013$, one tail). The results were significant because of the large sample size, but correlations were small.
2. The parents also reported reading between two and three books per month in Korean (mean = 2.62, sd = 1.33 on the following scale: 1 = none; 2 = 1 book; 3 = 2 books; 4 = 3 books, 5 = 4 books, 6 = more than 5 books). There was a positive but weak relationship between the amount of reading done in Korean and reading reported for English ($r = .18$, $p = .004$ one-tail).
3. According to some observers (reported in Cho and Krashen, 2019), when pleasure reading is included in school programs, it is only a supplement to the more “serious” traditional skill-based program, an attitude that is contrary to what research says (e.g. Mason, 2018).

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