
The Cure

2

If the arguments presented in the previous chapter are correct, if free voluntary reading is the only way to develop adequate levels of reading comprehension, writing style, vocabulary, grammar, and spelling, the implications are clear: One of the major goals of language education should be to encourage free reading, to make sure it happens. While we have paid lip-service to the value of reading (the shopping bag I got from the market recently proclaimed “Make reading your bag: open books = open doors), there has been only limited real effort in this direction.

□ *One of the major goals of language education should be to encourage free reading.*

Access

The most obvious step is to provide access to books. It is certainly true that “you can lead a horse to water but you cannot make him drink.” But first we must make sure the water is there. And when it is, horses always eventually drink.

More Access at Home Results in More Reading

The research supports the commonsense view that when books are readily available, when the print environment is enriched, more reading is done. A print-rich environment in the home is related to how much children read; children who read more have more books in the home (Morrow 1983; Neuman 1986; Greaney and Hegarty 1987; McQuillan 1998a; Kim 2003).

Lao (2003) asked prospective teachers to retrospect about their reading habits during childhood and adolescents. All 12 who described themselves as “reluctant readers” when young said they grew up in print-poor environments. All 10 who described themselves as “enthusiastic early readers” said they grew up in print-rich environments.

Better Classroom Libraries Result in More Reading

Enriching the print environments in classrooms has been shown to result in more reading. Morrow and Weinstein (1982) reported that installing well-designed library corners in kindergarten classes that previously did not have them resulted in more use of books and other “literature activities” by children during free play time. In addition, children did more free reading when the books in the library corner were more physically accessible, when they were within the children’s reach, and when teachers allowed the children to take books home from the classroom library (Morrow 1982).

Better School Libraries Result in More Reading

Enriching the print environment by means of a school library results in more reading. We have know this for a long time: Cleary (1939) reported that children in a school with no school library averaged 3.8 books read over a four-week period, while children from a school with a school library averaged exactly double that figure, 7.6 books. Moreover, children from the school with the library read “better” books; 84 percent of the books they selected were on “approved lists,” compared to 63 percent of the reading done by the children

□ *When children have access to more books at home, at school, or at the public library, they read more.*

with no library. Gaver (1963) reported that children who had access to school libraries did more reading than children who only had access to centralized book collections (without librarians), who in turn read more than children who only had access to classroom collections. My reanalysis of Gaver's data showed a strong correlation ($r = .72$) between the number of volumes available to the children and the amount they reported reading. In a study of libraries and reading in 41 states and the District of Columbia, McQuillan (1998a) also found that better school libraries (more books) resulted in more reading,

Students take more books out of school libraries that have more books and stay open longer (Houle and Montmarquette 1984). Each of these factors affects circulation independently: Increasing the supply of books by 20 percent, according to Houle and Montmarquette, increases the number of books taken out by about 10 percent, and increasing library hours about 20 percent increases loans by 17 percent in high school libraries and about 3.5 percent in elementary school libraries. Planned trips to the library also have an effect: McQuillan and Au (2001) reported that high school students did more reading when their teachers took them to the school library on planned library visits more often.

One of Lao's (2003) "enthusiastic" readers reports that her parents were avid readers and read to her, but books were not plentiful at home. "Linda" tells us that her mother got books from other sources, such as the public library and that the school library was especially important in her life: "My school library was like a second home. I was always there and loved to read."

□ *Larger school library collections and longer hours increase circulation, as do more organized visits to the library.*

Access to Public Libraries Results in More Reading

Access to public libraries also affects how much children read. Heyns (1978) reported that children who live closer to public libraries read more. Kim (2003) reported a strong relationship between the amount of reading done over the summer by fifth graders and whether students said it was easy to access book at a library.

One of Lao's reluctant readers ("Eileen," in Lao, 2003, described above) who had grown up in a print-poor environment at home ("books were scarce at home . . . practically non-existent," p. 15) became a reader thanks to the public library. In the fourth grade, she discovered Judy Blume's books, and her reading "took off from there" (p. 16). (See below for a discussion of "home run" book experiences.)

Ramos reported dramatic increases in reading thanks to one visit to a public library (Ramos and Krashen 1998). In this study, second- and third-grade children who came from print-poor environments and who attended a school with a poor school library were taken to the public library monthly, during school time but before the library was open to the public. This allowed the children to explore the library, share books, and not be constrained by the need to remain quiet. Each child was allowed to take out ten books, which suddenly produced a substantial classroom library for use during sustained silent reading time and for reading at home. Three weeks after the first visit to the library, both children and parents were surveyed. It was clear that the children enjoyed their visit; most reported reading more, that reading was easier, and that they wanted to return to the library.

Parents’ responses were consistent with the children’s’ responses and tended to show even more enthusiasm. Table 2.1 presents the details.

Table 2.1
Reactions to Library Visit

<u>Child survey (n = 93)</u>	
First time visited the public library:	52%
Returned to the library since the visit:	62%
Reading more since the library visit:	75%
Feel reading is easier now:	82%
<u>Parent survey (n=75)</u>	
Children more interested in reading since visiting the library:	96%
Notice improvement in child’s reading:	94%
Child spends more time with books:	94%
Would like the library visiting program to continue:	100%
Child has asked parent to take them to the library since the visit:	67%

Source: Ramos and Krashen (1998)

□ *One trip to a public library greatly increased enthusiasm for reading.*

Of course, the implication of this study is not simply to use the public library. The solution must come from school. The school involved in this study was lucky to have a cooperative, well-supplied public library close to the school. Others are not so lucky.

Access to books from any of the sources mentioned above (home, school, public library) will be extremely helpful, and may be enough to guarantee the establishment of a reading habit. Unfortunately many children have access to none of them. Worthy and McKool (1996) studied 11 sixth graders who “hated to read.” Nine of the 11 had little access to interesting reading material at home, in the school library, or in their classroom libraries, and none had visited the public library in the year before the interview. The two students who had access to interesting reading were the only two “who read with any degree of regularity” (p. 252). Ironically, even though all were described as reluc-

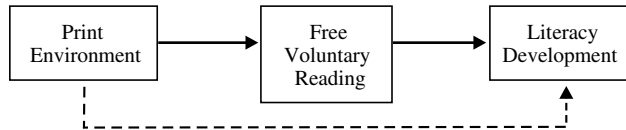
□ *Often, those who “hate to read” simply do not have access to books.*

tant readers, all appeared to be quite enthusiastic about some kinds of reading, especially “light reading” (see discussion below).

Figure 2.1 summarizes the relationship between the print environment, free voluntary reading, and the development of literacy. Confirmation that figure 2.1 is correct comes from studies of the effect of the print environment on literacy development directly, indicated by the dotted line in figure 2.1. These studies show consistent results: The richer the print environment, that is, the more reading material available, the better the literacy development. (Research reviewed in Krashen 1985a, 1988, 1989; Snow, Barnes, Chandler, Goodman, and Hemphill 1991; and Foertch 1992 is confirmation.)

□ *The richer the print environment, the better the literacy development.*

Figure 2.1 The Relationship of Print Environment and Free Voluntary Reading to Literacy Development



Although the relationship between the richness of the print environment and literacy development is always positive, the strength of the relationship found by researchers is often modest. One likely reason for this is that there is a missing link, or a “mediating variable”: Actual free reading, as illustrated in figure 2.1. A print-rich environment will only result in more literacy development if more reading is done.

Pack (2000) provides clear evidence that simply providing access is not always enough. In a study of children's after-school activities, Pack identified a group of children he labeled "library latch-key kids," children whose parents used the public library as a "free source of after-school care" from one to six hours per day. Pack reported that the children did "little more than 'hang out' at the library" (p. 166). They did not read, but passed the entire time in socializing with other children and playing on the computer.

□ *However, a rich print environment helps only when more reading is done.*

Providing access to books is thus a necessary, but not sufficient condition for encouraging reading. Other factors act to make free reading more desirable.

Comfort and Quiet

The physical characteristics of the reading environment are important. Morrow (1983) reported that preschool and kindergarten children used the library corner more when it had pillows, easy chairs, and carpets, and when it was partitioned off and quiet.

A particularly fascinating result was reported by Greaney and Hegarty (1987), who found that parents of fifth graders classified as heavy readers allowed their children to read in bed more than parents of fifth graders classified as nonreaders. Of the heavy readers, 72.2 percent of their parents allowed reading in bed, compared to only 44.4 percent of the nonreaders' parents.

Libraries

The first two factors for encouraging reading mentioned in this chapter, access to books and a quiet comfortable place to read, are rarely met in

many students' lives, in school or outside of school. One place where these conditions can be met is the library. If many students do in fact lack access to books, and if the arguments for reading as the source of literacy development presented in chapter 1 are even partly correct, libraries are crucially important.

Children Get Their Books from Libraries

Children get a substantial percentage of their books from libraries. Table 2.2 combines data from several different studies in which 11-year-old elementary school students were asked where they got their books for free reading.

There is variation in the data: In some studies, the school library is the most widely used source, in others it is the classroom library or public library. There is good agreement in all studies, however, that children get much of their reading material from some kind of library.

□ *Children get much of their reading material from libraries.*

Table 2.2
Sources of Books for 11-Year-Old Children

Study	Percent Getting Books from Libraries
Gaver 1963	30–63
Lamme 1976	81
Ingham 1981	72–99
Swanton 1984	70
Doig and Blackmore 1995	school lib = 63; class lib = 25, public = 57
Worthy, Moorman, and Turner 1999 High SES	school = 19; class = 3; public = 14
Worthy, Moorman, and Turner 1999 Low SES	school = 34; class = 6; public = 14
Ivey and Broadbush 2001	school = 55; class = 28, public = 61

While one study reported a decline in public library use as children get older (Williams and Boyes 1986; see esp. p. 260), the percentage of library use was still very high (86 percent of six- to seven-year-olds reported using the library, declining to 44 percent among 16- to 18-year-olds), other studies clearly show that teenagers also get many of their books from libraries (table 2.3).

Table 2.3
Sources of Books for Teenagers

Study	Age	Percent Getting Books from Libraries
Mellon 1987	ninth graders	school library—"almost 90%"; public library—girls 66%, boys 41%
Smart Girl Poll 1999	11–18	school library—66%; public library—58%
Fairbank et al. 1999	10–17	"the library"—66%; "school"—25%

Better Libraries Result in Better Reading

If libraries are a major source of books, and if more reading means better reading, better libraries should be associated with better reading. This has been found to be the case.

Gaver (1963) reported that children in schools with larger school libraries made better gains in reading than children in schools with smaller school libraries, who in turn made better gains than children in schools that had only classroom libraries.

Elley and Mangubhai (1979; reported in Elley 1984) found that the most important predictor of English reading scores among children in the Fiji Islands was the size of the school library. "Those

schools with libraries of more than 400 books produced consistently higher mean scores than those with smaller libraries or none at all . . . no school had high scores without a large library" (p. 293).

A solid confirmation of the positive effect of libraries was a remarkable study by Lance, Welborn, and Hamilton-Pennell (1993), who found that money invested in school libraries in Colorado was associated with higher reading scores, even when factors such as poverty and availability of computers were controlled. Lance and his colleagues have replicated these results in Colorado and in several others states, showing that library quality, defined in terms of the number of books in the library and the presence and quality of library staffing, is consistently related to reading achievement.¹

□ *Library quality (books and staffing) is related to reading achievement.*

The value of the library was confirmed again in Krashen (1995), an analysis of predictors of the NAEP fourth-grade reading test scores for 41 states. The results of this analysis should be of great interest to Californians, because it was California's low performance on this test relative to other states that inspired the formation of a reading task force and the perception that something was wrong with how reading was being taught in California. Among the best predictors of the NAEP performance was the number of books per student in the school library. As was the case with the Lance et al. study, this analysis controlled for other factors, such as computers and total amount of money invested in the schools. The results strongly suggest that California's real problem is access to books: California's school libraries are among the worst in the United States, both in terms of books and staffing. This suggestion was confirmed by McQuillan's work.

McQuillan (1998a) examined a wide variety of factors relating to NAEP fourth-grade reading scores in 41 states plus the District of Columbia. McQuillan also found that school libraries were a good predictor of NAEP scores. Most impressive were his findings that a very strong relationship existed between the overall print environment (school library, public library, books available in the home) and reading achievement ($r = .68$) and that this relationship was still substantial when the effect of poverty was considered. McQuillan also noted that California ranks very low among states in the United States not only in school libraries, but also in other sources of print, books in the home, and public libraries.

Elley (1992) surveyed reading achievement in 32 countries and found that the quality of a country's school libraries was a significant predictor of its rank in reading. Not surprisingly, Elley reported that children in more economically developed countries read much better than those in less economically developed countries. This is, most likely, because children in wealthier countries have more access to print. Of special interest to us, however, Elley also found that children in the less wealthy countries with the best school libraries made up a large percentage of the gap ("highest quarter" in table 2.4). The school library can make a profound difference.

Table 2.4
Mean Achievement by School Library Size: 14-Year-Olds

	Lowest Quarter	Second Quarter	Third Quarter	Highest Quarter
wealthy countries	521	525	536	535
less wealthy countries	445	452	454	474

mean = 500

Source: Elley (1992)

There is overwhelming evidence that children of poverty have far less access to reading material than do children from higher-income families. For these children, the school library is their only hope, the only possible source available for reading material. Sadly, the evidence thus far shows that school libraries are not succeeding in helping these children in most cases.

Poverty and Access to Books

Smith, Constantino, and Krashen (1996) investigated the availability of print in several communities in the Los Angeles area, including two vastly different ones, Beverly Hills and Watts. The difference in print environment was staggering. Children interviewed in affluent Beverly Hills said that they had an average of 200 books available to them at home (their own or siblings'). Children in low-income Watts, however, averaged less than one book, .4 to be precise. In addition, public libraries in Beverly Hills had twice as many books, and there was much more access to book stores for Beverly Hills children.

Neuman and Celano (2001) found startling differences between two high-income and two low-income print environments. Among their findings were these:

- There were more places to buy books in the high-income neighborhoods. Neuman and Celano looked at bookstores, drugstores, grocery stores, bargain stores, corner stores, "other" stores, and children's stores. Each low-income neighborhood had four places to buy children's books. One high-income neighborhood had 13 places, the other 11. The low-income neighborhood had no place to buy young adult books. One high-income neighborhood had three, the other one.

□ *Children from high-income families are "deluged" with books; children from low-income families must "aggressively and persistently seek them out."*

- High-income children had access to a much wider variety of books in stores. The total number of children's book titles available in the two low-income neighborhoods was 358 (one title for every 20 children) in one and 55 in the other (one title for every 300 children). In one high-income neighborhood, 1,597 titles were available (.3 per child), in the other, 16,455 (13 per child). Comparing the print-richest and the print-poorest, high-income children have 4,000 times the number of titles available. In low-income neighborhoods, "drugstores were the most common source of print materials for young children" (p. 15). Young adult materials were "scarce."
- Public libraries in high-income areas had far more juvenile books per child. Both libraries in the high-income neighborhood were open two evenings per week (until 8:00 P.M.); the low-income libraries were never open past 6:00 P.M.
- There was more readable environmental print in the high-income neighborhoods. Nearly all environmental signs were readable (96 and 99 percent). In the poor neighborhood, signs were often "graffiti-covered and difficult to decipher" (p. 19); only 66 and 26 percent were in "good readable condition" (p. 19).
- There were more places in public suitable for reading in the high-income neighborhood (e.g., coffee shops with good lighting, seating, friendly staff, etc.). Thus, children in the high-income communities were more likely to see people reading.

Neuman and Celano conclude that “children in middle-income neighborhoods were likely to be deluged with a wide variety of reading materials. However, children from poor neighborhoods would have to aggressively and persistently seek them out” (p. 15).

With gigantic differences such as these, it is hard to argue that children of poverty need more direct instruction in the form of phonemic awareness and phonics exercises. Our first priority is to make sure these children have something to read.²

Di Loreto and Tse (1999) found substantial differences in the children’s section of public libraries in high-income Beverly Hills and working class Santa Fe Springs. The Beverly Hills library contained many more children’s books and magazines, and had an impressive staff dedicated to children’s literature, while the Santa Fe Springs library had no staff especially for the children’s section (table 2.5).

Table 2.5
Comparison of Children’s Section
of Public Libraries in Two Communities

	Population	Books	Children’s Magazines	Staff in Children’s Section
Beverly Hills	32,000	60,000	30	12
Santa Fe Springs	16,000	13,000	20	0

Source: Di Loreto and Tse (1999)

What About School?

Poverty per se is of course devastating. But schools can counter the effects of poverty in at least one area: access to books. Recall that McQuillan (1998a) found that the relationship between access

to books and reading achievement held even when the effects of poverty were statistically controlled (see also Lance's studies, discussed above, as well as Roberts, Bachen, Hornby, and Hernandez-Ramos 1984, Table 3B). Thus, while it is true that children of poverty have less access to books, given two groups of such children, the group provided with more access to books will show more literacy development.

Thus far school has done little. In fact, school has not only failed to level the playing field, it has made the disparity worse.

*Children from High-Income Families Go to
Schools with Better Classroom Libraries*

In our Beverly Hills/Watts comparison (Smith et al. 1996), we found that the classroom libraries we inspected in Beverly Hills schools averaged about 400 books; those in Watts, only about 50.

Duke (2000) reported that classroom libraries for first graders in high-income areas averaged 33 books and magazines per child, compared to 18 per child in low-income neighborhoods. During the year, an average of 19 books and magazines per child were added to the high-income libraries, but only 10 were added to classroom libraries in schools in low-income areas. Duke also noted that books in low-income classroom libraries "appeared to be older" (p. 475, n.3).

High-income area classrooms had more books on display. These classroom libraries had an average of 21 books on "full display" at the beginning of the year, with 60 more on full display over the course of the year, compared to 10 on full display at the beginning of the year in low-income classroom libraries, with an average of 16 more displayed during the year.

*Children from High-Income Families
Have Access to Better School Libraries*

Beverly Hills school libraries have two to three times as many books as those in Watts (Smith et al. 1996).

Neuman and Celano (2001) found that school libraries in high-income neighborhoods had more books per child (18.9 and 25.7, compared to 12.9 and 10) and were open more days (both were open five days per week, compared to four and two days per week for school libraries in low-income areas). Both high-income school libraries had a librarian with a master's degree. Neither low-income school library had a certified librarian. Recall that Lance and his colleagues found that the quality of library staffing was related to higher reading scores.

The disparity extends to library services. In a California study, LeMoine, Brandlin, O'Brian, and McQuillan (1997) reported that students in high-achieving schools in affluent areas are able to visit the school library more frequently, both independently and as a class, and are more likely to be allowed to take books home. Seven out of the 15 low-achieving schools they studied did not allow children to take books home.

□ *Children who live in high-income neighborhoods go to schools with better classroom and school libraries.*

Allington, Guice, Baker, Michaelson, and Li (1995) have reported similar findings for school libraries in New York State, reporting that of the 12 school libraries they investigated, the six that served few poor children had more books than the six that served many poor children.

In agreement with Smith et al. (1996), Allington et al. also found that classroom libraries in schools serving poorer children had fewer books, and in agreement with LeMoine et al.

(1996), Allington et al. reported that “in the schools serving many poor children access to the library was usually restricted to a single weekly visit. Several schools also restricted the number of titles that children could borrow (usually one or two per visit). Two schools barred children from taking library books out of the building! No low-poverty school had such a restriction, and it was more common in these buildings for children to have relatively open access to the library throughout the day and, in some cases, before and after the regular classroom schedule” (p. 24).

The disparity extends to content as well. Children from higher-income families have access to the reading material they like, but children from lower-income families do not. Worthy, Moorman, and Turner (1999) examined access to reading for 419 sixth graders in the Austin, Texas, area. In agreement with other studies (see table 2.1), Worthy et al. found that the children were active library users: 44 percent said they usually got their reading material from some kind of library. The sample was divided into higher- and lower-income groups, based on eligibility for free and reduced lunch. The lower-income children were more dependent on libraries, especially school libraries: 63 percent of the lower-income children, for example, utilized the school library, as compared to 40 percent of the children from higher-income families.

Worthy et al. asked the children what they liked to read. The top preferences for all children, regardless of reading ability and gender, were scary books (R.L. Stine, Stephen King) and comic books (this study was done before the Harry Potter novels became popular). Worthy et al. then investigated whether these kinds of reading materials were available in three of the school libraries that

□ *Classroom and school libraries in high-income area schools are more likely to have what children want to read.*

served these children. The comics and magazines these children said they liked were “largely unavailable.” Scary books were “moderately” available. Because of their popularity, the more recent releases were usually checked out. Nor was preferred reading available in classrooms: “While most teachers were aware of many of their students’ preferences and most did not object to books like *Goosebumps* (‘I’m just thrilled that they’re reading’), fewer than one third of the classrooms contained more than a handful of such materials” (p. 22). Moreover, “teachers who had such materials usually used their own money to buy them or asked students to donate their used books” (p. 23). Children from higher-income families can get what they want to read outside of school; children from lower-income families often cannot and are dependent on the school and classroom libraries, which often do not include what they really want to read.

The tendency of some libraries to exclude what people want to read is of course not new. Michael Dirda, at age 10, noticed it: “How strange, it seemed to me, that the high-minded librarians refused to stock the Hardy Boys or Tom Corbett, the Space Cadet” (Dirda 2003, p. 59). Nell (1988) provides extensive documentation that many librarians regard themselves as “guardians of good taste.”

Libraries and Second Language Acquirers

The library situation is even worse for those acquiring English as a second language. Developing literacy in the primary language is an extremely efficient means of developing literacy in the second language (Cummins 1981, Krashen 1996, 2003c). In order to become good readers in

the primary language, however, children need to read in the primary language. In 1991, the average Spanish-speaking family with limited English proficient children in school in the United States had only 26 books in their home (this figure refers to total books, not age-appropriate books for children) (Ramirez, Yuen, Ramey, and Pasta 1991), about one-fifth the national average (Elley 1994). Once again, school does not solve the problem: In the bilingual schools studied by Pucci (1994), school libraries had approximately one book per child in Spanish (compare this with the national average of 18 books per child in elementary schools in the United States; Miller and Shontz 2001).

□ *Developing reading ability in the primary language helps the development of literacy in English, but there is often little to read in the primary language.*

Constantino (1994) has reported that ESL students often have little idea of what the school library can offer, and that parents of ESL students were nearly completely unaware of what was in libraries and how they operated (Constantino 1995).

Money for Libraries:

Who Is Paying Now?

Allington et al. (1995) reported that in their survey of schools in New York State, "classrooms with the largest collections of trade books were those where teachers reported they purchased most of the books" (pp. 23–24).

A great many teachers supply their students with books from their own funds. Teachers who do this are in an impossible ethical dilemma; if they do not buy books for their students, there is nothing to read. If they do, and students progress in literacy, the basal series and unused software gets the credit. There is only one solution to this intolerable situation: a much greater investment by the school in books.

□ A small percentage of what we spend on technology and testing would ensure access to books for all children.

The money is there. A fraction of the investment we are willing to make for technology and testing will provide access to good reading material for all children.

A Modest Proposal

An article in the *Los Angeles Times* (MuZoz 2003) announced that first lady Laura Bush visited The Vernon City Elementary School in Los Angeles in order to award them \$5,000 for the library collection. Vernon Elementary was the first school in the United States to receive money from the Laura Bush Foundation for America's Libraries. This all sounds encouraging, until we take a closer look. The article also stated that only 131 other schools in the country are getting additional funding from the Laura Bush Foundation. And 6,100 schools applied! That means only 2 percent of those that applied got funded.

There is more: The Vernon City school received enough money to add, at most, 400 titles to its library. This will raise Vernon's ratio of books per child from 15 to 1 to 16 to 1. (Recall that the national average is 18 to 1.) Also, Vernon, as a member of Los Angeles Unified School District, has no funding for a school librarian, and according to the *LA Times* article, library hours will be cut next semester because of the budget. Who is going to select the books, be responsible for their care, introduce them to children, and help teachers integrate the new books into the curriculum? When will the children have a chance to see the books?

Mrs. Bush is correct to want to help school libraries. I'm afraid, however, that the contribution of the Bush Foundation is like shooting an arrow at the moon: It is in the right direction but won't get far.

Here is another suggestion: An article in *Education Week* announced that the testing required for No Child Left Behind will cost \$5.3 billion between 2002 and 2008 (Richard 2003). What if that \$5.3 billion were invested instead in a trust fund for school libraries, dedicated to improving both books and staffing in high poverty area schools? The interest on this sum might be enough to guarantee a print-rich environment and adequate libraries for all children in the United States forever. (My thanks to David Loertscher for the trust fund idea.)

Another advantage of a permanent fund is that schools would no longer have to compete against each other for tiny amounts, and the time now spent writing grants, evaluating grants, and searching for money could be utilized in more productive ways.

Reading Aloud

Largely thanks to the enormous impact of Jim Trelease's *Read Aloud Handbook*, now in its fifth edition (2001), the practice of reading aloud to children is widespread in North America, and with good reason.

Children who are read to at home read more on their own (Lomax 1976; Neuman 1986, 1995). Neuman (1995) reported that parents of children who were heavy readers "established a fixed routine early on of reading to their children when they were young .. nap-time and bedtime stories were said to begin as early as six months of age" (p. 132). In addition, when teachers read stories to children and discuss the stories ("literature activities"), children read more (Morrow and Weinstein 1982). Only one of the 12 reluctant readers in Lao's study (Lao 2003; discussed earlier) was read to as a child; all 10 of the enthusiastic early readers were read to.

□ *Children who are read to at school or at home read more and show better literacy development.*

□ *Even college students read more and better books when they are read to.*

Two classroom studies confirm that children are more likely to select books for independent reading that teachers have read to them (Martinez, Roser, Worthy, Strecker, and Gough 1997; Brassell 2003).

From elementary school, the research then jumps to the college level: In Pitts (1986), “basic skills” university students (“intelligent but under-prepared students,” p. 37) were read to one hour per week for 13 weeks. Selections included works by Twain, Salinger, Poe, and Thurber, and the reading was discussed afterwards. Pitts reported that the class that was read to checked out more books and better books from the reading lab than did students in other basic skills classes. In addition, the class that was read to did better on the final essay.

Reading aloud has multiple effects on literacy development. As noted above, it has an indirect effect—hearing stories and discussing stories encourages reading, which in turn promotes literacy development. Hearing stories appears to have a direct impact on literacy development as well. Short-term studies show that children make significant increases in vocabulary knowledge after just a few hearings of studies containing unfamiliar words (Eller, Pappas, and Brown 1988; Elley 1989; Leung and Pikulski 1990; Stahl, Richek and Vandevier 1991).

In controlled studies, it has been shown that children who are read to regularly, at home or at school, make superior gains in reading comprehension and vocabulary (Bus, Van Ijzendoorn, and Pellegrini 1995; Blok 1999). In a recent study by Denton and West (2002) of over 20,000 children, it was reported that children who were read to at

least three times a week prior to entering kindergarten did better than those read to less than three times a week on a measure of reading, given at the end of kindergarten and the end of first grade. This result held even when the effect of poverty was controlled.

Senechal, LeFebvre, Hudson, and Lawson (1996) is a remarkable confirmation that storybook reading by parents contributes to literacy development: They found that children of parents who scored higher on a test of knowledge of storybook authors and storybook titles did better on a test of vocabulary. This result held regardless of the parents' education and the parents' own reading habits.

Hearing stories read aloud is not only beneficial, it is pleasant. The empirical research confirms what most parents know: The vast majority of children say that they enjoy being read to (Walker and Kuerbitz 1979; Mason and Blanton 1971; Wells 1985; Senechal et al. 1996). Here is a concrete example. Feitelson, Kita, and Goldstein (1986) is an empirical study that confirmed the positive impact of read-alouds on language development. In addition to providing test scores, Feitelson et al. also presented this interesting report on how children reacted to hearing stories. First graders in Israel were read to from the Kofiko series, which dealt with the adventures of a monkey. The following is a quote from a teacher's observational record, two months after the reading program began: "11:20: The class is busy copying home assignment questions from the blackboard. At 11:25 the teacher reminds the children that 'we need to hurry because we want to read Kofiko.' There are immediate shouts of approval and children hurry to finish the task. A few faster children go to the desks of the slower ones and assist them. Cries of 'hurry up' and 'let's get it done so we don't lose time,' are heard from various directions" (p. 348).

□ *Nearly all children like being read to.*

In addition to the enthusiasm for hearing stories in the classroom, Feitelson et al. reported that children asked their parents to buy them Kofiko books: "By the end of the study 13 of the 31 children in the experimental class personally owned one or more Kofiko books; all together the children owned 45 Kofiko books. Four additional children were borrowing Kofiko books from relatives, neighbors, or the public library. In comparison, there were single Kofiko volumes in each of three homes in one control class, and one Kofiko book each in four homes and two in a fifth home in the second control class. In every case these belonged to older siblings and the interviewed first grader had not read them" (p. 350).

Here is another stunning example of the power of read-alouds, from the first edition of Jim Trelease's *Read Aloud Handbook* (2001):

Assigned in mid-year to teach a sixth-grade class of remedial students, Mrs. (Ann) Hallahan shocked her new students by reading to them on her first day of class. The book was *Where the Red Fern Grows*.

A hardened, street-wise, proud group (mostly boys), they were insulted when she began reading to them. "How come you're reading to us? You think we're babies or something?" they wanted to know. After explaining that she didn't think anything of the kind but only wanted to share a favorite story with them, she continued reading *Where the Red Fern Grows*. Each day she opened the class with the next portion of the story and each day she was greeted with groans. "Not again today! How come nobody else ever made us listen like that?"

Mrs. Hallahan admitted to me later, "I almost lost heart." But she persevered, and after a few weeks (the book contained 212 pages), the

tone of the class's morning remarks began to change. "You're going to read to us today, aren't you?" Or "Don't forget the book, Mrs. Hallahan."

"I knew we had a winner," she confessed, "when on Friday, just when we were nearing the end of the book, one of the slowest boys in the class went home after school, got a library card, took out *Where the Red Fern Grows*, finished it himself, and came to school on Monday and told everyone how it ended." (p. 26)

Reading Experience

Reading itself promotes reading. A consistent finding in in-school free reading studies is that children who participate in these programs are more involved in free voluntary reading after the program ends than those in traditional programs (Pfau 1967; Pilgreen and Krashen 1993). Greaney and Clarke (1973) present a spectacular example: Sixth-grade boys who participated in an in-school free reading program for eight and one-half months not only did more leisure reading while they were in the program but also were still reading more than comparison students six years later. Tse (1996) describes the case of Joyce, an adult ESL student in the United States who did not view reading as a leisure activity and had never read a book in English before coming to the United States. After participating in an extensive reading class, her attitude toward reading "changed dramatically," and she continued to read after the end of the course, and recommended that her husband take the same class, rather than a traditional class. Shin (1998) noted an improvement in attitude toward pleasure reading among 15 ESL middle school students after one year of sustained silent reading. Before the SSR experience, only three out

□ *Reading itself promotes reading.*

of 16 (23 percent) were regular pleasure readers. This increased to 56 percent (nine out of 16) at the end of a year.

Cho and Krashen (2002) documented a clear increase in interest in reading and in promoting pleasure reading in English as a foreign language among teachers in Korea after only one two-hour exposure to interesting and comprehensible children's literature. Previously, the teachers had associated reading in English with difficult pedagogical texts that were packed with difficult vocabulary and grammar; many had never experienced reading truly interesting material in another language.

Home Run Books

When I read Garfield books in first grade, I thought I found something better than TV.

Trelease (2001) has suggested that a single very positive reading experience, one "home run book," can create a reader. Trelease took the term "home run" book from Fadiman (1947), in reference to his earliest experience in reading, a book entitled *The Overall Boys*. "One's first book, kiss, home run, is always the best." A series of three studies has confirmed that Trelease is right. In all three studies, elementary school children were asked one question: Was there was one book or reading experience that interested you in reading? Children were also asked to name the book if they could.

It was clear from students' responses that they understood the question. While most simply reported the name of a book, some added commentary, such as

□ *Sometimes one positive reading experience can create a reader.*

"It was the Box Car Children that started me reading, because it was a good book."

"Captain Underpants! That book turned me on, because it was funny and an adventure."

"The book that got me interested was Clue, because I didn't like to read before."

"I liked to read ever since my first book, Chicka Chicka Boom Boom."

(Von Sprecken, Kim, and Krashen 2000, p. 9)

In Von Sprecken, Kim, and Krashen (2000), 53 percent of the 124 fourth graders recalled at least one home run book. In Kim and Krashen (2000), 75 percent of 103 sixth graders from a high poverty school recalled one or more home run books. Finally, in Ujiie and Krashen (2002), 82 percent of 266 fourth and fifth graders in another low-income area school recalled one or more home run books.

In agreement with other studies of favorite books (Ivey and Broaddus 2001), the children mentioned a wide variety of books. The fourth graders in Von Sprecken et al. (2000) mentioned *Animorphs* (eight students), various "scary books" (16; but 15 of the 16 mentioned a book by R. L. Stine), Marvel Comics (three), *Charlotte's Web* (two), books by Judy Blume (two), a book from the Boxcar Children series (two), *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (two), books by Beverly Cleary (four), and many, many others. The sixth graders in Kim and Krashen (2000) mentioned, among others, *Don't Look at the Mirror*, *Kristy's Great Idea*, *The Giver*, *Night in the Terror Tower*, *The Giving Tree*, *The Plague*, *The Outsiders*, *Island of the Blue Dolphin*, *Looking for Home*, *Calling All Creeps*, *Pigs Can Fly*, *The Diary of Anne Frank*, *Goosebumps*, *Matilda*, *Annie and the Old One*, and *Go Dogs Go*. Home run books

in Ujiie and Krashen (2002) included *Fear Street*, *Captain Underpants*, *The Little Mermaid*, *The Stone Fox*, *Goosebumps*, and many others.

□ Children mention a wide variety of “home run” books.

Lao’s (2003) subjects also differed with respect to what caused the home run experience. For one subject, it was Judy Blume. For another, it was a magazine: Her subject “Jane” tells us: “Teachers were very structured and basal readers were used as required reading. I did not like the basal reader at all and had a hard time with reading until my mother brought me a magazine called *True Confessions*. This magazine had stories about girls who were in trouble with boyfriends, mothers or life in general. I loved this magazine and from then on, I began reading” (p. 16).

The finding that readers mentioned a wide variety of books underscores the importance of providing many different titles in school and classroom libraries and introducing children to a wide range of literature in language arts. One cannot predict what book will serve as a home run experience for a particular child.

Models

Children read more when they see other people reading, both at school and at home. Morrow (1982) found that nursery school and kindergarten use of library corners increased when teachers read during sustained silent reading sessions.

Wheldall and Entwistle (1988) examined the reading behavior of eight- and nine-year-old children during their daily SSR time and confirmed that children were significantly more engaged in actual reading while teachers were reading than when teachers were not reading.

Morrow (1983) and Neuman (1986) reported that parents of children who do more leisure reading read more than parents of children who show less interest in books. Although these parents might do other things that promote reading, these results suggest that having a model is important.

□ *Children read more when they see other people reading.*

These studies indicate that teachers should follow McCracken and McCracken's (1978) advice and actually read for pleasure during sustained silent reading time. Although this may be difficult, given the endless paperwork teachers have to deal with, the results will make the sacrifice worthwhile.

Providing Time to Read

Simply providing time to read results in more reading. Sustained silent reading, of course, provides time for reading, and as we have seen, children who have participated in SSR programs read more on their own than those who have not, both immediately after the program ends (Pilgreen and Krashen 1993) as well as years later (Greaney and Clarke 1973). There is also strong evidence that students really use SSR time for reading.

□ *Children read more when they have time to read.*

Von Sprecken and Krashen (1998) observed sustained silent reading sessions in a middle school in the middle of the school year and reported that 90 percent of the students were reading. More reading tended to take place in those classrooms in which more books were available in the classroom library (see "Access," above) in which teachers also read while students read (see "Models," above), in which students were not required to bring their own books, and in which teachers made deliberate efforts to promote certain books. In one of the 11 classes observed, there were few books, no modeling of reading, no promotion

□ *After the first few weeks, most children read during SSR.*

of books, and students had to bring their own books. Nevertheless, 80 percent were observed to be reading during SSR.

Cohen (1999) unobtrusively observed 120 eighth-grade students during SSR time over a two-week period and found that 94 percent were reading during SSR. She noted that enthusiasm for sustained silent reading was not high at the beginning of the school year but increased after one to two months.

Herda and Ramos (2001) reported that 63 percent of students observed in SSR sessions in grades one through twelve were actively reading; in grades one through five, the percentages were much higher, ranging from 76 percent to 100 percent. In the upper grades, students were given the option of studying or pleasure reading, and a substantial percentage took advantage of the study option. Nevertheless, a surprising percentage were reading for pleasure, ranging from 29 percent in grade 12 to 65 percent in grade nine.

Direct Encouragement

Research is sparse in this area, but it appears that simply suggesting reading to children may have an impact on the amount of reading done. Morrow (1982) reported that when nursery school and kindergarten teachers encouraged pupils to use the library corner more, the pupils did so. Lamme (1976) found that elementary school classroom libraries were used more when teachers "encouraged their use." Greaney and Hegarty (1987) found that 73 percent of the parents of "heavy readers" in the fifth grade encouraged their children to read specific books, as compared to 44 percent of the parents of nonreaders, and Neuman

(1986) reported a strong correlation ($r = .53$) between “parental encouragement of reading” and the amount of time children devoted to reading.

Conversely, directing children to read may backfire if the reading material is not appropriate, that is, either not interesting or not comprehensible, or both. Greaney and Hegarty also reported that more parents of nonreaders encouraged newspaper reading (41 percent, compared to 18 percent of the parents of nonreaders). One interpretation of this result is that newspaper reading was not right for these fifth graders.

□ *Direct encouragement to read can work if reading material is interesting and comprehensible.*

The case of Ben Carson suggests that direct encouragement to read can stimulate an interest in reading and thus lead to better literacy development. Carson, now a neurosurgeon, was a poor student in the fifth grade when his mother required him to check out two books per week from the library and insisted that he report on his reading to her at the end of each week. Carson was not enthusiastic, but he obeyed his mother. What is crucial is that Carson’s mother allowed him to read whatever he wanted to.

At first, Carson chose books on animals, nature, and science, reflecting his interests. Carson reported that while he was a “horrible student in the traditionally academic subjects, I excelled in fifth grade science” (1990, p. 37). As his science reading expanded, he “became the fifth grade expert in anything of a scientific nature” (p. 37).

Carson credits reading with improving his reading comprehension and vocabulary, which affected all his academic work, reporting that he became “the best student in math when we did story problems” (p. 38). Consistent with the research, reading also improved his spelling: “I kept reading all through summer, and by the time I began sixth

□ Ben Carson's reading resulted in much better performance in school

grade I had learned to spell a lot of words without conscious memorization" (p. 39).

The initial impetus his mother provided led to dramatic results: "As I continued to read, my spelling, vocabulary, and comprehension improved, and my classes became much more interesting. I improved so much that by the time I entered seventh grade. . . . I was at the top of the class" (p. 39). Clearly, Carson's mother provided him with just the right amount of direct encouragement; because his reading was self-selected, the intrinsic pleasure of reading soon took over, and direct instruction was no longer necessary.

The critical role of self-selection is confirmed in this report from a reader interviewed by Carlsen and Sherrill (1988):

As soon as I was progressing through the primary grades I remember a distinct lack of enthusiasm for reading because my mother tried to force books on me, which I disliked, either because they were too difficult or they were about subject matter in which I had no interest. My older sister had been extremely fond of horse stories and I could not tolerate them. (p. 138)

Of course, encouragement only works if readers have access to truly compelling books and are capable of reading them.

Shin (2003) presents another case in which direct encouragement worked: Tanesha was a sixth grader who read at the fourth-grade level and had little confidence in her reading ability. Tanesha was enrolled in a special summer program that emphasized free reading (Shin 2001). Shin observed that Tanesha could read and understand *Goosebumps*, and encouraged her to try to finish one *Goosebumps* book and read another over the

weekend. Tanesha was extremely doubtful that she could do it, but surprised herself by finishing both volumes. Shin then challenged her to read a *Goosebumps* book in a single day. Despite her reluctance, Tanesha accepted the challenge and succeeded, went on to read one *Goosebumps* book per day for the next few weeks, and eventually moved on to *Fear Street*, and Judy Blume, reading a total of 40 books over the summer.

The conditions were right for direct encouragement to work with Tanesha. As was the case with Ben Carson, there was access to plenty of books, the reading material was compelling, and Tanesha was capable of doing the reading: She only lacked confidence.

□ *Ben Carson and Tanesha received just the right amount of direct encouragement.*

Another form of direct encouragement is informing students about the theory and research underlying free voluntary reading. This is especially important with older students, who, based on previous classes, have assumed the correctness of skill-building and direct teaching of language. Lee (1998) is a report of one successful attempt to share theory and research with students of English as a foreign language in Taiwan.

Other Factors

Other factors that appear to affect how much children read include:

Discussion and literature circles: As noted in chapter 1, Manning and Manning (1984) reported greater gains with SSR when students discussed their reading with each other in pairs and small groups. Of great interest is their finding that a group that had brief weekly individual teacher-student conferences in which “the book the student was

reading was discussed and plans for further reading were set" did not make as much progress.

The "shared book experience" group in Elley and Mangubhai (1983), also discussed in chapter 1, did better than the "pure SSR" group in the first year of their study, but there were no differences after a second year. Recall that in "shared book experience," books are read to the class, discussed, read together, and acted out.

These studies focus on gains in reading achievement, not amount read, but the results are suggestive.

Peer pressure: Appleby and Conner (1965), in their description of a one-semester free reading elective high school English course, informally observed that what students read was heavily influenced by what their peers were reading. Some students, in fact, felt compelled to read what their friends were reading and ignored their own interests. Wendelin and Zinck (1983) asked fifth graders why they selected the books they did. Sixty-nine percent responded that they relied more on friends' recommendations than on teachers' recommendations. Worthy (1998), in a study of two sixth graders, concludes that peer recommendations "may be the most important motivator for voluntary reading."

Book display: Morrow (1982) reported that good kindergarten and nursery school teachers know what book store owners know: When library corners have "attracting features," posters, bulletin boards, and displays related to children's literature, children show more interest in books.

Paperbacks: Lowrey and Grafft (1965) compared two groups of fourth graders, one reading hardcover books and the other reading paperback

□ *Young people's reading choices are influenced by their peers.*

versions of the same books (the books were “known to be popular with students and teachers”). The paperback group showed a dramatic improvement in attitude toward books and reading, while the hardcover group showed no significant change. Other studies showing that children prefer paperbacks include Ross (1978), Wendelin and Zinck (1983), and Campbell, Griswald, and Smith (1988). Also, the successful Hooked on Books experiment (Fader 1976) emphasized paperbacks.

□ *Children prefer paperback books to hardcover books.*

Jim Trelease has some interesting suggestions on how parents can encourage reading. In an interview (Carter 1988), Trelease recommended “the three B’s”:

Book ownership: “Again and again, I meet people who tell me that name of a special book they owned and didn’t have to share.”

Book rack: Trelease suggests keeping reading materials in book racks in the bathroom

Bed lamp: “Even at age 3, you can say to the child: You are old enough to read in bed like Mom and Dad.”

□ *Trelease’s three Bs:*

- *book ownership*
- *book racks*
- *bed lamps*

In addition, teachers have used booktalks (see, e.g., Duggins 1976) and authors’ visits (e.g., Reed 1985) to encourage reading.

Light Reading: Comic Books

On a November day in 1957 I found myself standing in front of Miss Grosier’s first grade class in Hillcrest Elementary School, trying to think of a really good word. She had us playing this game in which each kid had to offer up a word to the class, and for every classmate would couldn’t spell your word, you got a point—provided of course that you could spell

the word. Whoever got the most points received the coveted gold star.

"Bouillabaisse," I said, finally.

"You don't even know what that is," Miss Grosier scolded.

"It's fish soup."

"You can't spell that."

"Can too."

"Come here. Write it," She demanded.

I wrote it. She looked it up, and admitted that it was, indeed, correct.

Easiest gold star I ever won. And right here, right now, I'd like to thank, albeit somewhat belatedly, whoever wrote the Donald Duck comic book in which I found the word bouillabaisse. Also, I'd like to thank my mother who read me that comic book and so many others when I was four and five. . . . I learned to read from those sessions long before I started school. While most of my classmates were struggling with *See Spot Run*, I was reading *Superman*. I knew what indestructible meant, could spell it, and would have cold-bloodedly used it to win another gold star if I hadn't been banned from competition after bouillabaisse. (Shooter 1986, p. A85)

The author of this wonderful story is Jim Shooter, former editor-in-chief of the Marvel Comic Book Company. It appeared in the 1986 edition of the *Overstreet Comic Book Price Guide*.

Perhaps the most powerful way of encouraging children to read is to expose them to light reading, a kind of reading that schools pretend does not exist, and a kind of reading that many children, for economic or ideological reasons, are deprived of. I suspect that light reading is the way nearly all of us learned to read.

□ *The power of comic book reading: the Jim Shooter story.*

□ *Light reading is the way nearly all of us learned to read.*

In this section, I focus on comic books. Comics have been very popular, and there has been some interesting research on comic book reading.

Before showing how comics can encourage reading, I present a brief history of comic books in the United States, as well as research that focuses on questions that have been of concern to the public: Are comic books “challenging” enough? Does comic book reading cause any harm? Finally, I bring the discussion around to the original concern: Can comic book reading lead to additional free voluntary reading?

A Brief History

Comics enjoyed a “Golden Age” from about 1937 to 1955, a time that saw the introduction of such characters as Superman (1938), Batman (1939), Wonder Woman (1941), and Archie (1941). During this time, 90 percent of all elementary school children and 50–80 percent of junior high school students were comic book readers (Slover 1959; Witty and Sizemore 1954; Blakely 1958. Lyness (1952) reported more modest readership of comics, but the number of children reading comics is still substantial in his study, with 69 percent of fifth-grade boys reporting reading at least four comics a week and 46 percent reading 10 or more.

□ *The golden age of comic books.*

Public concern about the impact of comic books on behavior, stimulated in part by Wertham’s *Seduction of the Innocent* (1954), resulted in the establishment of the Comics Code, guidelines that one comic book historian referred to as “the most severe form of censorship applied to any mass medium in the United States” (Inge 1985). The result was a decline: “Writers and artists, in an attempt to ‘clean up their act,’ began to grind out

boring and repetitive stories about spooks and funny animals” (Brocka 1979).

The fears about comic books appeared, however, to be unfounded. Research has failed to find a strong relationship between comic book reading and behavior. Hoult (1949) reported that delinquents read more comics and more comics labeled “harmful” and “questionable” than did a comparable group of nondelinquents, but nearly all of Hoult’s subjects reported reading comic books. Witty (1941) compared the 10 percent of pupils in grades four through six who read the most comics with the 10 percent who read the least, and found that the two groups “received almost the same average marks and were considered by their teachers to be about equally well-adjusted and effective in social relationships” (p. 108). Lewin (1953, cited in Witty and Sizemore 1955) reported similar results.

The recovery, the “Silver Age” of comic books, began in 1961, with the publication of Marvel Comics’s *Fantastic Four*, followed in 1962 by what may have been the most important event in comic book history in the United States: the first appearance of Spider-Man. Under Stan Lee’s leadership, Marvel developed the first superheroes with problems. Spider-Man, for example, has problems that the Superman and Batman of the 1940s and 1950s never imaged—financial problems, romance problems, lack of direction, and a lack of self-esteem.

There is clear evidence that the Silver Age is still going strong, but there have been ups and downs. Annual sales of comic books in 1983 were \$200 million (*Los Angeles Herald Examiner*, October 4, 1987). This skyrocketed to \$850 million in 1993 but fell to \$375 million in 1998 and to \$250 million in 2000 (Businessweek.com, August 29, 2002).

□ Comic book reading is not responsible for antisocial behavior.

Some experts think the recent decline in comics is due to the development of animated computer and video games (Hartl 2003), and there are signs of recovery: In 2001, sales increased slightly to \$260 million.

Movies based on comic-book characters are expected to boost interest in comics, and graphic novels or book-format comics, "meatier and fuller-length comic books" (Gorman 2002), according to one librarian, "have proven to be a hit with kids and are flying off library shelves" (Gorman 2002, p. 42), especially among teenagers. Gorman is not alone in her observations on graphic novels: The American Library Association held a preconference session on graphic novels in 2002, and BookExpo America offered a full-day graphic novel session in 2003 and had a "graphic novel pavilion" as part of the exhibitions. The *School Library Journal* now has regular columns on comics and graphic novels (see, e.g., Weiner 2003).

Just as the Marvel comics of the 1960s were a giant step beyond the comics of the 1940s, graphic novels are a giant step beyond the comic book, with subtle, complex, and often fascinating plots. Here are two graphic-novel "classics" for beginners in this genre: *The Dark Knight* (Miller 1986) features an aging Batman who comes out of retirement to fight crime, no longer in partnership with the police commissioner but as a vigilante. This Batman is tired and sore after adventures and has serious philosophical disagreements with Superman. The *Watchmen* (Moore 1986) is based on the quote from Cicero, "who watches the watchmen?" The watchmen, of course, are the superheroes. *Time Magazine* called it "the best of the breed" of graphic novels, and "a superlative feat of imagination" (Cocks 1988).

□ *Graphic novels are popular today.*

A particularly popular type of graphic novel is the Manga, Japanese graphic novels in English translation. *Publishers Weekly* described Manga as “one of the hottest categories in bookstores” (MacDonald 2003), which “is gradually evolving from a hard-core cult obsession to the kind of mainstream phenomenon that teens and young adults adopt as their own.”

The number of comic book shops in the United States increased from about 100 in the mid-1970s to about 4,000 in 1987. The number has declined since the late 1980s but is still impressive. Duin (2002) reported that there were 3,600 comic book stores in the United States, and The Master List (<http://www.the-master-list.com>) provides information about 2,500 comic book stores in the United States and Canada.

Williams and Boyes (1986) studied children in three English-speaking Canadian communities from 1973 to 1975 and reported that 80.4 percent of the children reported that they read or had read comic books. In 1991, McKenna, Kear, and Ellsworth, using a stratified sample of children from 95 school districts in 38 states, reported that the percentage of elementary school children reading comic books in the United States was substantial: For boys, the range was from 69 percent (grade one) to 75 percent (grade 6), while for girls the range was from 50 percent (grade 6) to 60 percent (grade 1). This is less comic book readership than during the Golden Age of comics, but it is a considerable amount.

Confirming the continuing popularity of comic books, Worthy, Moorman, and Turner (1999) asked sixth graders in the Austin, Texas, area what they liked to read. The top preferences for all children, regardless of reading ability and gender, were scary books (R.L. Stine, Stephen King) and comic books.

Comic Books and Language Development

Comic books opened up my imagination and gave me a large vocabulary . . . What other six-year-old would know what a serum was? Or invulnerability? (Sharon Cho, in Rosenthal 1995, p. 51)

Wertham, in *Seduction of the Innocent* (1954), asserted that comic book reading interfered with learning to read and with language development, claiming that "severe reading difficulties and maximum comic book reading go hand in hand, that far from being a help to reading, comic books are a causal and reinforcing factor in children's reading disorders" (p. 130).

Wertham's claims have not been supported. Research done on comic book texts and on the impact of comic book reading on language development and school performance suggests that comic books are not harmful. Moreover, there is considerable evidence that comic books can and do lead to more "serious" reading.

□ *Claims that reading comic books retards reading development are unfounded.*

Comic Texts

In 1941, R. L. Thorndike recommended that comics should be considered: "In view of the need of the upper elementary school and junior high school pupil for a large volume of reading and vocabulary building experience, this source should not be neglected" (p. 110).

Current comics average about 2,000 words per issue (not counting advertisements). This is significant: One comic a day would mean well over a half million words a year, half of the average yearly reading volume of middle-class children (Anderson, Wilson, and Fielding 1988).

□ *One comic a day = 500,000 words a year.*

Several studies of comic book reading difficulty have been done. Thorndike (1941) used the Lorge formula and reported that the popular *Superman* and *Batman* comics were written at about the fifth- or sixth-grade level. Wright (1979) used the Fry formula and evaluated a wider range of comics. Wright's findings for superhero comics (e.g., *Superman*, *The Incredible Hulk*) are consistent with Thorndike's, while other comics are far easier, as shown in table 2.6.³

Table 2.6
Reading Level of Comic Books (1978)

Title	Readability Grade Level			
	Sample 1	Sample 2	Sample 3	Mean
The Amazing Spider-Man #187	7.4	3.0	2.8	4.4
Archie #274	2.0	1.7	1.7	1.8
Batman #299	7.9	4.0	8.5	6.4
Bugs Bunny #201	2.9	1.9	1.7	2.1
Casper the Friendly Ghost #200	1.9	1.7	1.7	1.8
Chip and Dale #55	2.9	1.9	1.8	2.2
Dennis the Menace #158	2.8	3.0	4.7	3.5
The Incredible Hulk #74	5.5	9.2	1.9	5.5
Mighty Mouse #53	1.9	3.3	1.9	2.4
Sad Sack #265	2.4	1.9	1.9	2.1
Spidey Super Stories	2.7	1.8	1.9	2.1
Star Hunters #7	6.0	7.3	3.3	5.5
Star Wars #16	7.5	7.4	3.3	6.1
Superman #329	7.3	8.3	3.5	6.4
Tarzan #18	7.6	4.4	4.5	5.5
Tom and Jerry #311	1.9	2.0	1.8	1.9
Wonder Woman #245	5.5	5.5	3.5	4.8
Woody Woodpecker #172	2.4	2.4	3.0	3.1
Yogi Bear #7	3.2	3.5	2.4	3.0

Source: G. Wright, "The Comic Book: A Forgotten Medium in the Classroom," *Reading Teacher* 33 (1979). Reprinted with permission of Gary Wright and the International Reading Association.

If readability scores have any validity, Thorndike's and Wright's analyses show that comics can be at a respectable level of difficulty. In comparison, best sellers in 1974 ranged in readability from grade 6 to grade 10, with a mean readability score of 7.4 (Schulze 1976, cited in Monteith 1980).

To see how sophisticated comic dialogue can get, consider these examples. The first is from Marvel's *Fantastic Four*. In this scene Reed Richards, a master scientist (a.k.a. Mr. Fantastic), is explaining to his wife, Sue Richards (a.k.a. the Invisible Woman), how the villain Psycho-Man operates:

□ *Comic book texts can be complex.*

The Psycho-Man has a vast technology at his command, darling, but he had traditionally used it to only one end: to manipulate emotions. Everything he does is designed to create conflicting, confusing emotional stimuli for his intended victims. (*The Fantastic Four*, no. 283, 1985, p. 21)

The reading level of this passage, according to the Flesch-Kincaid formula, is 12.0, or 12th grade.

In Marvel's *Secret Wars*, no. 1, several superheroes speculate about how they were involuntarily transported to another planet:

Captain Marvel: H-how'd we get here? I mean one minute we're checking out this giant watchmacallit in Central Park, then "poof," the final frontier.

Mr. Fantastic (Reed Richards): This much I can tell you, Captain Marvel—this device apparently caused sub-atomic particle dissociation, reducing us to proto-matter, which it stored until it teleported us here, to pre-set coordinates in space, where it reassembled us inside a self-generated life support environment.

The Incredible Hulk: That's obvious, Richards!

(*Secret Wars*, no. 1., p. 2)

Mr. Fantastic's explanation is written at the 12th-grade level, according to the Flesch-Kincaid formula. It should be pointed out that readability formulas such as the Fry formula are based on random samples of the text. The above excerpts were not chosen at random: I selected them because they are hard. They are thus not typical of comic book language, but they show what comic books readers occasionally encounter.

Deborah Glasser has pointed out to me that if teachers are looking for high-interest/low-vocabulary reading for older students, they can't do better than *Archie*. *Archie* is about high school students, but according to Wright's data, it is written at the second-grade level. In addition, after 60 years, Archie and his friends are still in high school, certainly the longest incarceration in the history of education. This is good news for students and teachers, because it means that there are plenty of used *Archie* comics around.

The value of *Archie* comics was confirmed by Norton (2003), who studied the comic book reading habits of 30 preteen readers, all dedicated to *Archie*. The children universally praised the comics ("ARCHIE RULES"), described the characters as "interesting, engaging and humorous" (p. 142), and shared and discussed *Archie* comics with each other "on a regular basis," (p. 143), forming a true literacy community. As expected, this view was not shared by teachers and other adults. Norton asked the interesting question of when and why adults, who "loved to read Archie comics as children, dismiss them 'garbage' once they reached adulthood?" (p. 146).

□ *Archie is excellent
high-interest/
low-vocabulary reading.*

Experiments with Comic Book Reading

Two sustained silent reading studies using comic books have been published. In a 15-week study using fifth graders, Sperzl (1948) found no difference between groups reading comics and reading other material on tests of reading comprehension and vocabulary. Both resulted in acceptable gains. Perhaps the most interesting finding in Sperzl's study is how much the children enjoyed reading comic books. Sperzl reported that "the period was eagerly looked forward to . . . as far as the rest of the world was concerned, it simply did not exist for these boys and girls" (p. 111). (See also Norton 2003 for similar reactions to comic books among preteen readers.)

Arlin and Roth (1978) compared third graders reading "educational" (e.g., classic) comics with another group reading "high-interest" books. Both groups gained in reading comprehension. Although "poor readers" gained more from book reading, poor readers reading comic books still matched expected growth, gaining .26 years in 10 weeks.

We can interpret both studies as showing that comic book reading is at least as beneficial as other reading. Both studies, however, were short term (recall the review of in-school free reading studies done in chapter 1; in-school free reading is clearly more effective when durations are longer), and the comic book readers in Arlin and Roth's study read classic comics.⁴

A number of studies confirm that long-term comic book readers, those who continue to read comics after the early grades, are at least equal to non-comic book readers in reading, language development, and overall school achievement (Witty

1941; Heisler 1947; Blakely 1958; Swain 1948; Greaney 1980; Anderson, Wilson, and Fielding 1988). Even children who read almost nothing but comic books do not score significantly below average in reading comprehension (Greaney 1980).

An exclusive diet of comic books will probably develop adequate but not advanced levels of competence in language and literacy development. There is good evidence, however, that such reading habits are unusual. In general, long-term comic book readers do as much book reading as non-comic book readers (Witty 1941; Heisler 1947; Bailyn 1959; Swain 1948), and the results of several studies suggest they do more (Blakely 1958; Ujiie and Krashen, 1996a, 1996b).

Table 2.7 presents the results from one of these studies. Ujiie and Krashen (1996a) asked seventh-grade boys about their comic book reading, overall reading, book reading, and attitude toward reading. Those who reported more comic book reading also reported for-pleasure reading in general. The results were similar for middle class children and for "chapter 1" children, those who came from lower-income families.

Table 2.7
How Often Do You Read for Pleasure?

Chapter 1	Daily	Weekly	Monthly/never
heavy comic reader	54% (19)	34% (12)	11% (4)
occasional reader	40% (32)	28% (23)	32% (26)
non-comic reader	16% (4)	20% (5)	64% (16)
Middle Class			
heavy comic reader	65% (17)	27% (7)	8% (2)
occasional reader	35% (31)	35% (31)	30% (27)
non-comic reader	33% (8)	17% (4)	50% (12)

Source: Ujiie and Krashen (1996a)

Similar results were reported for book reading and for attitudes toward reading, with more comic book reading associated with greater enjoyment of reading. What is especially interesting is that although the middle class boys tend to read more in general, undoubtedly related to the fact that they have access to more books (Neuman and Celano 1999), heavy chapter 1 (low income) comic book readers reported more reading than the occasional and non-comic book reading middle class boys.

There is, in addition, evidence that light reading can serve as a conduit to heavier reading. It can help readers not only develop the linguistic competence for harder reading but also develop an interest in books.

□ *Some studies show comic book readers read as much as non-comic book readers. Some studies show they read more.*

□ *Comics can serve as a conduit to heavier reading.*

Comics as a Conduit

Research by Hayes and Ahrens (1988) suggests that comic books can play an important role in helping readers progress to the level where they can read and understand demanding texts. According to their findings, it is highly unlikely that much educated vocabulary comes from conversation or television. Hayes and Ahrens found that the frequency of less-common words in ordinary conversation, whether adult-to-child or adult-to-adult, was much lower than in even the "lightest" reading. About 95 percent of the words used in conversation and television are among the most frequent 5,000 words. Printed texts include far more uncommon words, leading Hayes and Ahrens to the conclusion that the development of lexical knowledge beyond basic words "requires literacy and extensive reading across a broad range of subjects" (p. 409). Table 2.8 presents some of their data, including two of the three measures they used for word frequency.

Note that comic books occupy a position between conversation and abstracts of scientific papers, falling somewhat closer to conversation. This confirms that they can serve as a conduit to more challenging reading.

Table 2.8
Common and Uncommon Words in Speech and Writing

	Frequent Words	Rare Words
Adults talking to children	95.6	9.9
Adults talking to adults (college grads)	93.9	17.3
Prime-time TV: adult	94.0	22.7
Children's books	92.3	30.9
Comic books	88.6	53.5
Books	88.4	52.7
Popular magazines	85.0	65.7
Newspapers	84.3	68.3
Abstracts of scientific papers	70.3	128.2

frequent words = percentage of text from most frequent 5,000 words

rare words = number of rare words (not in most common 10,000) per 1,000 tokens.

Source: Hayes and Ahrens (1988)

Several case histories support the view that light reading is the way many, if not most, children learn to read and develop a taste for reading.

Haugaard (1973) writes of her experiences with comic books:

As the mother of three boys, who, one after another, were notoriously unmotivated to read and had to be urged, coaxed, cajoled, threatened and drilled in order even to stay in super slow group in reading, I wish to thank comic books for being a conduit, if not a contribution, to culture.

The first thing which my oldest boy read because he wanted to was a comic book. (p. 84)

Despite her initial reluctance, Haugaard bought her son comics, reasoning that

as long as these things appealed to him where all other printed matter had failed, I let him read all he wanted. The words he learned to read here could be used in other reading material too and perhaps his skill would lure him beyond this level. (p. 84)

The results were startling:

He devoured what seemed to be tons of the things . . . The motivation these comics provided was absolutely phenomenal and a little bit frightening. My son would snatch up a new one and, with feverish and ravenous eyes, start gobbling it wherever he was—in the car on the way home from the market, in the middle of the yard, walking down the street, at the dinner table. All his senses seemed to shut down and he became a simple visual pipeline. (p. 85)

□ *Comic books lead to other reading.*

Comics did indeed lead to other reading. After a year or two, Haugaard's eldest son gave his collection away to his younger brother (who now "pores over the comic books lovingly"), and Haugaard noted that "he is far more interested now in reading Jules Verne and Ray Bradbury, books on electronics and science encyclopedias" (p. 85).

Haugaard's experience is consistent with the rest of the literature. Her sons' absorption in comics is identical to the reaction Sperzl's students had (see "Experiments with Comic Book Reading" above), and the eldest son's interest in other kinds of reading agrees with the studies mentioned earlier showing that comic book reading does not replace or eliminate book reading. (It should be

pointed out that the results of these studies suggest that Haugaard's eldest son need not have given up comics in order to enjoy other books. He might not have stopped if he had access to today's graphic novels.)

Mark Mathabane, in his autobiographical account of his youth in South Africa (Mathabane 1986), mentions comic books as making an important contribution to his acquisition of English and his desire to read. Mathabane had had limited exposure to English until his grandmother began to work for a friendly English-speaking family outside the impoverished ghetto where Mathabane and his family lived:

Not long after she started working for the Smiths, she began bringing home stacks of comic books: *Batman and Robin*, *Richie Rich*, *Dennis the Menace*, *The Justice League of America*, *Tarzan of the Apes*, *Sherlock Holmes*, *Mysteries*, *Superman*, *The Incredible Hulk*, *Thor—God of Thunder*, *The Fantastic Four* and *Spider-Man*. (p. 170)

Mathabane's reaction was similar to that of Haugaard's son:

Having never owned a comic book in my life, I tirelessly read them over and over again, the parts I could understand. Such voracious reading was like an anesthesia, numbing me to the harsh life around me. Soon comic books became the joy of my life, and everywhere I went I took one with me: to the river, to a soccer game, to the lavatory, to sleep, to the store and to school, reading it furtively when the teacher was busy at the blackboard. (p. 170)

Mathabane credits comics with helping to bring his English to a level where he could begin to read and appreciate his English books:

□ *Autobiographical examples attest to the value of comic book reading.*

Midway into my eleventh year, Granny started bringing home strange-looking books and toys. The books, which she said were Mrs. Smith's son's schoolbooks, bore no resemblance whatsoever to the ones we used at my school. Their names were as strange to me as their contents: *Pinnocchio*, *Aesop's Fables* and fairy tales of the brothers Grimm. At this point, because of reading comics, my English had improved to a level where I could read simple sentences. I found the books enthralling. (p. 170)

Comics also helped South Africa's Bishop Desmond Tutu:

My father was the headmaster of a Methodist primary school. Like most fathers in those days, he was very patriarchal, very concerned that we did well in school. But one of the things I am very grateful to him for is that, contrary to conventional educational principles, he allowed me to read comics. I think that is how I developed my love for English and for reading. (Campbell and Hayes, cited in Trelease 2001, p. 134)

Trelease (2001) points out that anybody concerned about a possible connection between comic book reading and juvenile delinquency should consider Bishop Tutu's experience.

M. Thomas Inge, a professor of the humanities, remarks that comics were clearly a conduit for him and others: "For my generation, it was the comic book that led directly to the printed page" (Inge 1985, p. 5). Professor Inge has clearly not given up reading comics. His essays on comic books (Inge 1985) are informative and scholarly.

□ "For my generation, it was the comic book that led directly to the printed page."

This writer's experience is similar: I was in the low reading group in the second grade. My father encouraged comic book reading, and improvement soon followed. And Jim Trelease tells us that as a child, he had the largest comic book collection

in his neighborhood (Trelease 2001, p. 134). His conclusion, based on the research and his personal experience is that “if you have a child who is struggling with reading, connect him or her with comics. If an interest appears, feed it with more comics” (p. 134).

Dorrell and Carroll (1981) show how comic books can be used to stimulate additional reading. They placed comic books in a junior high school library but did not allow them to circulate; students had to come to the library to read the comics. Dorrell and Carroll then compared the circulation of non-comic book material and total library use during the 74 days the comics were in the library, and the 57 days before they were available. The presence of comics resulted in a dramatic 82 percent increase in library use (traffic) and a 30 percent increase in circulation of non-comic material (table 2.9).

Table 2.9
Effects of Including Comic Books
in a Junior High School Library

	Pre-comic Period	Comic Period
Number of students who used the library (daily average)	272.61	496.38
Circulation (daily average)	77.49	100.99

Pre-comic period = 54 days; comic period = 74 days

Number of students who used the library does not include students brought to the library by teachers for class assignments.

Source: Adapted from L. Dorrell and E. Carroll, “Spider-Man at the Library,” *School Library Journal* 27 (1981).

Dorrell and Carroll also reported that the presence of comics in the library did not result in any negative comments from parents, and that teachers, school administrators, and library staff

members supported and encouraged the idea of comic books in the library.

Juan Necochea, now a professional academic, related how comics contributed to his literacy development (Cline and Necochea 2003). Necochea began school at age eight in the United States, with no knowledge of English and no previous schooling. Yet, "toward the end of the second grade, at the age of 9, . . . there was a sudden significant surge in my academic performance—I seemed to go from a nonreader to proficient reader of English practically overnight . . . my teachers . . . must have assumed that I must have been a 'late bloomer' " (p. 124).

Necochea attributes his success to his previously developed literacy in Spanish, which, he informs us, came from two sources: A home environment rich in oral language, filled with "folk tales, legends, family histories, tragedies, music and traditions" (p.124), and . . . comics books. Necochea was an avid comic book reader (his favorite was *Kalimán, el Hombre Increíble*). At first he paid his older brother to read the comics to him, but eventually he learned to read them himself: "*Kalimán* and my older brother became my first reading teachers" (p. 125). Necochea reports that by age six he could read in Spanish very well.

This case not only confirms the power of comic books, it also confirms the power of first language literacy as a facilitator of second language literacy, a topic we return to in chapter 3.

The Case for Comics

The case for comics is a good one:

- The texts of comics are linguistically appropriate, and pictures can help make the texts comprehensible.⁵

- Research shows that comics have no negative effect on language development and school achievement.
- Comic book readers do at least as much reading as non-comic book readers, and the most recent research shows that they read more overall, read more books, and have more positive attitudes toward reading.
- There is strong evidence from case studies that comics can serve as a conduit to book reading.

Light Reading: The Teen Romance

Another example of light reading that can encourage additional reading is the teen romance. Parrish (1983) provides this characterization:

Most of teen romance books are written to a formula. The central character is a girl, 15 to 16 years old, and the story is always told from her viewpoint. One or more boys, 17 to 18 years old, are also needed. The setting is usually contemporary and familiar, such as a small town. First love is a favorite plot focus.

The joys of falling in love, the anxiety it engenders, the pain and growth of problems met, and the inevitable happy ending are all standard. However, these romances exclude sexual situations, profanity, or perversions. The conflict is usually about the heroine's feelings—insecurity, uncertainty, unpopularity, inferiority, pleasure/pain, a struggle for independence. Dialogue generally carries the action, while characterization is revealed through the romantic interaction and problems. (p. 611)

Teen romances were read by many, if not most, girls in junior high school and high school in the 1980s. Parrish and Atwood (1985) surveyed 250 junior and senior high school girls in the Phoenix metropolitan area and reported that during the school year, 50 percent of the eighth graders said they had read from one to five teen romances, and 100 percent of the ninth graders had read at least five. Also, "an astonishing 12% of the twelfth graders had read in excess of thirty novels this school year" (p. 24).

□ Teen romances are very popular with teenage girls.

Although there has been little research on teen romances, the results are quite similar to those of comic book research.

Teen romances appear to have linguistically acceptable texts, ranging in reading level from grade four to grade seven. *Sweet Valley Twins* is written at the fourth-grade reading level; *Sweet Dream Romances*, written for girls ages 10 to 15, is at the fifth-grade level; and the *Sweet Valley High* series, for age 12 and older, is written at the sixth-grade level. *Caitlin*, a "love trilogy" written by Francine Pascal, ranges from the grade five to the grade seven reading level. By way of comparison, recall that the mean readability level of best sellers is around the seventh-grade level.

□ Reading levels range from grades four to seven.

Reading teen romances does not seem to prevent other kinds of reading. Parrish and Atwood (1985) found that "students who read the romance novels read many other kinds of literature also" (p. 25).

Teen romances appear to bring students into the library. According to Parrish and Atwood, eighth and ninth graders in the 1980s got their romance novels equally from friends, bookstores, and school libraries. Tenth graders favored drug and grocery stories and the school library. Twelfth graders showed the greatest diversity: Over half

got their books from friends and the public library, 37 percent from bookstores and the school library, with little use of home and drug/grocery stores. Thus, despite the existence of other places to get teen romances, the school library still plays a significant role as a source of reading for this genre.

□ *There is no research on the behavioral effects of reading teen romances.*

There is evidence that reading teen romances promotes reading. The following, quoted by Parrish (1983), sounds very much like Haugaard's report of how comic books stimulate reading. The writer is a 14-year-old girl: "I am the kind of person who hates to read, but when my mother brought home a Silhouette book for me to read, I just couldn't put it down" (p. 615)

Just as there has been concern about the content of comic books, there is concern about the content of teen romances. There has been no research on the behavioral effects of teen romances, but concerned teachers and parents may be interested in reading Sutton's thoughtful review. Sutton (1985) gives the teen romance cautious approval, suggesting that while we regard "the lesser lights of paperback fiction as the competition" (p. 29), they have some merit:

Characterization is minimal, the writing is less than graceful ("They were all being so polite and civilized the twins thought they would throw up.") and even romance is overshadowed by the soap opera suspense. But it does work: the bare bones plots, hokey and hoary, move. The links between successive volumes are clever, and you really want to know . . . what Jessica is going to pull next (p. 27).

□ *Teen romances worked for some adult second language acquirers.*

A recent series of studies suggests that teen romances may have another important use: They may be ideal sources of comprehensible and interesting reading material for some acquirers of English as a second language.

Kyung-Sook Cho (Cho and Krashen 1994, 1995a, 1995b) worked with a group of women in their thirties who, despite years of formal (grammar-based) study of English in Korea and considerable residence in the United States, had made little progress in English. Cho first suggested that her subjects read books from the *Sweet Valley High* series, written for girls ages 12 and older. These books proved to be too difficult; they could only be read with great effort, and with extensive recourse to the dictionary. Cho then asked her subjects to try *Sweet Valley Twins*, novels based on the same characters but at a younger age, written for readers ages 8 to 12. Once again, the texts were too difficult. Cho then recommended *Sweet Valley Kids*, novels dealing with the same characters at an even younger age, written for readers ages five to eight. Her subjects, all adults, became enthusiastic *Sweet Valley Kids* readers.

Cho reported significant vocabulary growth in her readers (Cho and Krashen 1994), and also gathered informal evidence of their progress, including reports from their friends (Cho and Krashen 1995a). Perhaps the most impressive result is the report of one of her subjects one year after she starting reading *Sweet Valley* books. After one year, this subject, who had never read for pleasure in English prior to this study, had read all 34 *Sweet Valley Kids* books, had read many books from the *Sweet Valley Twins* and *Sweet Valley High* series, and had started to read Danielle Steele, Sydney Sheldon, and other authors of romances in English (Cho and Krashen 1995a).

Light Reading: The Power of Magazines

Rucker (1982) provides a strong demonstration of the power of magazines to promote and improve reading ability. Rucker gave junior high

□ *Magazine reading appears to promote more reading.*

school students questionnaires probing their interests. A few months later, he provided a random sample of the students with two free magazine subscriptions relating to their interests. One group of students received the magazines for one year, another for a year and a half. Neither the students nor their parents were informed that an experiment was being conducted, and even teachers did not know about the subscriptions.

Rucker reported that students who received the magazines had superior gains on standardized tests of reading (but not on a test of "language," i.e., mechanics and spelling). A reasonable interpretation of these results is that the magazines themselves served as valuable input and that they stimulated even more reading. As Rucker points out, magazines are the most "reader interest specific" of all mass media and "may thus consequently be the most valuable as stimuli to reading" (p. 33).

Is Light Reading Enough?

□ *A diet of light reading only isn't enough.*

It is sensible to suppose that what is read matters. Despite the benefits of light reading, a diet of only light reading will probably not lead to advanced levels of development. Only a few studies bear on this issue, and they are correlational, which means we cannot be sure whether reading preferences are a cause or result (or both) of reading ability. The studies, however, suggest that reading comprehension and vocabulary development are related to what is read.

Rice (1986) reported that adults with better vocabularies "tended to read more sophisticated materials," such as technical journals, history, literary magazines, and science magazines. Hafner,

Palmer, and Tullos (1986) found that better readers (top one-half on a reading comprehension test) in the ninth grade tended to prefer "complex fiction" (historical fiction, science fiction, mystery, adventure, personal development, personal insight), while "poor readers" (bottom one-half) tended to prefer "how-to-do-it" books, science books, hobby books, and books on art, music, and history. Southgate, Arnold, and Johnson (1981) found that seven- to nine-year-olds who were better readers preferred adventure books, while "funny books" were more popular with less advanced readers.

Thorndike (1973), in his large-scale study of reading comprehension in 15 countries, reported that for 14-year-olds the types of reading that correlated best with reading comprehension ability were, in order, 1) humor; 2) history and biography; 3) science fiction, myths, and legends; and 3) adventure and current events. Thorndike also reported that by the end of secondary school the pattern had changed somewhat: While reading of sports, love stories, and school stories was negatively correlated with reading comprehension, history and biography, technical science, and philosophy and religion showed the strongest positive correlation.

There is some agreement among the studies; science fiction and adventure books seem to be consistently preferred by good readers. There are also some contradictions: Good readers, according to Thorndike, prefer history and religious books, but in the Hafner, Palmer, and Tullos study, poor readers preferred these topics. (An obvious problem in relating reading growth to genre is that there might be quite a bit of variation in complexity within one kind of reading. Clearly, research in this area has just begun.)

As noted earlier, Greaney (1980) identified a group of “predominately comic book readers,” fifth-grade children who did far more comic book reading than book reading. These children were not significantly below the group average in reading comprehension but were not as proficient as children classified as “predominately book readers.”

The results of these studies do not imply that light reading is to be avoided. As argued earlier, light reading can serve as a conduit to heavier reading: It provides both the motivation for more reading and the linguistic competence that makes harder reading possible. Reassuring and supporting evidence comes from studies that show that many children who do extensive free reading eventually choose what experts have decided are “good books” (Schoonover 1938), and studies show that readers gradually expand their reading interests as they read more (LaBrant 1958). Also, books children select on their own are often harder than their official “reading level” (Southgate, Arnold, and Johnson 1981).

□ *Light reading isn't enough, but it can lead to heavier reading*

Do Rewards Work?

The studies presented in this chapter suggest that the intrinsic reward of reading is so great that it will stimulate additional reading. They suggest that we do not need extrinsic rewards for reading, that is, gold stars, cash awards, reading club membership, or other incentives. Smith (1988) argues, in fact, that awards can backfire:

Show a child that the payoff for reading or writing something is a treat, a token, a happy face or a high mark, and that is what the child will learn is the price literacy should extract. Every child knows that anything accomplished by coercion, no matter how benign, cannot be worth doing it its own right. (p. 124)

What Does the Research Say?

Research offers no support for the use of rewards and suggests, in agreement with Smith, that rewards may be harmful.

McLoyd (1979) asked second and third graders to read from “high-interest” books under three conditions: “high reward,” “low reward,” and “no reward.” In the high reward condition, children were promised a reward that they rated the most highly out of six presented. In the low reward condition, children were promised a reward that they rated the least highly out of six presented.

It was explained to the rewarded children that the reward would be granted if they read until they reached a marker in the book indicating 250 words and that the experimenter was interested in their opinion of the book. Rewards were not mentioned to the children in the no reward condition; rather, they were simply asked to read up to the indicated place in the text and to then give their opinion of the book. The reading sessions lasted 10 minutes.

The difference between the two rewarded groups was not statistically significant, but both rewarded groups differed from the non-rewarded group. The rewarded groups clearly read only what they had to in order to get the reward, barely going beyond the 250-word marker. The non-rewarded readers went well beyond this point; they read more than twice as much as the rewarded groups.

Children appear to be perfectly willing to read without rewards (witness the success of Harry Potter) and do not even think of rewards when asked about how to encourage reading, in contrast to teachers.

□ *Rewarding reading sends the message that reading is unpleasant or not worth doing without a reward.*

Worthy (2000) asked 419 middle school children and 35 teachers for their suggestions for motivating students to read. The schools were from a range of ethnic and socioeconomic groups.

The students were asked: "What could your language arts teacher do to make students more motivated to read?" Students were asked to write up to three suggestions, and made a total of 509 suggestions. Teachers were asked, "What do you think are the best ways of motivating students to read?" and provided "multiple suggestions." Both groups recommended providing more interesting books (students = 45 percent of suggestions, teachers = 35 percent), and both recommended more student choice and more read-alouds. Nine student suggestions were for more time to read, but this was not mentioned by teachers.

Of interest to us here is incentives: "Teachers and students made strikingly different suggestions regarding incentives. Although 29% of teacher suggestions were focused on rewarding or coercing students to read (i.e. grades, "nagging") only 9% of students' suggestions fell into this category, and often their suggestions were obviously facetious (e.g. 'Give us \$10 for every page we read') (p. 448).

Worthy noted that, "Although most teachers spoke of the importance of developing intrinsic motivation to read, more than half said that they used external motivators as inducements to reading" (p. 448).

Similarly, Ivey and Broaddus (2001) asked 1,765 sixth graders what stimulated them to read; only 7 percent mentioned external rewards.

Bintz (1993) also found that many teachers believed in incentives. He asked teachers what would promote student interest in reading. Teachers felt

□ *When asked how to encourage reading, students rarely recommend rewards.*

that many students were not interested in reading and that they needed to be forced to read and needed to be “held accountable” for their reading. Many of the teachers, Bintz concluded, were unaware that many of these “reluctant” readers were avid readers of self-selected reading outside of school. The students, according to Bintz, were not reluctant to read but were only reluctant to read school-assigned material.

Reading Management Programs

A number of studies have attempted to determine the impact of reading management programs, programs in which children are tested on what they read and rewarded for points earned on these tests. McQuillan (1997) reviewed studies of the effectiveness of these programs and concluded that there was no evidence that they improved reading achievement or attitudes toward reading. I have recently reviewed studies of the best known of these programs, Accelerated Reader (Krashen 2003d), and summarize my results here.

Accelerated Reader (AR) has four components:

1. Children are provided with substantial access to books.
2. Children read books that they select themselves (AR recommends one hour per day for free voluntary reading).
3. Children earn points by taking tests on the content of the books, tests that focus on literal meaning.
4. Children get prizes in exchange for the points they earn on the tests. (The AR company points out that this feature is not intrinsic to AR, but is at the discretion of the school.)

□ *Studies of Accelerated Reader do not provide evidence that tests and rewards are helpful.*

We would not be surprised to learn that a program that includes items 1 and 2 will increase reading proficiency. As discussed in this chapter, there is strong evidence that when readers are provided access to comprehensible and interesting reading material, they read more. As documented in chapter 1, those who read more, read better. The question of interest, then, is whether features 3 and 4 make any difference. Do tests and rewards help? The obvious study that would settle this is to see whether programs such as Accelerated Reader are better than simply providing more books and more time to read. Unfortunately, this kind of comparison has not been done.

Studies of Accelerated Reader

Most studies of the efficacy of AR compare AR to doing nothing special; that is, they compare students in AR programs to students in traditional language arts classes in which no effort is made to increase access to books, encourage reading, and provide more time to read. Many of the results are positive, with AR students doing better on standardized tests than comparison students in traditional language arts classes. Even when results are positive, however, they do not tell us which aspects of AR are responsible for the results. I reviewed these studies in detail in Krashen (2003d).

Not all of these studies, however, show that AR was in fact more effective than traditional language arts instruction. Goodman (1999) reported that AR students gained only three months over an academic year on standardized tests of reading comprehension. In one of the reports on the official AR Web site (renlearn.com; Report 36), AR was done in two middle school classrooms for one year. One class showed gains, the other did not: Mathis (1996) compared progress with AR for a group of

sixth graders with gains made by the same students the year before and found no difference. It could be argued that the duration of these studies was not long enough to show the impact of AR: Recall that the impact of sustained silent reading is greater when studies are long term. This does not help explain the results of the next study, however.

Pavonetti, Brimmer, and Cipielewski (2003) administered the Title Recognition Test to seventh graders in three districts. The Title Recognition Test is a checklist that correlates highly with other measures of reading exposure as well as with various measures of reading achievement (see discussion in "The Author Recognition Test" section in chapter 1). For all three districts combined, Pavonetti et al. reported no difference between those children who had had AR and those who had not.

Only three studies have attempted to deal with the issue of what aspect of AR is effective. In all three, however, it appears to be the case that the AR group had more exposure to comprehensible text, and in two studies the comparison group did not do pure "recreational reading." In all three studies, the results are inconsistent and unclear.⁶

Conclusions on AR

Despite the popularity of AR, we must conclude that there is no real evidence supporting it, no real evidence that the additional tests and rewards add anything to the power of simply supplying access to high-quality and interesting reading material and providing time for children to read.

This is not to say that I have proven that AR is ineffective. I have only concluded that data supporting it do not exist. Although McLoyd's results

suggest that rewards actually inhibit reading, we must withhold judgment until additional controlled studies confirm this. What we can conclude, however, is that the enthusiasm for AR is not supported by research. Before purchasing AR and submitting students to tests, a more prudent policy might be to ensure that high-interest reading material is easily available to students, and that students have time to read and a place to read.⁷

Notes

1. These results are summarized below. In all cases, poverty was a significant predictor of achievement. The number of books per student and amount of library staffing were also consistent predictors of achievement. In some studies, these relationships held even when poverty was controlled, but in others they were only present when poverty was not controlled.

Predictors of Test Score Performance

Study	Colo. II	Alaska	Pa.	Oreg.	Tex.	Ind.	Mass.	Iowa
	RC	RC, LA, M	RC	RC	RC	lit, M	LA, M, Sc	RC
poverty	yes	yes	contr.	yes	yes	contr.	yes	yes
books	yes*	no	no	yes*	yes	yes	yes	yes**
staffing	yes*	yes**	yes	yes*	yes	yes	yes	yes**

* = books and staffing combined as one factor

** = differences emerge if poverty not controlled

RC = reading comprehension

contr. = statistically controlled

lit = literacy; M = math; Sc = science; LA = language arts

Sources: Colorado II = Lance, Rodney, and Hamilton-Pennell (2000a); Alaska = Lance, Hamilton-Pennell, Rodney, Petersen, and Sitter (1999); Pennsylvania = Lance, Rodney, and Hamilton-Pennell (2000b); Oregon = Lance, Rodney, and Hamilton-Pennell (2001); Texas = Smith (2001); Indiana = NCES (2000); Massachusetts = Baughman (2000); Iowa = Rodney, Lance, and Hamilton-Pennell (2002).

2. For additional arguments against the over-emphasis on phonemic awareness and phonics, see Krashen (2002, 2003b); Smith (1994b).

3. The Fry formula is based on three random samples of 100 words. These samples can vary quite a bit. Note, for example, the variability in the three samples for *The Incredible Hulk* in table 2.2 (5.5, 9.2, 1.9). Daniel Krashen has suggested to me that the 9.2 sample may have been based on the speech of Bruce Banner, the Hulk's alter ego. Banner is a research scientist, and his speech reflects his profession.

4. Although classic comics are probably more acceptable to parents and teachers, there is evidence that they are not all that popular with children. Wayne (1954) asked 297 seventh-grade students to indicate which comic types they preferred; each student was asked to choose four from a list of 15. Classic comics ranked ninth out of 15. When children are asked which comics they prefer, without a list to choose from, classic comics are never mentioned (for a review of these studies, see Witty and Sizemore 1954). Michael Dirda, in his reading autobiography, shares his enthusiasm for comic books, but tells us, "I never really cottoned to the earnest and didactic 'classic comics'. . . . Who would pick up something called *The Cloister and the Hearth*?" (Dirda 2003, p. 56).

5. There has been some concern that the pictures in comic books will allow children to ignore the text and might actually interfere with learning to read (Wertham 1954). According to language acquisition theory, however, pictures can actually help, because they can provide clues that shed light on the meaning of an unfamiliar word or grammatical structure—they can, in other words, help make texts more comprehensible (Krashen

1985). As one comic book reader, a preteen acquirer of English as a second language, put it: "[T]hey got picture . . . colorful picture to help the readers to understand like how, what is happening, going on" (Guofang, quoted in Norton 2003, p. 143).

But some children do ignore the text and only look at the pictures. Bailyn (1959) found that 27 percent of the fifth- and sixth-grade boys she observed reading comic books "concentrated mainly on the pictures." In their sustained silent reading study, Arlin and Roth (1978) reported that poor readers appeared to do more picture reading of comic books than good readers did.

Why are some children picture readers? At first glance, the picture reading syndrome is puzzling, because pictures do not tell the whole story in most comics, and children do not typically ignore print in their environment. Here are some possibilities:

A difficult text combined with attractive pictures. While readers can tolerate some "noise" in texts, too many unknown elements will discourage attempts at comprehension (Frebody and Anderson 1983). A second grader may not even try to read the relatively complex text and storyline of comics such as *X-Men* or *Negation*, but might find the pictures of great interest.

Mistaken assumptions about reading. Some picture readers may be able to read substantial portions of the text but do not attempt to read. It is possible that their incorrect assumptions about reading discourage these children from trying to read. Because of "reading lessons" in school, they may have the mistaken impression that in order to read they need to know every word in the text. Such an assumption sets up a defeating sequence of events: The reader reads less, and as a result has

less of a chance to develop reading ability and acquire more language.

These are only possibilities. Frank Smith has pointed out to me that if they are true, it does not follow that picture reading can be cured by denying the child comic books. More comic reading, not less, may be the solution. With more exposure, the child's interest in the story might stimulate attempts at reading.

6. One report appears in two versions: Vollands, Topping, and Evans (1996) is an ERIC report, while Vollands, Topping, and Evans (1999) is a slightly abbreviated version appearing in *The Reading and Writing Quarterly*. The report included two independent studies, each lasting six months. In both cases, it is claimed that AR was compared to a group that did recreational reading.

Vollands, Topping, and Evans: Project A: As discussed in detail in Krashen (2003d), this study provides no clear support for AR. The comparison group children had to give "written feedback" on what they read, and the AR group was read to in addition to doing self-selected reading. Jeff McQuillan (personal communication) has pointed out that if we add the read-aloud time to the SSR times, the AR group had considerably more exposure to comprehensible text, 3,225 minutes compared to 2,850 minutes for the comparison group. As noted earlier in this chapter, read-alouds contribute strongly to literacy development

The results are not clear. The AR group made better gains on one measure of reading comprehension as well as on a test of reading accuracy, but both groups declined on another test of reading comprehension, given only to a random

subsample of the AR group. The AR group appeared to decline less, however, than the comparison group did.

This study is not a comparison of AR versus recreational reading alone. It is a comparison of two programs in which students in both programs were held accountable for what they read, and the children in the AR group had more exposure to comprehensible text than comparison children did.

Vollands et al.: Project B: The comparison group in this study was also engaged in an incentive program. Vollands et al. noted that that "children would write their name on a publicly displayed chart when they had finished their book" (1999, p. 54). In addition, comparison children also read from a selection of novels, with all reading done aloud by the students, and they had to answer comprehension questions on the reading. This is not free voluntary reading. If we only consider the genuine free reading done by the comparison group, the AR children had slightly more exposure to comprehensible text (see Krashen 2003d for details).

AR children in this study took tests but did not receive rewards. Points earned, however, were displayed in public.

The results were inconsistent. Comparison students made larger gains on one standardized test of reading comprehension (Edinburgh), but AR students made larger gains on another reading comprehension measure (Neale), with comparisons making no gains at all on the Neale, a mysterious result, because comparisons were considered to be "good readers." This inconsistency may be due to the fact that all 26 comparison students and nearly all AR students took the Edinburgh test, but only a random sample

of 11 AR students and 12 comparison students took the Neale comprehension test.

It is difficult to conclude much of anything from this study: Both groups had similar incentives (recognition), and results were mixed.

Facemire (2000) also used a comparison group that was engaged in recreational reading. AR was used with 15 third graders in a high poverty area of West Virginia. AR students gained five months over the nine-week period, and comparisons gained three months. This study is an important step in the right direction but has a few problems. First, it is likely that the AR students read more than the comparisons did; AR students had "at least" 20 minutes per day of SSR, while comparisons had exactly 20 minutes. While comparisons had "access" to the library, AR students had a regularly scheduled 80 minutes per week.

Second, each group contained one unusual outlier. The AR group included one child who gained 2.3 years in nine weeks, and the comparison group included one child who got much worse in reading, dropping more than one year during the nine-week study. If we remove these outliers, the groups look nearly the same, with the AR group gaining four months and the comparisons three and one-half months.

7. A study of EFL students in Japan (Kitao, Yamamoto, Kitao, and Shimatani 1990) contains some interesting statistics that show that the usual means of encouraging reading don't work very well. They compared reading graded readers as a course requirement with reading graded readers for extra credit. All students had to hand in book reports to receive credit. Two hundred twenty graded readers were made available.

Those who read as a requirement read only what was assigned: 92 out the 93 students did the assigned reading, but 87 of them read only one book. Only 69 out of the 207 who were offered extra credit handed in book reports. Of those who handed in reports, the average was slightly more than two per student (2.2).

Why these sad results? There are several possibilities:

1. The book report requirement made reading much less desirable.

2. The books were simply not interesting: Even though students rated the books as somewhat interesting (mean of 4.44 on a 1 to 6 scale), "interest" was not the reason the readers read. When the readers were asked what motivated them to read, only five listed "interesting books" as their first reason, and only 17 listed this as their second reason.

3. The students had little time to read outside of school. When the nonreaders were asked why they did not read, 70 out of 128 indicated they were too busy as their first reason, and 37 more mentioned this as their second reason.

What we can conclude is that for university students, reading graded readers for grades or extra credit, with required book reports, does not produce spectacular results.

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Insights from the Research

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