

Can We Increase the Power of Reading by Adding Communicative Output Activities? A Comment on Song and Sardegna (2014)

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Song and Sardegna (2014) introduce their study by saying, ‘To the best of our knowledge, no study to date has investigated the incidental acquisition of specific grammatical items through extensive reading with communicative output activities. This study aims to fill this gap in our knowledge base’ (2014: 69). Song and Sardegna claim to have achieved their aim, providing us with evidence that ‘suggests’ that ‘enhanced extensive reading,’ defined as extensive reading supplemented with oral activities, ‘... can contribute to incidental acquisition of English prepositions’ (2014: 67).

Their subjects were intermediate level high school students of EFL in Korea and the study lasted one semester. Their enhanced extensive reading group did indeed make better gains on a test of English prepositions than a traditionally taught group. Neither group received any direct instruction on English prepositions. But this does not provide evidence that output practice ‘enhanced’ the results. *To show this, a third group would be necessary, one that did reading only, without output practice.* Song and Sardegna’s

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results are consistent with the claim that output helped, but are also consistent with the claim that extensive reading alone was responsible for the gains, that ‘enhancement’ was not necessary.

As Song and Sardegna note, studies have demonstrated that reading alone is helpful. In addition to the references Song and Sardegna supply, reviews of studies (see, for example, Krashen, 2004, 2011) show that reading contributes to the development of reading ability, writing ability, vocabulary, spelling and several aspects of grammatical competence. Reading alone is not, as Song and Sardegna claim, ‘slow, unpredictable, and haphazard’ (2014: 68): studies of sustained silent reading show that it is more efficient than traditional instruction, yielding greater gains in the same amount of time (Krashen, 2004, 2011; Mason, 2004) and studies show that adding supplementary writing does not increase the power of reading (Mason, 2004, Smith, 2006). In addition, we must point out that Song and Sardegna used a very small sample (n=12 for each group), did not include reliability data for their test, and, as they noted, the enhanced group had far more exposure to English. This latter problem is not serious, however, as the enhanced group gained far more per hour of instruction; it was, in other words, more ‘efficient.’

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