

# Aesthetic Reading: Efficient Enough

*Stephen Krashen*

## ABSTRACT

*Ponniah and Priya (2008) reported that “aesthetic” (fiction) readers of English as a foreign language outperformed “efferent” (non-fiction) readers on tests of English. This result is consistent with findings showing that aesthetic texts contain substantial amounts of academic language and supports the conclusion that fiction contains enough academic language to bring second language students to high levels of competence in English.*

**Keywords:** Aesthetic reading; Aesthetic readers; Efferent reading; Efferent readers.

Ponniah and Priya (2008) compared the literacy competence in English as a second language of 50 engineering students in India who preferred “aesthetic” (fiction) reading with those who said they preferred “efferent” (non-fiction) reading. All had studied ESL for 12 years and all had same amount (quantified in terms of the number of years of schooling) of instruction in English.

The subjects were asked about the kinds of

reading they did. Based on their responses, 37 subjects were classified as primarily aesthetic readers (fiction) and 13 as primarily efferent readers (newspapers, technical, academic).

Aesthetic readers outperformed efferent readers on all tests of English literacy (**Table 1**), a result similar to that reported in Sullivan and Brown (2014) for vocabulary development in English as a first language.

**Table 1. Performance of Aesthetic and Efferent Readers on Tests of English Literacy**

	Aesthetic	Efferent	t	p	effect size
R.C.	6.93 (1.57)	6.38 (1.12)	1.15	0.25	0.4
Cloze	6.84 (1.34)	5.84 (1.84)	2.03	0.047	0.62
Grammar	7.71 (2.41)	5.38 (1.43)	3.26	0.002	1.18
Writing	3.55 (.94)	2.26 (0.99)	4.17	0	1.34

*Grammar = rewrite a passage correcting errors*

*Writing: Write a passage incorporating a given sentence.*

*RC: Reading Comprehension*

*Maximum score: RC, Cloze, Writing = 10, grammar = 20*

As seen in the table, aesthetic readers scored higher on all measures, but the difference was not statistically significant on the reading test. It needs to be pointed out, however, that Ponniah and Priya used a two-tail test. A one-tail test is more appropriate here, as the direction of the effect can be predicted based on previous research. For a one-tailed test,  $p = .125$ , still falling short of significance, but close to an acceptable  $p$ -level for statistical significance. Also, the effect size for reading comprehension is substantial.

As Ponniah and Priya (2008) point out, it is likely that the aesthetic readers read more (1), which could account for their advantage, as a number of studies have reported that those who do more reading have higher achievement in both first and second language (Krashen, 2004). Nevertheless, the results are consistent with studies showing that “aesthetic” texts contain a great deal of academic language (Rolls and Rodgers, 2017; McQuillan, 2014; Green, in press).

It has not been established that aesthetic reading is more efficient (e.g., more academic words acquired per page read) than efferent reading, but Ponniah and Priya’s results in English as a foreign language, as well as those of Sullivan and Brown’s (2014) in first language development suggest that even if aesthetic reading is less efficient than efferent reading in acquiring academic language, it is efficient enough. What is clear is that aesthetic reading counts.

## NOTE

(1) Beniko Mason (personal communication) pointed out to me that this is true of Ponniah and Priya’s subjects: more subjects were

aesthetic readers than efferent readers, the aesthetic readers reported reading more and they read a wider variety of texts.

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**Stephen Krashen**, University of Southern California (Emeritus), Los Angeles, California, USA.

Email: [skrashen@yahoo.com](mailto:skrashen@yahoo.com)