

Self-selected Pleasure Reading
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My message today is simple. A powerful path to high levels of language competence is reading, but not just any reading. One kind that really works is fiction, sometimes known as “literature” but more commonly known as “stories.” But not just any fiction, - fiction that we really want to read. This is much more likely to happen when readers select their reading themselves. To make sure everyone can find fiction that is right for them, they need access to lots of books; that’s what libraries are for.

SOME THEORY

Our research tells us that we can both “acquire” and “learn” language, and that language “acquisition” is much more powerful than language “learning.”. Language acquisition is subconscious – while it is happening, we are not aware that it is happening. We are aware that we are reading a book, but at the same time, without realizing it, we may be acquiring new language. And after we acquire new grammar or vocabulary, we may not even realize it: Acquired knowledge is stored subconsciously in our brain. Instead, we have a “feeling” that we hear or is grammatical correct, but can’t always express why.

We are very good at acquiring language. But we are not very good at “learning” languages, that is learning rules of grammar and applying them.

THE PROBLEM(S) WITH CONSCIOUS LEARNING OF GRAMMAR

First: we don’t know all the rules. Even the best linguists and most well-informed language teachers don’t know all the rules. In fact, linguists say that they have only discovered “fragments” of the rules of any language. But knowing a rule is useless unless you can use it in real communication. To do this we need to be thinking about correct form, and we need enough time to retrieve the rule from our memory and apply it. These conditions are only met is when we take a grammar test, and even then our ability to use grammar is limited.

THE COMPREHENSION HYPOTHESIS

If the study of grammar is not the path to competence, what is? Evidence has been building over the last few decades that language acquisition happens in only one way: When we understand what we hear and what we read; it happens when we get “comprehensible input.” The ability to speak and write is a RESULT of language acquisition, not the cause.

COMPELLING INPUT

If comprehensible input is the cause of language acquisition, acquirers must attend to the input; they have to pay attention to it. The best way to make sure this happens is make sure the input is extremely interesting. I suggest that the best input is so interesting the listener (or reader) even forgets, in a sense that it is in another language.

LANGUAGE ACQUISITION IS GRADUAL

Each time we encounter a new item in a comprehensible context we acquire a small amount (5-10%) of the meaning (or form). This may not seem like very much, but if we get lots of comprehensible input it can do the full job of acquiring the item. This is true of native speakers of English reading in English. It is also true of native speakers of Mandarin reading in Chinese. Each time a word with unfamiliar characters is understood in reading, a small part of the unfamiliar character is acquired (Ku and Anderson, 2001).

APPLICATION

Fiction!

As nearly all parents know, children love to hear stories. Most books taken out of libraries are fiction, and fiction dominates best-seller lists. Also attesting to the attraction of fiction is the obvious popularity of movies and TV drama.

Let me contribute my experiences: I live in about a 40-minute drive from Santa Monica, California, a suburb of Los Angeles. Before the pandemic, I drove from my home to Santa Monica at least twice a week, to lift weights at Gold’s Gym and to visit my grandchildren. It is a very boring ride. I stopped listening to music on the radio, because the radio stations started charging money for listening to high quality music (e.g. the Beatles). I stopped listening to the news, as news coverage became more and more one-sided. I solved the

problem by renting audio-books from local public libraries that I could listen to while driving.

The audio-books offered by the library were mostly fiction, all in English, and were popular best-sellers. This included mysteries, medical novels, “legal” novels, and adventure stories, so that’s what I listened to. To my surprise, I found most of the novels to be excellent listening, and they turned a boring ride into a real pleasure.

My first selection was the first Harry Potter book, and eventually I listened to all seven of them. The Harry Potter books are all about education and are very insightful. Of course it was very satisfying that the headmaster of Hogwarts, Dumbledore, is one of the heroes, and JK Rowling’s descriptions of classes at Hogwarts presents a coherent picture of excellent pedagogy (e.g. the Potions class) and terrible pedagogy (e.g the boring “History of Magic” class). I was especially interested in one of Harry’s friends, super-student Hermione, the student who always had her hand up, eager to answer the teacher’s questions. One of my university graduate students wrote a perceptive essay about her, asking the important question, “Is Hermione smart?”

These books were so good that I found myself doing what some of you do: Not getting out of the car immediately after arriving home, but staying in the car for a few minutes to hear the end of an especially interesting chapter.

In addition to Harry Potter, I listened to and totally enjoyed many of John Grisham’s legal novels, even though I had no special interest in the law, the Harry Bosch series of crime novels by Michael Connolly, even though I had no special interest in police work, and medical novels (I loved Verghese’s Cutting for Stone), even though I had no special interest in medicine.

SELF-SELECTION

If we want student reading to be interesting to students, a powerful way of making sure this happens is to allow and encourage self-selection; students decide what books they will read. In one study involving students in EFL classes at a university in Taiwan, self-selected reading resulted in more language acquisition than assigned reading did (Lee, 2007). Lee’s description tells us why: “... the books ... students chose were ‘so interesting and fun to read’. Students discussed their reading with each other, and recommended books to their classmates. Books written by Judy Blume, Louis Sacher, and books from

the Sweet Valley series were especially popular, and were rarely back on the shelves until the end of the year” (p. 165).

In addition to the published academic research, our own experiences confirm the value of self-selection. All of us have received books as gifts, and they are rarely books that we would have selected ourselves. When this happens to me, I dread the moment when the giver of the book asked me how I liked it, and, of course, I hadn't read the book. Gift books are, in a sense, assigned reading.

Garrison Keillor had the same reaction: “As a former English major I am a sitting duck for gift books, and in the past few years I've gotten Dickens, Thackeray, Smollett, Richardson, Emerson, Keats, Boswell, and the Brontes, all of them Great, none of them ever read by me, all of them now on my shelf, looking at me and making me feel guilty.” I have a Garrison Keillor shelf at home.

I am sure that many people have had the same experience I had with reading required books in school. In my secondary school in the United States we did “American literature” in the third year and “British literature” in the fourth year. I read the assigned novels and passed the required examinations, but I don't remember the title, author, or content of any of the books I read for these classes. I remember all of the books I read at that time on my own, my self-selected reading, and I remember many of them fondly, mostly science fiction. Among the authors, Isaac Asimov, Arthur C. Clarke, Robert Heinlein, Ray Bradbury, and Frank Herbert. My pleasure reading today in languages other than English is largely science fiction.

THE IMPACT

During the pandemic, we stayed at home nearly full-time. I did our shopping once a week, early Friday mornings, at the local supermarket, during a time reserved for the “elderly” (age 65 and older). In one of my first shopping trips, the employee at the cash register was “Fidel”, and I assumed, correctly, that he was Mexican-American. I spoke to him in Spanish. As is usually the case, he answered in English. I then said this to him, in Spanish. “Someday I would like to speak Spanish the way you (plural) do. Please help me. Let's speak Spanish.” He enthusiastically agreed! Since that visit, I make sure I am in his check-out line, and we have short, friendly conversations in Spanish.

My Spanish improved quite a bit over the next year: Fidel now speaks to me more rapidly, using more complicated language, a reaction, I think, to my improved competence and

fluency. I have additional evidence: Recently, I had a conversation in Spanish with a colleague that I had not spoken with for a while. We spoke Spanish. Her reaction: “Steve, your Spanish is so much better! What have you been doing?”

My improvement was not the result of talking with Fidel. Our conversations are very short; he has other customers to deal with. My improvement, my progress from low intermediate to high intermediate, in my opinion, is because I began to read more in Spanish. I have been using Beniko Mason’s GSSR system (see below) and doing a great deal of relatively easy reading, entirely graded readers, books written for students of Spanish as a foreign language. The order in which I read them is not dictated by their reading level, but whether I find the subject interesting. I have focused on a few authors whose writing appeals to me (Bill VanPatten and Adriana Ramirez) and my results agree with those of the published research. In the past, I have read some “authentic” fiction written in Spanish, but it was challenging. My prediction is that I will reach the stage where reading “real” Spanish is comfortable quite soon.

GSSR: GUIDED SELF-SELECTED READING

As I just noted, my Spanish reading program is based on Beniko Mason’s research. Her low-level EFL students at a university in Japan first participate in two or more semesters of Story-Listening in English: The teacher tells stories, usually folk or fairytales, made comprehensible by the use of drawings, additional background and description, and very occasionally translation of a difficult word. Students are not tested on the content of the stories they listen to and are not asked to keep a list of new words or study them, even though the teacher occasionally writes words thought to be new to the students on the board.

In her studies, Mason reported considerable vocabulary acquisition on tests given several weeks after listening to the story. She has also reported that adding traditional vocabulary-building activities was not an efficient use of time. Students gained more vocabulary per minute from listening to stories than doing the exercises.

Eventually, students gradually move to GSSR (Guided Self-Selected Reading) and read easy fiction (graded readers) which they select themselves with the help of the teacher. Students are provided with many choices of books to choose from, there is no post-testing of any kind, and students are not required to finish every book that they begin to read. In one study, Mason and I (Mason and Krashen, 2017) reported on the progress made by eight EFL students who had been doing GSSR for four months to three years, and took

alternate forms of the TOEIC test at times convenient for them. The students agreed to keep records of what they read.

The results were astonishing. The correlation between the time students spent reading and the amount gained on the TOEIC was nearly perfect ($r = .91$). Students gained an average of .6 points on the TOEIC for each hour of reading. If this rate of growth is maintained, a reader could move from Elementary Proficiency Plus on the TOEIC to the highest level, International Professional Proficiency in just a few years. The students in this study, it needs to be pointed out, had the advantage of a very rich print environment: access to 5000 graded readers.

My impression is that graded readers have improved tremendously in quality over the last decade. Despite the simplified language, authors have managed to produce genuine literature, moving and informative stories that easily hold one's interest.

This is only one example of improvement in language from reading. In my opinion, improvement in language from self-selected reading is one of the best-established results in the professional literature, and we have known about this for a long time, eg my 1989 paper, which covers the acquisition of vocabulary and spelling in first and second language, and my book, *The Power of Reading*, contain many more examples (Krashen, 2004).

SOPHIA

A particularly interesting (and very clear) case is "Sophia," (Lin, Shin and Krashen, 2007) a high school student whose reading comprehension test scores declined during the school year. She scored lower in the spring of each year than she did the preceding fall. But when she returned to school the next fall, her scores were higher than they had ever been. This happened two years in a row.

The explanation: Over the summer, Sophia was in library engaged in self-selected pleasure reading, averaging about 50 books per summer. She read Nancy Drew, books in the Sweet Valley series and books by Christy Miller. She did not study vocabulary lists or do any other form of "study." Sophia's mom remarked that Sophia was too busy with school work during the school year to read for her own pleasure and joked that it might be a good idea to keep her at home during the school year in order to increase her scores on reading tests.

WHAT ABOUT ACADEMIC LANGUAGE?

If students read mostly fiction, will they be prepared for academics? Shouldn't they be reading more "serious" nonfiction?

Studies by Jeff McQuillan are reassuring. He has reported that fiction contains a substantial amount of academic vocabulary, vocabulary considered to be important for understanding school work in general. His studies cover the seven Harry Potter novels as well as books known to be popular with teenage readers (McQuillan, 2019; 2020).

There is also research showing that those who read know more about a variety of subjects, including history, literature and science (e.g. West, Stanovich, and Mitchell, 1993) and we know that a great deal of what we read is fiction (Nell, 1988).¹ These studies have thus far have only been done with speakers of English as a first language, and we look forward to studies of other languages and with second language acquirers.

EMPATHY AND APPRECIATION OF COMPLEXITY

But there is even more! Research done over the last decade shows that readers of fiction have more empathy and understanding of others and are more aware of the complexity of life, becoming more suspicious of simple solutions. Rather than review the research,² let me present Barack Obama's answer to a reporter's question about his reading habits, published in the Guardian. I need to point out that President Obama, to my knowledge, had not read the research I just mentioned before giving his answer, but is in full agreement with it: "When I think about how I understand my role as citizen ... the most important stuff I've learned I think I've learned from novels. It has to do with empathy. It has to do with being comfortable with the notion that the world is complicated and full of grays, but there's still truth there to be found, it's possible to connect with some[one] else even though they're very different from you."

It is amazing how much benefit we can get from doing something that is extremely pleasant and relatively inexpensive.

CONFIRMATION

So how can we help students get these benefits? How can we help students become long-term pleasure readers? In our paper (Cho and Krashen, 2016), we examined a number of case histories of long-term pleasure readers in English as a second language to see what they did in common. The results are very consistent with the research reviewed in

this paper: (1) They had access to interesting reading material. (2) They had time to read, and a quiet comfortable place to read. (3) They selected their reading themselves. (4) They were not tested on what they read, and either did not receive rewards or did not give rewards the credit for their reading habit.

POST-SCRIPT: AN INTERESTING IDEA

Secondary school librarian Laduska Adriance ([2010](#)) proposed a unique and inexpensive way of doing peer recommendations. Her “Star Method” is simple: Students draw a star or place a star-shaped sticker in the inside corner of library books they like. A book with lots of stars, it is predicted, will attract readers.

We found this to be the case in our study (Miller, Hesler, and Krashen, 2019) at a South Korean elementary school with 5th and 6th grade students of English as a foreign language who had had several years of exposure to English in school. Students enthusiastically put stickers in books they liked, especially comic books, and students clearly showed interest in reading books with stars: One student “was excited to note that there were now fifteen stickers in Diary of a Wimpy Kid and then immediately sat down to read the book” (p. 23).

SOURCES:

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NOTES

One of the books I listened to in the car was *The Run-Away Jury*, by John Grisham. I served as foreman of a jury a few years earlier, and when I listened to Grisham's book I realized that I didn't do a good job. Had I read that book before serving, I would have done much better. Justice would have been served.

e.g. Kidd, D., & Castano, E. (2013). Djikic, M., Oatley, K. & Moldoveanu, M. (2013).