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Article



Language Acquisition and the Power of Pleasure Reading

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Studies done over the last 50 years have confirmed that reading, especially self-selected pleasure reading, is a powerful way of stimulating language and literacy development. Studies are also emerging that confirm that self-selected pleasure reading also results in increased knowledge in many different areas, and that reading, especially fiction, can result in a deeper understanding of others.

Some Theory

The core of our work can be expressed as a few simple hypotheses:

The Acquisition-Learning Hypothesis: We have two different ways of gaining knowledge of a language. One way is “acquisition,” a subconscious process. While it is happening, we are not aware it is happening. Also acquired knowledge is stored in our brains subconsciously; we may or may not be able to state “rules” describing what we have acquired.

We are very good at acquiring languages. It is something the brain does well.

“Learning” is conscious: While we are learning, we know we are learning and we can state the rules describing what we have learned.

We are not very good at learning languages. It is something the brain does poorly.

The centerpiece of current theory is the “Comprehension Hypothesis: We acquire (not learn) language in only one way: when we understand messages, when we understand what we hear or read. In other words, when we get “comprehensible input.”

An important corollary of the Comprehension Hypothesis: Talking and writing are not “practicing.” We acquire language by input, not output: More output does not result in more language acquisition. Rather, the ability to produce language is the result of language acquisition. In fact, forcing people to speak before they have acquired enough language to express themselves easily not only doesn’t help language acquisition, it provokes anxiety (Krashen, 2018).

Some Features of Input

If we acquire language by understanding input, it is obvious that input needs to be interesting. The best input is more than interesting: It is “compelling,” extremely interesting.

Language acquisition is gradual. Each time we encounter a new item in a comprehensible context we acquire only a small amount of the meaning and form from context; gradually we acquire the full form and meaning (Nagy, Herman, and Anderson, 1985.)

Application

There has been considerable success in beginning language classes in which comprehensible input is provided in the form of stories. In Story-Listening, developed by Beniko Mason, the teacher tells stories of universal interest. The stories are made comprehensible through the teacher’s use of drawings, gestures, and occasional translation (Krashen, Mason, and Smith. 2018).

In Story-Listening, students are not responsible for studying the new words used in the story; they are told they only need to understand and enjoy the story. It appears to be the case that using supplementary vocabulary building exercises are not as effective as simply telling another story (Mason and Krashen, 2004).

After listening to stories for one or two semesters, reading begins in the form of “guided self-selected reading” (GSSR). A generous supply of compelling, comprehensible stories are made available, and students select books with the help of teachers. Students start from the lowest level of graded readers; the eventual goal is reading “authentic books,” books written for native speakers.

Some Research: The Effect of Self-selected Pleasure Reading on Language and Literacy

In our study (Mason & Krashen, 2017), a group of eight EFL students in Japan enrolled in GSSR classes took alternative forms of the TOEIC English reading and listening examination. TOEIC scores range from zero to 1000, with 250 indicating enough English to start reading easier books.

We reported that for each hour of reading students did, they gained an average of .6 of a point on the TOEIC. If this rate of hourly improvement is maintained, two hours a day over two years of relaxed self-selected reading would result in a gain of 720 points, placing the test-taker nearly at the top of the TOEIC scale, starting at 250.

Lin, Shin and Krashen (2007) studied the progress of a teen-age girl, Sophia. Sophia’s secondary school tests all students on English reading at the beginning of the school year and again at the end, expecting to see improvement. Sophia’s reading scores, however, went DOWN during the school year, but went UP over summer vacation, and were higher than they were the year before.

What did Sophia do over the summer to cause this gain? She went to the local public library, and read for pleasure, averaging about 50 books each summer, reading books popular with young readers her age (e.g. *Twilight*, *Nancy Drew*).

Several studies compared the effect of increasing writing versus increasing reading. DeVries (1970) is a study of native-speakers of English, ten-year-old students who were placed into one of two groups: One group did the usual writing class, writing two themes a week for nine weeks. Students in the other group “were excused from practically all composition work ...and made use of the time ... for an increased amount of reading, in and out of class.” The “reading” group did better on the final essay for content, mechanics, organization, and grammar. For many other studies with similar results, see Krashen (2004).

Does Pleasure Reading Supply “Academic Language”?

A possible objection to emphasizing self-selected fiction is the belief that this kind of a diet will not result in the kind of academic language proficiency required in school. McQuillan (2020) assures us that this is not the case: McQuillan analyzed the vocabulary in the seven Harry Potter novels and concluded that reading all seven will result in the acquisition of 204 academic words, that is, words that appear in class and in textbooks in subject matter classes. McQuillan (2019) reported similar results.

Those who read more, know more.

Pleasure reading does more than build language and literacy: Those who read more, know more. Stanovich and Cunningham (1993) is the major study in this area. College students in the US were tested on a wide variety of subjects, including science, social studies, current events, personal finance, health, and technology.

They reported that those who had more “print exposure” (were more familiar with current authors and magazines) did better on the subject matter tests. Of great interest: Higher grades (grade point average) were not related to how well the students did on the tests of knowledge.

More reading, better understanding of others.

Finally, pleasure reading does more than build language and literacy and increase knowledge. Those who read more, especially fiction, have a deeper understanding of other people; they have more empathy (Kidd and Castano, 2013).

American radio journalist Terry Gross, the host of *Fresh Air*, has an excellent explanation of why fiction has this effect: “... when you’re learning to read fiction ... what you’re learning, in part, is empathy. You’re learning to be somebody else, learning to see the world through their eyes.” (<https://tinyurl.com/y8d3cdoz>).

Novelist Alice Walker, in fact, feels that this is the main function of literature: “If literature didn’t inspire empathy and compassion, it would be virtually useless.” Alice Walker, interview, “Newsmaker,” *American Library Magazine*, 6/13, p.19.

Self-selection and Access

The best way to ensure that reading is compelling is self-selection: Teachers know this: “No single practice inspires my students to read as much as the opportunity to choose their own books does” (Miller, 2012, p. 90).

My secondary school experience confirms this: When I was in secondary school in United States, we had compulsory language arts classes covering American and British literature. I did all the assigned reading and completed the assigned book reports and essays. Today, I don’t remember a single assigned novel I read for those classes, not even the authors or titles. I do, however, vividly remember, decades later, the books I read on my own. This “popular literature” was my true language arts class, and those books had a powerful effect on me.

A final word: For self-selected reading to take place, readers need access to reading material. We need to make sure all students have access to books in school and public libraries, and we need to take advantage of the knowledge of professional librarians who will order the right books and help connect students to books that are right for them (Lance, Schwarz and Rodney, 2014; Lance and Marks, 2008).

APPENDIX: HOW DO WE TEACH WRITING?

First, a crucial hypothesis: More writing does not lead to better writing form. Better writing form (e.g. writing in “essay style” with an introduction, conclusion, correct spelling, grammar etc.) comes from reading, not writing, that is, it comes from comprehensible and compelling input (Krashen, 2004).

But actual writing can do something else: It can have a profound influence on cognitive development and can stimulate creative thinking. This happens through revision. Revision is the core of the composing process. Revision means making mistakes and then “correcting” them, coming up with better ideas and a deeper understanding of your message that you had when you started writing. Elbow (1972) points out that in writing, “Meaning is what you end up with, not what you start out with.”

Dealing with Writer’s Block

A Writer’s Block occurs when the writer is not sure what to write next, when the writer senses that something is missing, or even wrong, and it is not obvious what to do about it. **WRITER’S BLOCKS ARE GOOD NEWS!!** They mean the writer is about to learn something. The cure is revision, and there are steps to take to make revision not only painless, but also satisfying and even pleasurable.

The way to deal with to a writer’s block is not to attack the block directly: “Composition is not enhanced by grim determination” (Smith, 1994, p. 131). The solution is to allow the subconscious mind to work on dissolving the block, and this requires “an interval free from conscious thought (Wallas, 1926), a hypothesis shared by Tolle (1999): “All true artists, whether they know it or not, create from a place of no-mind, from inner stillness.” The first step, therefore, is to take a break and do something mindless during the break.

The mathematician Poincare (1924) noted that when reaching a block in his work, after a “preliminary period of conscious work” he would get up from his desk and do something that took little thinking, such as putting more wood on the fire. Returning to his work only minutes later, the solution, or at least parts of it, would often appear.

It is important to write out the new insight immediately. “The story may be true of the man (sic) who had such so brilliant an idea that he went into his garden to thank God for it, found on rising to his knees that he had forgotten it, and never recalled it.” (Wallas, 1926, p. 85).

Sometimes incubation breaks result in small steps forward, but at other times, they result in major progress: “I’m happy when the revisions are big. I’m not speaking of stylistic revisions, but of revisions in my own understanding.” Saul Bellow, in Murray (1990, p. 181). I am, of course, happy with both kinds.

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