

# Landmark

## Self-Selected Voluntary Reading: The Missing Link

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Reading for pleasure, or “reading because you want to”, is a very powerful tool for language acquisition, one that is strongly supported by research in both first and second language acquisition. Those who read more have better language development and more knowledge in a variety of areas, such as reading comprehension, vocabulary, writing style, and spelling. Research on self-selected reading confirms the Comprehension Hypothesis, the view that we acquire language and literacy through comprehensible input.

In this paper, I will discuss what I think has been a serious omission in language education programs. Ironically, it is something that is inexpensive to include. Besides, students find it very pleasant. In fact, it is so pleasant that students often want to continue doing it on their own. Moreover, there is massive research supporting its use in second language acquisition. The missing link is, course, reading for pleasure.

I will begin with the underlying theory:

### **Two Views of Language and Literacy Development**

For the last few decades, we have been engaged in a major and important war. It is a good war, because whichever side wins, we will have learned a great deal.

On one side is the Comprehension Hypothesis, which claims that we acquire language and develop literacy in only one way—by understanding what we hear and read, or when

we get “comprehensible input”. A crucial feature of the Comprehension Hypothesis is that the so-called “skills”—the individual components of language and literacy—are acquired as a result of getting comprehensible input. If we get comprehensible input, then competence in vocabulary, grammar, etc., emerges.

The Skill-Building Hypothesis reverses this causality. In classes based on Skill-Building, students first consciously learn about the language, then “practice” applying the rules they have learned in their spoken and written output. Their errors are corrected in order to help them arrive at the correct version of the rule. The Skill-Building Hypothesis assumes that if students do this long enough, the rule will eventually become “automatized” and production of language will become smooth and automatic. In other words, the Skill-Building Hypothesis is a Delayed Gratification Hypothesis: work hard and someday you will have your reward.

In contrast, the Comprehension Hypothesis promises instant happiness. For input to be understood, the acquire must first pay attention to it, and the best way for this to happen is for it to be interesting.

The Comprehension Hypothesis is thus a win-win situation. It has been shown to be effective in the research, as we shall see in this paper, and it is pleasurable to implement.

The Reading Hypothesis is a special case of the Comprehension Hypothesis; it is a form of

comprehensible input. The Reading Hypothesis claims that reading for comprehension is the source of our reading ability, writing ability (writing style), vocabulary, spelling, and our ability to understand and use complex grammatical rules. Emerging research strongly supports the idea that the most effective form of reading is when we read what we want to read, i.e. free voluntary or self-selected reading (Krashen, 2004).

### What the Research Says: Sustained Silent Reading

Three reviews of the impact of in-school self-selected reading on second language development have been published in the last ten years. In sustained silent reading, a few minutes are set aside from the language class and students read whatever they want to read. There are no book reports or any other form of accountability. (For a discussion on the elements of successful SSR, see Krashen, 2011). The reviews have been published in the form of “meta-analyses”, a very useful and precise way of presenting the results of many individual experiments.

Table 1 presents the results of the three recent meta-analyses of studies involving second and foreign language acquisition. Nearly all of them are based on studies of English as a foreign language. In each study, time was allotted in the “experimental group” for students to select their own reading material and accountability was either minimal or there was no test or report of any kind. The comparison group was taught using traditional pedagogy.

An “effect size” was calculated for each study, in this case, for each comparison between test scores achieved by students doing in-school free reading and traditional instruction. A positive effect size meant the reading group did better than the comparison group. Effect sizes of around .2 meant that the advantage of the reading group was small, .5 medium, and .8 or greater was considered a large effect size. The average effect size for reading comprehension ranged from .54 to .87, and for vocabulary from .18 to .47, both confirming that SSR is effective. Several individual studies were included in more than one meta-analysis, but the overlap is not extensive.

Table 1.  
Effect Sizes for Three Recent SSR Meta-Analyses: English as a Foreign Language (EFL)

	Vocabulary	Reading Comprehension
Krashen(2007)		.87 (15)
Nakanishi (2014)	.18 (9)	.68 (15)
Jeon and Day (2016)	.47 (17)	.54 (46)

*Note. Number of studies analyzed has been given in parentheses. Table originally presented in Krashen and Mason (2017).*

### Multivariate Analyses

Using multiple regression, a researcher can determine the impact of one variable, while holding the effect of other variables constant. Multiple regression allows us to assume that the predictors are not correlated to each other.

Table 2 presents the results of a multiple regression comparing the impact of different predictors of competence in the subjunctive among speakers of Spanish as a second language. The subjects’ “acquired” knowledge of the subjunctive was tested, not their conscious

knowledge of the rules for the use of the subjunctive. Comparison of the “betas” shows that the only successful predictor was the amount of reading in Spanish subjects reported doing. Study of Spanish, even study dedicated to the subjunctive, did not count, nor did time spent in Spanish-speaking countries.

Table 2  
Spanish as a Foreign Language: Monitor-Free  
Test of Subjunctive

Predictor	beta	p
Study	0.052	0.72
Residence	0.051	0.73
Reading	0.32	0.034
Study of Subjunctive	0.044	0.76

(From Stokes, Krashen & Kartchner (1998).

Mason and Krashen (2017) performed a multivariate analysis on data from a series of case studies done by Mason. All of Mason’s subjects had done an EFL class with her as an instructor in Japan, and had requested that Mason help them establish a reading program they could follow on their own. Mason agreed, but asked the former students to take alternate forms of the TOEIC examination and keep a record of what and how much they read. Krashen and Mason came to the surprising conclusion that the readers gained an average of a little more than one-half point on the TOEIC for each hour they read (mean = .06 points). There was little variation among the subjects, even though different subjects read very different kinds of books, for different amounts of time. All of them read nearly entirely fiction.

One more multivariate study deserves mention here, that of Sullivan and Brown (2013), who administered an English vocabulary test to native speakers of English and analyzed a number of

predictors. They reported that reading “middlebrow” and “highbrow” fiction were good predictors of vocabulary test scores, and both were better than reading non-fiction. Sullivan and Brown also reported that how much the subjects reported reading at this stage in their life (age 42) could be used to predict their vocabulary scores, independent of how much they read when they were younger, and independent of their scores on previous tests, administered when they were age 5 and again at age 16. Sullivan and Brown’s report indicates that we can improve and become more literate at any age and the way to do it is to read.

### Case Histories

Case histories constitute valuable research material if we collect enough to them to determine consistent patterns. Although I am presenting only one case history here, it is one out of many that support the Reading Hypotheses, in this case for first language literacy development.

Murray (2010) grew up in extreme poverty in New York, but was a highly successful student. She eventually went to Harvard and made a career in writing and public speaking. Her dad had an unusual habit. When Murray was growing up, different branches of public library in New York were not connected by computer. Her dad took advantage of this lack of connectivity and got a library card from each branch. He borrowed all the books that he could from each branch and never returned them.

Murray tells us that she only attended school in the final weeks before the end-of-year examinations, but managed to get promoted thanks to last-minute test prep and because of the knowledge she absorbed from readings the books her father took from local libraries.

## **Reading and Knowledge**

Murray's case suggests that reading is not only a major source of literacy, it is also a major source of knowledge. Stanovich and colleagues (Stanovich and Cunningham, 1993; West, Stanovich, and Mitchell, 1993) have confirmed this in a series of studies in which they conclude that those who read more, know more about literature, history and science. They have more "cultural literacy" and even "practical knowledge".

The literacy development and wide knowledge that are the outcomes of reading may be the reason for Simonton's (1988) conclusion "... omnivorous reading in childhood and adolescence correlates positively with ultimate adult success" (Simonton, 1988).

## **The Pleasure of Self-Selected Reading**

When we read books that we choose ourselves, it is usually a very pleasant experience. This has been confirmed through empirical studies (Krashen, 2004), but the following reports provide even more compelling evidence.

One dedicated reader, interviewed by Victor Nell (1988), reports "Reading removes me ... from the irritations of living ... for the few hours a day I read 'trash' I escape the cares of those around me, as well as escaping my own cares and dissatisfactions." Author Somerset Maugham, also in Nell (1988) states:

Conversation, after a time, bores me, games tire me, and my thoughts, which we are told are the unfailing resources of a sensible man have a tendency to run dry. Then I fly to my book as the opium-smoker to his pipe ... (p. 232).

Nell (1988) includes an entire chapter on reading in bed, before going to sleep. He reports that bedtime reading was nearly universal among dedicated readers. Of the 26 pleasure readers

he interviewed, 24 said that they read in bed "nearly every night" or "most nights".

Some of the bedtime readers volunteered that bedtime reading was an addiction, stating bedtime reading is

... a habit which I certainly do not wish to break. Even if I read for only five minutes, I must do it—a compulsion like that of a drug addict! ... My addiction to reading is such that I almost can't sleep without a minimum of ten minutes (usually 30-60 minutes) of reading" (p. 250).

Jim Trelease (Trelease, 2013) understands the pleasure of bedtime reading. He advises parents wanting to encourage a reading habit to make sure their children have a lamp at their bedside.

## **The Missing Link**

A diet consisting only of enjoyable fiction will not, I hypothesize, bring readers to the highest levels of literacy. It will, however, bring readers to the point where specialized reading in areas of importance and interest are comprehensible. It is the link between basic conversational language and truly advanced levels.

## **An Obstacle**

An obstacle to fully implementing SSR and encouraging self-selected reading is the lack of access to interesting, comprehensible and affordable books, and other reading material. This is nearly universally the case for those living in high-poverty areas (Neuman and Celano, 2001). My hope is that we will invest more in libraries, and at the same time find cheaper ways to produce readers and take more advantage of inexpensive applications of technology to solve this problem (Krashen, Wang, and Lee, 2016).

In addition, comprehensible and enjoyable reading is rarely available for beginning and even low intermediate second and foreign

language acquirers in any language except English. There are three paths to solving this problem, and I suggest we take all three at once:

- 1 Build up interest and competence in reading with a preliminary stage of Story Listening: beginning and intermediate students hear stories in classes, supplemented in a number of ways to make them more comprehensible (Mason, Vanata, Jander, Borsch, & Krashen, 2009).
- 2 Build up competence and interest in reading using another approach; Beniko Mason suggests guided self-selected reading consisting of very easy reading suggested by the teacher.
- 3 Create more texts for students in all languages.

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