

Why Don't We Take Advantage of the Power and Pleasure of Reading?

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The Power of Reading

Research conducted on the impact of reading on language acquisition since the publication of the first edition of *The Power of Reading* (Krashen, 1993/2004a) has been validated over and over again. Reading, especially self-selected pleasure reading, is the primary cause of literacy development. It has in fact been difficult for the author to produce a third edition of *The Power of Reading*, because so much confirming evidence has emerged to support his theories. We now have overwhelming evidence that in both first and second language development, more reading results in more development of language, including better reading, better writing, bigger vocabulary size, better mastery of complex grammar and better spelling. Studies also confirm that those who read more, know more about literature, history, science, and even practical matters. Supporting evidence includes experiments, multivariate correlational analyses and case histories carried out in a wide variety of places and conditions (Krashen, 2004).

The Pleasure of Reading

Self-selected reading (SSR) done in-school is consistently considered to be more pleasant than time spent in traditional instruction (Krashen, 1994), and recent research shows that even one brief period of free reading can result in increased interest in reading, as can a visit to a good library (Cho and Krashen, 2018).

Case histories describe readers who become fanatic pleasure readers, and who quite

unexpectedly make impressive progress in their literacy development (Cho, 2016, 2017a; Cho and Krashen, 1995, 2015). It is hard to imagine such dedication to traditional instruction.

The Enthusiasm for English

Without question, English has become the world's second language, the first language of science and the most important language for the internet. An editorial in the journal *Molecular Biology of the Cell* (Drubin and Kellog, 2012) declared that "English is now used almost exclusively as the language of science". DuFour (2017), examined the prestige rankings of professional journals by SCImago Journal Rank and reported that "all of the top 50 journals are published in English and originate from either the U. S. or the U.K.". English is also the most used language on the internet. According to data gathered in 2015, about 55 per cent of internet content is in English (<https://unbabel.com/blog/top-languages-of-the-internet/>)

Cho (forthcoming) gave a questionnaire to parents (mostly mothers) of elementary school and middle school students in a metropolitan city in Korea, who were participating in a Parents' English Education program organized by the city board of education. The questionnaire was distributed to the parents on the first day of the five-day program, and was collected after the program ended. It included the following question:

What is your level of interest in English? (1) very low (2) low (3) moderately (4) high (5)

very high. Only 2 per cent of the participants reported low or very low interest (17/928) while 7 per cent reported high or very high interest (698/928)

The Status of Pleasure Reading

Given the importance of English, the power of reading to improve English fluency and the pleasure that reading offers, one would expect reading to be a popular way of improving fluency in English as a foreign language, but it is not.

As part of the same study, Cho asked the parents how many English books their children read in a month. Eighty-four per cent (n = 778) of the parents said that their children read little in English (either no books at all, or just one or two books per month).

This figure could be an underestimation, because it represents students in both elementary and middle school and does not include students at the beginning level, those not yet ready to do independent reading in English.

Other studies, however, show only limited interest in pleasure reading among university students taking education courses to prepare them to teach English, or get advanced degrees. When asked if they read books in English for pleasure, very few indicated that they were dedicated pleasure readers. (Cho and Krashen, 2017b).

As noted earlier, we have had some success in increasing enthusiasm for reading by engaging students in a SSR experience, however short it may be, or by arranging a brief visit to an English library. However, the enthusiasm is short-lived; six months to one year later, we see that while there has been an increase in English pleasure reading, it is very modest (Cho, 2017b).

Why Don't Language Acquirers Take Advantage of the Power of Reading?

Kim and Krashen (1997) asked this question in a paper published over 20 years ago. They

interviewed five adult learners of English as a second language. All five gave the same answer: their English classes emphasized grammar and drill. The tests were grammar-based and reading was not only not recommended, it was never even mentioned. Kim and Krashen noted that “the only English books to which the five women were exposed were textbooks, grammar books, and workbooks. When coherent texts were included, the material was often boring and difficult” (p. 27).

We sent a copy of this paper to colleagues who were familiar with the pedagogy of English as a foreign language, as it is taught currently, and asked if anything had changed. The consensus was that while language educators are paying some attention to reading, it does not yet occupy a central role.

Language education, in most cases, is still backing the wrong horse; it is backing the Skill-Building Hypothesis rather than the Comprehension Hypothesis. Skill-Building Hypothesis claims that we develop competence in a language by consciously learning its grammar rules first. We then gain fluency by producing our freshly learned rules over and over (speaking and writing), and improve accuracy by getting our errors corrected. According to this view, reading plays no role in language development. The Comprehension Hypothesis claims that we develop language competence by understanding what we hear and read. “Comprehensible input” leads to subconscious absorption (or “acquisition”) of grammar and vocabulary. The Reading Hypothesis is a special case of the Comprehension Hypothesis.

The Skill-Building Hypothesis is still preferred in language teaching, despite lack of evidence to support it. Current pedagogy only pays lip service to the Reading Hypothesis and to its parent, the Comprehension Hypothesis. Reading is often included, but it is obviously an add-on.

We received comments from two colleagues, Andrew Hesler, chair of the English Department at the Uchon Elementary School in Seoul, and Sy-Ying Lee, chair of the Applied Foreign Languages Department at National Taiwan University of Science and Technology.

Hesler felt that there had been only “slight shifts” in the direction of more emphasis on reading, and these occurred largely with younger students in private schools that offer supplementary English classes. These schools possibly had libraries for pleasure reading, but very often the core instruction was based on traditional Skill-Building, with some reading included as an add-on. Hesler talked about his teaching experience at a private English school in Korea:

The structure of their classes was two hours of class in a skill-driven format. Worksheets, drills, discussions. Students did get the chance to watch US TV shows for 30 minutes each day. They would then go to the library for an hour of unstructured reading ... reading was an afterthought. A good afterthought, but I felt like it was just a plus to tack onto the “classes” students took ... Teachers with similar experiences have told me that reading was not really a big part of instruction where they worked, outside of perhaps, a novel study class for 30 minutes of round-robin reading. My positions with older students have always been “grammar centric” and there was a great emphasis on speaking and teachers’ providing corrections. Reading was nearly non-existent outside of materials I would hunt down, or articles in business English classes. It seems to me that parents these days are more aware that reading matters for their children. But they still want skill-driven classes that, they feel, provide instant results: a test with a high score, and lists of new vocabulary that students have “learned”.

These educational institutions are clearly not aware that the amount of pleasure reading is the best predictor of scores not only on standardized English tests, but also competence in vocabulary, reading, grammar, writing style and spelling (Krashen, 2004, 2011).

According to Sy-Ying Lee, there is a strong movement to teach subject matter in English, which is problematic because of teacher and student limitations in English. This means that subject matter can be taught in English only for subjects that can be taught in simple English, at least to begin with. Lee pointed out that “A possible result is that both the content and the language learned through these courses will be greatly limited.” We suspect that for the English as a foreign language, content-based instruction might be unnecessary. Perhaps a strong focus on pleasure reading in English may bring students to the point where they can understand “academic” language.

Additional Problems in Current Foreign Language Reading Programs

There are some additional problems in the current foreign language reading programs that we would like to add. A major problem is access to interesting books. As noted earlier, Cho (2018) found that one brief SSR session resulted in increased enthusiasm for reading, but the effect did not last very long. This is because some crucial elements were missing—continued access to books and a time and place to read (Cho and Krashen, 2018). Another problem is that even simplified books (graded readers) are often too difficult for beginners, especially when dealing with foreign languages that have few or no cognates with the students’ first language.

To deal with this issue, Beniko Mason has introduced two ways to initiate students into self-selected reading, *Story Listening* and *Guided Self-Selected Reading*.

In the *Story Listening* approach, teachers present interesting stories in the second language. They explain unfamiliar language through simple drawings, body movements and the occasional brief translation. Mason has published a number of studies showing that this simple approach results in more efficient vocabulary acquisition than traditional teaching, even though its purpose is simply to make the story more comprehensible and not mastery of vocabulary (e.g. Mason, Vanata, Jander, Borsch, & Krashen, 2009).

Very easy reading is nearly completely absent in foreign language programs, forcing students to move prematurely to texts that can only be read slowly and painfully. Even texts that appear to be very easy often contain items that students have not yet acquired, or have only partially acquired. In *Guided Self-Selected Reading*, the teacher recommends texts that students can read easily. We suspect such texts build confidence and promotes language development.

Summary and Conclusion

The need to learn English is obvious in many professions. The problems that existed in 1997 persist. Also, it is evident from current research that young adults are more likely to develop an interest in English reading after experiencing the opportunity to browse and read English books.

However, only a modest percentage of learners who acquire English as a foreign language are active readers in English. The problems that existed in 1997 persist. While educational institutions now include some pleasure reading, it appears to be a weak concession to research results, with no meaningful change in actual practice. The core of language education remains focused on skill-building which involves conscious learning of grammar and its rules. Even when reading is recognized as central to language acquisition, we still have the problems of insufficient access to interesting and comprehensible reading material.

Finally, we would like to assert that ignoring the power of reading is a rejection of natural language acquisition and comprehensible input. It is not clear whether this failure is the result of policy-makers and curriculum specialists not being aware of research and theory, or a deliberate rejection of it.

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