

# A Fulfilling Journey of Language Acquisition via Story Listening and Reading: A Case of an Adult Scholar

*Sy-Ying Lee*

Supported by case histories and experimental evidence, Krashen (2016) proposed that we achieve the highest level of literacy and language competence over three stages: hearing stories, reading self-selected narrow recreational texts and reading self-selected professional texts in an area of personal interest. In this article, I will describe how an adult learner of English as a foreign language achieved great success by following the reverse order.

Like most Asian learners of English as a foreign language, the main language learning inputs for this adult learner came from formal instruction. Although her English competence was adequate for her to pass all the nation-wide entrance exams, for years she had been troubled by the thought that her English was poor, especially in informal situations. This feeling persisted until she tried a new approach, in which she herself selected the fiction books that she found interesting and read and listened to audio recordings of these books. Today, she finds fiction reading so interesting that she listens and reads whenever she has a free moment. This has boosted her competence as well as her confidence in aural and spoken English, in both academic and nonacademic situations, in a remarkably short time.

## **The Rationale**

In his response to Hilfer's claim that "adult language development may be learned ... formally ... through instruction and explicit explanation of a new language's structure", and that full competence in the language requires

"... extensive practice speaking ... and a large volume of feedback ..." (Hilfer, 2018), Krashen (2018), points out that many real life case histories in fact support just the opposite. Such a case is presented here.

## **Karey's Problem**

Karey used to be an elementary school teacher in Taiwan, where she taught basic English and other subjects for six years, but she never spoke English informally. She studied information science and computer education as part of her graduate degree, in which English was required only for reading research papers. Karey is currently a full professor, and she specializes in developing the competence of pre- and in-service language teachers in the use of technology to enhance foreign language acquisition. She has received several research awards and has served as a guest editor for special issues of prestigious journals. She has not studied in any English-speaking country.

Karey had used English only to write professional papers for publications and for brief professional correspondence. Until recently, she found making presentations in English very frightening, frustrating, and exhausting, especially in front of professors of English as a Foreign Language (information gathered through interviews with S-Y Lee, conducted in Mandarin).

Karey understood that spoken and written language belong to different genres: "When giving a speech in English, you can't simply read aloud from your power point slides. This would

be very boring.” When she had to make a speech, she first wrote a script, had it revised by her assistant with an Applied Linguistics background, and then practiced speaking the script aloud for days, before making the presentation. She found dealing with questions from the audience very difficult, especially when it comprised non-native speakers, whose accents varied drastically. Furthermore, her grammar mistakes and incorrect word choices made her feel humiliated in front of an audience.

This lack of confidence in speaking in English is not restricted to Karey alone. Despite having studied English for at least seven years in school, most college graduates in Taiwan are rarely able to use English confidently and comfortably, especially in public. Karey has this problem even though she has read and written several professional papers in English. She realizes that the successful oral delivery of papers includes paralinguistic elements—body language, facial expressions and appropriate gestures and also the occasional joke. She has observed that other speakers include these elements in their presentations with apparent ease, and felt she could never attain this level of competence. Moreover, she has always felt ill at ease while speaking the more informal English called for in non-academic interactions with scholars at workshops and conferences. These include conversation at the dinner table or while accompanying guests to different locations.

Her expertise and research specialty in the use of technology to enhance language learning and teacher training in teaching Chinese as a foreign language helped her understand her problem. What she needed was material for daily life conversations—descriptions of events, locations, scenery, local culture and people, commentaries on international news, educational policies and entertainment.

Carrying with her years of accumulated experiences of frustration, a nearly incurable sense of failure, and the incessant pressure of having to use spoken English on more and more occasions during recent years (for research purposes and because of the increasing popularity of the Chinese language), Karey became desperate to find ways to improve her English speaking ability.

She tried a variety of approaches before she turned to reading and listening to stories. She began with attempting to read classic literature, a path that many adults try, without success. The language level was simply too high and incomprehensible, and the necessity of looking up unknown words interfered with her flow of reading; she was unable to keep her attention on making meaning. Then she tried “Tutor ABC” and other online English tutors with a private teacher. She stopped because of the tutors’ obsession with correcting her pronunciation. Some friends enthusiastically suggested that she watch TED talks because they seemed to be a good fit with her scholarly background and her need to talk in front of experts and professionals. She did not, however, find them interesting as they were not related to her professional interests.

Karey’s journey in acquiring the kind of English she needed began when she read *Comprehensible and Compelling: The Causes and Effects of Free Voluntary Reading*, in Mandarin (Krashen, Lee & Lao, 2017). The authors argued that we acquire language by understanding what we listen to or read. They added that the most effective input for language acquisition is one which is “compelling”—generally a story—and so interesting that we “forget” it is in another language. The authors suggested a three-stage path to advanced language proficiency, beginning with listening to a large number of stories, followed by self-selected reading for

pleasure, and finally ending in personalized reading in areas of special interest to the reader. It is the middle stage, self-selected reading, that helps learners discover their interest and passion. This stage is also instrumental in building expertise and helping learners acquire language.

However, finding input that is both comprehensible and interesting is not easy for adult second language acquirers (Cho & Krashen, 1994). Karey began with simple English books she had bought for her children, the *Magic Tree House* series (now her children have grown up and those books had been lying untouched on the shelves for years). Thanks to her grasp of basic English and her experience in writing and publishing research papers, reading these children's books was not difficult; moreover, these books were not boring, even though they were written for young readers.

Karey easily immersed herself in the stories. During the interview, we agreed it was her

comprehension of these books, rich in scientific knowledge, that kept her motivated to continue with self-selected voluntary reading. Unfortunately, not all the books she read were as interesting as the *Magic Tree House* books. Given that the first stage in the three-path to advanced learning proficiency advocated by Krashen, Lee and Lao was that of *listening* to stories, Karey should have started with that. However, she had no chance of “being read to”.

As a researcher familiar with technology as a resource and support for independent learning, Karey found the BBC six-minute news briefs to be of interest. A podcast of *Anne of the Green Gables*, a well-known classic for children, stimulated her interest in seeing the film again, having seen it years ago. When she searched for it on YouTube (Fig. 1: *Learning English Through Story*), she found audio versions of many interesting stories with

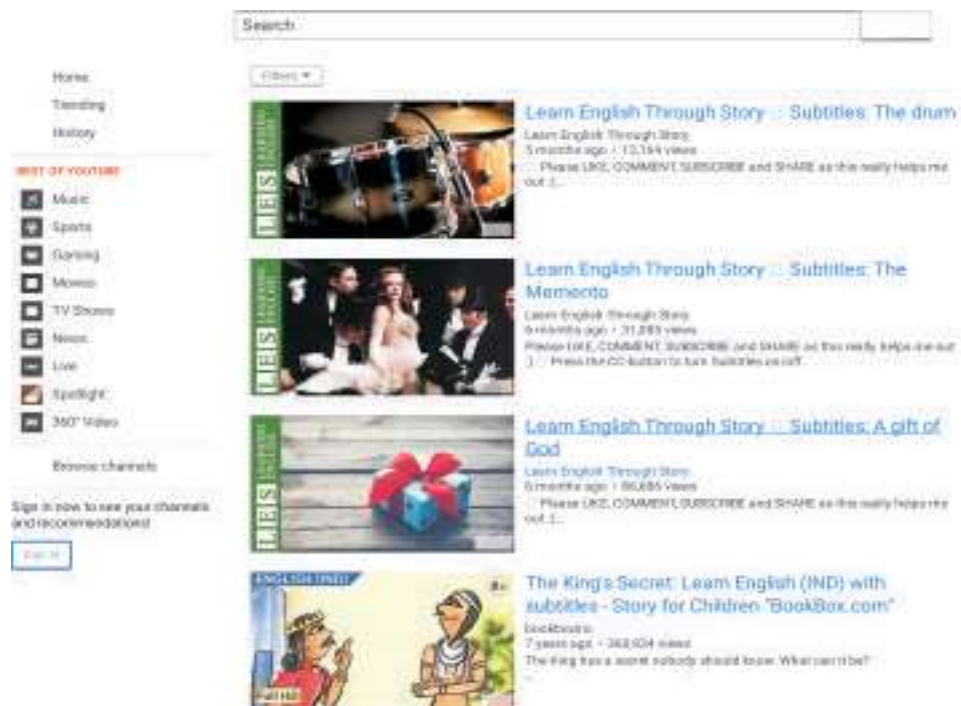


Figure 1. Learning English Through Stories on YouTube.

subtitles, all free, and all edited to a level comprehensible for her.

To help her take full advantage of these stories, she got a mobile connection with unlimited internet access, which made it possible to listen to stories while driving, and her husband helped her connect her mobile phone to their TV monitor. She found the stories so compelling, and the visual support so helpful that she had less of an urge to look up unfamiliar words, which, it can be argued, resulted in greater gains of vocabulary through context. Furthermore, thanks to an e-book website she discovered, the pdf files of many of the stories she had listened

to online were now available for her to read in print, over a cup of coffee at Starbucks, or while waiting for friends or colleagues for meetings or appointments, or at home after work.

From March 2018, Karey began keeping a reading log of all the books she had listened to or read, or both (see Table 1 for her partial reading list; this list did not begin with the first book she had read and she eventually discontinued the list). She developed a strong interest in knowing more about how language was used to create a story that could be so enthralling. Reading became a welcome part of her daily routine.

Table 1  
Karey's Reading List

Number	Story	Author	Listen	Read
1	<i>A Christmas Carol</i>	Charles Dickens	x	
2	<i>A Shot in the Night</i>	Ridley Anew	x	
3	<i>A Hacker's Revenge</i>	John Backhouse	x	
4	<i>About a Boy</i>	Nick Hornby	x	
5	<i>Aladdin and the Enchanted Lamp</i>	Philip Pullman	x	
6	<i>Ana Karenina</i>	Leo Tolstoy	x	
7	<i>Blackbeard's Treasure</i>	Jenny Dooley	x	
8	<i>Count Vlad</i>	Jenny Dooley	x	
9	<i>Dante's Peak</i>	Dewey Gram	x	
10	<i>Hampton House</i>	Jerry Dooley	x	
11	<i>Home for Christmas</i>	Andrea M. Hutchinson	x	x
12	<i>Ireland</i>	Tim Vicary	x	
13	<i>Jane Eyre</i>	Charlotte Brontë	v	
14	<i>Life Exchange</i>	Jenny Dooley	x	x
15	<i>Madame Bovary</i>	Gustave Flaubert	x	
16	<i>Mary, Queens of Scots</i>	Tim Vicary	x	
17	<i>My Cousin Rachel</i>	Daphne Du Maurier	x	
18	<i>Murder on the Orient Express</i>	Agatha Christie	x	x
19	<i>Orpheus Descending</i>	Jenny Dooley	x	

## Narrow Reading

The pace of Karey's reading gradually accelerated. In the five months since March 2018, she has read and/or listened to nearly 100 stories (Fig. 2). This includes classic children's fiction such as *Peter Pan*, *The Little Mermaid*, *Swan Lake*, and *The Secret Garden*; and simplified literary works of titles such as *Jane Eyre*, *Anna Karenina*, *A Christmas Carol*, *The Great Gatsby*, etc. She has also read other stories that she found appealing—some much-loved and touching such as *The Railway*

*Children*, some thrilling but metaphorical such as *Life Exchange*, and others horrifying yet profound, with life messages such as *The Stranger*.

During the interviews, she described the plots of these stories with great passion, as if she had just finished reading them. She also shared her reflections by explaining how she interpreted the meaning of these stories in the context of her own life experience, religious beliefs and social values.

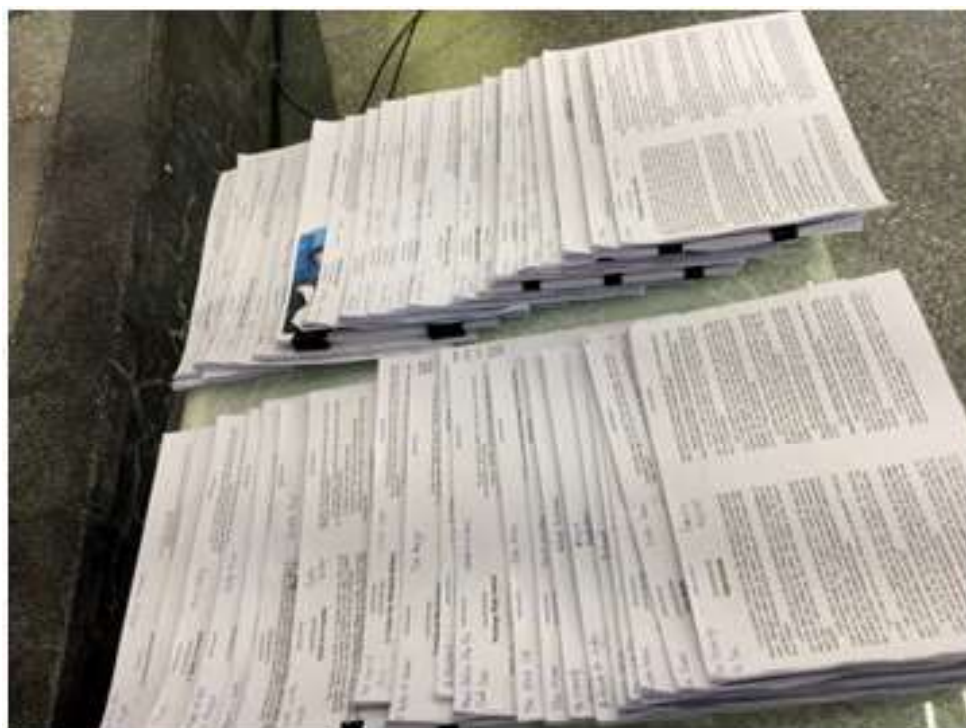


Figure 2. Some stories printed out for reading

Interestingly, one story by Agatha Christie, *Murder on the Oriental Express*, aroused in her an intense enthusiasm for detective stories, and led her to focus on narrow reading—a reading preference in which the reader focuses on the same type of genre or works by the same author.

This newly developed interest in detective stories was especially valuable because she

found that these stories allowed her to acquire the language of action, location, motion and motive. This was precisely the language she was lacking when having conversations with guests or when giving speeches. She was happy when she realized that she did not need to attend conversation classes, or practice speaking under artificial conditions, or memorize grammar or vocabulary for her next presentation.

Agatha Christie books are now her favourite reading material. To read more of this author, once again she found an online e-reader with lots of Agatha Christie books (Figure 3). She

has recently discovered another author, Richard Macandrew, who has written several book series, including detective stories for students of English as a foreign language.

The screenshot shows the 'English e-Reader' website interface. At the top, there is a search bar with the text 'FIND BOOK'. Below the search bar, there is a blue banner with the text 'Get Your Stories to Go' and 'Audible books inspire and entertain anywhere, anytime. Join today! audible.com'. Below the banner, there is a table with columns for Title, Author, English, Genre, and Level. The Author column is filtered to 'Agatha Christie'. The English column is filtered to 'any', the Genre column is filtered to 'any', and the Level column is filtered to 'any'. The table lists 12 books by Agatha Christie, including 'Murder on the Orient Express', 'Death in the Clouds', 'They Do It with Mirrors', 'The Murder of Roger Ackroyd', 'They Came to Baghdad', 'The Mysterious Affair at Styles', 'Sparkling Cyanide', 'Cat Among the Pigeons', '4.50 from Paddington', 'The ABC Murders', and 'Appointment with Death'.

Title	Author	English	Genre	Level
Murder on the Orient Express	Agatha Christie	BrE	detective	intermediate
Death in the Clouds	Agatha Christie	BrE	detective	upper-intermediate
They Do It with Mirrors	Agatha Christie	BrE	detective	upper-intermediate
The Murder of Roger Ackroyd	Agatha Christie	BrE	detective	intermediate
They Came to Baghdad	Agatha Christie	BrE	detective	upper-intermediate
The Mysterious Affair at Styles	Agatha Christie	BrE	detective	pre-intermediate
Sparkling Cyanide	Agatha Christie	BrE	detective	upper-intermediate
Cat Among the Pigeons	Agatha Christie	BrE	detective	intermediate
4.50 from Paddington	Agatha Christie	BrE	detective	intermediate
The ABC Murders	Agatha Christie	BrE	detective	intermediate
Appointment with Death	Agatha Christie	AmE	detective	pre-intermediate

Figure 3. English e-reader

### Progress Perceived During the Five Months

I had not planned to write a report on Karey's reading progress when I first started talking to her. It was Karey's own discovery of the gradual improvement in her reading speed, oral fluency, expressive richness and listening ability that motivated me to write about her. Thus, this paper does not contain any statistics to show how many words she gained, nor any test scores. Also Karey has now stopped recording what she reads due to her very tight work schedule and another important reason, "I am now reading for pleasure! There is no need to know how much I have listened to or read each day."

I conducted several hour-long interviews with Karey in coffee shops to gather the material for this report. As I spoke to her, it became increasingly clear that Karey's experiences needed to be shared. They showed that it was possible to improve without formal instruction, output practice, private tutors and constant assessment, as long as the supply of stories was sufficient and free selection was granted. The most significant outcome of Karey's experiment was that she felt less apprehensive about speaking English in public – something that had troubled her for years.

In April 2018, only one month after she started reading and listening to stories, Karey was

invited to give a fifteen-minute presentation about her research on the use of technology in language teaching at an international conference on Applied Linguistics and Language Teaching. In this presentation, for the first time she felt good about her performance, “I used to feel extremely nervous when giving presentations in English with even only one English teacher in the audience!”

In June, she was invited by two top universities in Hong Kong to talk at seminars. She was also asked to consult with faculty members at one of the two universities. This is what she had to say:

Compared to the visit to Hong Kong a few years ago, which was like a nightmare, my confidence this time was much better. Interacting with each professor or researcher, each with different ideas and topics, was much easier this time. When focusing on the content, I simply forgot that I was using English in all discussions!

In August, Karey invited a journal editor from the United States to give a talk at the university where she taught. This time her experience was very different from her previous experiences of interacting in English:

No stuttering, no embarrassment, no frustration! Our conversations at the lunch and dinner tables were full of laughter, pleasantries, and intellectual exchanges of viewpoints on different topics. I owe it all to the stories I have enjoyed in the past few months!

Just two days before this article was completed, Karey called and told me, “Can you believe it? A one-hour long-distance Skype meeting is no problem for me now!” Nearly all speakers of English as a second language know how challenging it is to listen to someone on the phone or in front of a monitor.

Observing the improvement resulting from reading and listening to stories in real situations is a better assessment of language acquisition than paper and pencil test results, that do not reflect the changes in behavioral, cognitive and affective aspects.

### **Conclusion**

Karey’s progress, it can be argued, may be largely due to her strong motivation. However, many language learners have very high motivation levels, but they quit because of lack of proper materials and a solid understanding of the theory of language learning. To conclude, I will present two issues worth further contemplation:

First, many scholars or teachers strongly argue in favour of form-focused approaches. This argument, however loud, is not backed by longitudinal investigation. If formal learning is so effective, Asian students, having received so many years of school instruction focusing on form, should be very strong in all aspects of language performance. Proponents of this approach have apparently not noticed that research shows that the effect of form-focused instruction is fragile (Krashen, 2003).

Karey’s experience, in conjunction with that of so many others (see e.g. Elley, 1991; Elley & Mangubhai, 1983; Krashen, 2004; Krashen & Mason, 2017; Mason & Krashen, 2017; Mason & Krashen, 2004; Wang & Lee, 2007), shows the opposite, both cognitively and affectively. Karey, a distinguished professor as well as an outstanding student throughout her school years, had six years of formal instruction in English, three in junior high school and three in the first three years of the five-year teachers’ college. Other than this, she was also exposed to English during her graduate studies, when reading and writing journal papers. The language instruction in school was clearly not enough for her to deal with the varied and complex ways in which language is used in real life situations.

Fiction contains exactly the materials we need to face this challenge; it includes communication of all types such as chatting, negotiation, discussion, description, narration and even teasing or joking. No school text will encompass all the language features we are likely to encounter in real life (Hsieh, Wang & Lee, 2011; McQuillan, 2016).

Second, formal instruction did not help Karey overcome her extreme anxiety when it came to public speaking in English. Her case was similar to that of an adult Spanish learner, who had to take a pill (valium) before going to class because “it freaks [her] out” when she has to do an oral report or is called upon to speak in class (Krashen, 2017). Karey said that the “pounding in her heart” was hard to bear and she considered herself to be a boring speaker and conversationalist.

After reading and listening to stories that contained a lot of rich language input, she is now a much more natural conversationalist, willing to share her own stories and experiences in addition to her research expertise, and brave enough to comment on issues others bring up spontaneously. Even without the chance to study abroad, she is now becoming more confident in non-academic situations. At the end of our interview, she concluded, “I think I have almost crossed over the border built by fear”.

A plethora of studies on second language acquisition have provided empirical evidence that the path Karey followed is the most powerful means to improve aural and oral language proficiency (Elley, 1991; Elley & Mangubhai, 1983; Krashen, 2004; Krashen & Mason, 2017; Mason & Krashen, 2017; Mason & Krashen, 2004; Wang & Lee, 2007). Thus far, the available evidence indicates that it works for children as well as adults. Therefore it has important implications for the school curriculum, and can make a huge contribution to informal, out of school language use for people such as

Karey. Her story adds one more piece of evidence to support the Comprehension Hypothesis in that language is successfully acquired when we understand what we read and hear (Krashen, 2003). Finally, Karey’s case shows that it is never too late to acquire a second or foreign language or improve fluency via story reading and listening.

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**Sy-Ying Lee** (Ph. D. Southern University of California) is currently professor at the Department of Applied Foreign Languages, National Taiwan University of Science and Technology. Her research interests include issues related to second language acquisition, extensive reading, storytelling in teaching EFL children, material analysis using corpus analysis, reading-writing connection in critical literacy practices, and blogging.

*lee@mail.ntust.edu.tw*