

FREE READING: A POWERFUL TOOL FOR ACQUIRING A SECOND LANGUAGE

By

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ABSTRACT

The paper claims that free reading is a crucial ingredient in acquiring a second or foreign language. It contributes to the development of all measures of language competence which include grammar, vocabulary, spelling, syntax, fluency and style. The review supports the claim that readers acquire language subconsciously when they receive comprehensible input in a low anxiety situation. Pleasure component in free reading will lower the anxiety level of learners in the learning environment. Despite the benefits of reading, curriculum designers include more grammar study into the curriculum. Moreover, the focus is more on learning forms rather than experiencing reading in ESL classes. In fact, free reading is a powerful tool for acquiring grammar and forms and, therefore, more reading could be included in ESL curriculum.

Keywords: Language Competence, Incidental Acquisition, Subconsciously Acquired Grammatical Knowledge, Affective Filter, Comprehensible Input.

INTRODUCTION

It has been hypothesized that learners require extensive input in the form of reading to acquire a second or foreign language (Krashen, 2004; Ponniah, 2008; Hsieh, Wang, & Lee, 2011). Reading provides more input that affects acquisition, with a strong impact on grammar, vocabulary, spelling, writing style and reading fluency. The Comprehension Hypothesis claims that learners acquire language when they receive comprehensible input in a low anxiety situation. The presence of pleasure component in free reading will lower the anxiety level of the learner. Day and Bamford (1998) assert that reading text should be well within the linguistic competence of readers for the acquisition of language and the reading material should be interesting.

Free Reading means learners have complete freedom to choose books of interest and can read at their own pace. While reading, learners focus on the meaning of the text and not form. Opposed to intensive reading, which involves focus on form, free reading results in the acquisition of language implicitly. Despite the strong evidence supporting the claim that reading results in language acquisition, it is missing in ESL/EFL curriculum. Studies conducted in the recent years have shown (Lee &

Hsu, 2009; Overbeek, 2011; Rowan, 2006) that this kind of reading is an effective and a valuable input which helps a learner to acquire a second or foreign language.

The three main purposes or goals attributed to reading are pleasure, information and general understanding (Day & Bamford, 1998). When readers start experiencing the pleasure of reading, they will have more interest to read. Pleasure component present in reading will influence the readers to get involved in reading; moreover, they will find time to read. Pleasure Hypothesis (Krashen, 2004) predicts that activities that provide students with interesting and comprehensible input will be perceived equally pleasant and even more pleasant than activities that provide comprehensible input. A study conducted among the middle school students of Mandarin in US shows that comprehensible input providing activities were found effective and pleasant by the students and the study was based on the hypothesis that students will find activities that supply interesting and comprehensible input more effective and more pleasant (Lao & Krashen, 2008).

Reading by itself is a very rewarding experience and the experience of reading must be the nexus of reading task (Day & Bamford, 1998). There should not be questions after reading. If necessary, a minimal accountability can be

expected to keep track of what and how much the students have read. When there are questions at the end, the learners may feel stressful and anxious and may miss out the inherent element of pleasure in reading leading to problems in comprehension and acquisition. The Affective Filter Hypothesis states that when the affective filters are high, acquisition will be very low and when the affective filters are low, acquisition will be high (Krashen, 1981). A study which analyzed an adult's extensive reading in French over a period of 12 weeks reveals that non-threatening reading of interesting materials helped to develop a sense of achievement (Hong, 2007).

Teachers need to make the students become aware of the benefits of reading. It not only improves the reading proficiency but also results in the acquisition of language competence (Day & Bamford, 1998). The Natural Order Hypothesis states that a learner acquires a second language just as the way a child acquires its first language (Krashen, 1981). If readers get sufficient comprehensible input through reading, they are sure to acquire all measures of language competence. A study conducted among the Taiwanese vocational college students examines the impact of in-class extensive reading or sustained silent reading on writing. The students who devoted their time to reading excel in the use of content, organization of thought, vocabulary use and mechanics. The study also confirms that readers subconsciously acquired writing style, syntax, spelling, grammar and fluency (Lee & Hsu, 2009).

Acquisition of Vocabulary

Reading results in the incidental acquisition of vocabulary. Readers acquire vocabulary when they focus on meaning of the text they read, and not when focusing on new words. This process is subconscious; readers do not know that they acquire vocabulary while they read but, in fact, they subconsciously absorb meaning. Mastery over the use of vocabulary means acquiring all aspects of word knowledge which include spelling and grammar of words. An analysis of different studies conducted on reading hypothesized that vocabulary acquisition happens when the learner receives comprehensible input in the form of reading (Ponniiah, 2011a; Hsiek, Wang, & Lee, 2011;

Wagovich & Newhoff, 2004). Ponniiah (2011), in his experimental study, concluded that explicit learning of words will fade away from the mind over a period of time and, in fact, it is difficult to use consciously learnt words in sentences. The study also confirms that incidental learning through reading results in the acquisition of all aspects of the word meaning including grammar of words. The study conducted by Hsiek, Wang & Lee (2011) among Taiwanese pupils from grades 1 to 6 revealed that free reading rather than academic reading enables the pupils to acquire the level of vocabulary they are expected to acquire. The students were given two sets of reading materials namely story books and text books. The study revealed that the story book readers not only gained the ability and the confidence to read independently but also had more exposure to vocabulary as the story books contained twice as many nouns and about three times as many verbs and adjectives as the text books. Wagovich & Newhoff (2004) claimed that reading results in word knowledge growth. Their study proved that partial word knowledge can be acquired from a single exposure and the complete meaning of a word is acquired through repeated exposure. Carey (1978) supported the claim that children acquire partial meaning of a word when they encounter the word for the first time, and they acquire the complete knowledge of a word when encountering the word repeatedly in different contexts.

Writing Competence

Writing involves acquisition of language competence such as vocabulary, spelling, grammar, syntax and style. Learners learn to write by reading. Those who read more write better have better vocabularies and grammar (Krashen, 2004); moreover, reading lowers writing apprehensions. Studies confirm that free reading plays a greater role in breaking the barrier and removing apprehensions and leading to better and fluent writing (Lee & Hsu, 2009 & Rowan, 2006). Lee & Hsu (2009) confirm that reading results in writing competence which include style, vocabulary, syntax and discourse structure. Interviews of Dr. Susan Ohanian, winner of 2003 NCTE George Orwell Award for Distinguished Contribution to Honesty and Clarity in Public Language and Dr. Alfie Kohn,

author of "The Homework Myth" and public speaker on parenting and education reveal that they were voracious readers as children and confirm that their writing is the result of reading (Rowan, 2006). Rowan (2006) claims that comprehensible input received through reading facilitates the acquisition of literacy skills and augments writing.

Fluency of the language

Fluency is the ability to use a language without any inhibitions or fear. Fear of speaking is the result of incomplete acquisition (Krashen, 2008). In order to overcome the fear, one has to receive input in the language. Reading provides comprehensible input and it affects writing and speaking. Overbeek (2011) reveals her personal experiences of how reading helped her in developing her fluency and overall proficiency. Hong (2007) asserts her own experiences of reading in French resulted in not only the increase of vocabulary and improvement of writing skills but also made her very fluent and more understandable to others.

Grammar

Grammar is the formal knowledge about a language and is believed to be learnt explicitly. In fact, subconsciously acquired grammatical knowledge is more powerful than consciously learnt grammar. Explicit learning of grammar is very tedious and monotonous which requires drills and exercises. Even if the learners learn rules consciously, they may not be able to use them at the appropriate moment or in real situation. Reading helps the learners to acquire grammar naturally in a pleasant way. Krashen (1981, p. 2) claims that 'our fluency of production is based on what we have picked up. Our formal knowledge of second language, our conscious learning may be used to alter the output of the acquired system sometimes before and sometimes after the utterance is produced'. Ponniah (2008) claims that learners who experience comprehensible input through reading acquire proficiency in grammar and their proficiency level is greater when compared to those who have less exposure to comprehensible input.

Missing ingredient (free reading) in form focused ESL classes

In spite of strong evidences supporting the claim that free

reading is a powerful tool in second and foreign language education, it is missing in ESL curriculum and instead the focus is more on form. This may be because of the presence of form focused tests. A recent study (Ponniah, 2009) confirms that learning English as a second language for thirteen years using form focused instruction have not helped adult ESL students acquire language. The study also asserts that if students continue to learn the language (English as a second language) in form focused classes which focus on conscious learning of rules of grammar, list-learning of vocabulary, it is doubtful that they can acquire language, and they may not develop positive feelings for language. Mason and Krashen (2004) experimented that traditional form focused vocabulary instruction is not as powerful as incidental acquisition of vocabulary through reading. Moreover, learners cannot use consciously learned words in sentences and the learned knowledge will fade away over a period of time. (Ponniah, 2011). There are several limitations in learning and using consciously learned language competence in real situations and test like performance. The Monitor Hypothesis states that three conditions must be met for the use of consciously learned rules (Krashen 1981)

- The acquirer must know the rule. This is a formidable constraint because rules are very complex to be taught and learned, and are often misstated in grammar books (Murphy & Hastings, 2006).
- The acquirer must be focused on form. Generally, students appeal to conscious knowledge less when reading and writing and engage more with rules only when doing grammar exercises.
- The acquirer must have time to apply the rules. Performers may not have time to use rules in real situations. If they overuse rules when speaking, fluency will be seriously hampered.

Despite the limitations of learning and using consciously learned grammatical rules, conscious learning of a language is given more importance in ESL curriculum. Focus is more on learning forms rather than experiencing reading in ESL classes. Free reading is a powerful tool for acquiring grammar and forms and, therefore, more reading could be included in ESL curriculum.

Conclusion

In sum, free reading is a powerful tool that helps acquire all measures of language competence. Moreover, it is a pleasurable learning experience and reading will lower the anxiety level of learners in the learning environment. Traditional form-focused classes will not help them acquire language. In fact, this will discourage them from learning a second language and, therefore, they should read more to acquire language. To include free reading into the curriculum, potentials of reading should be tapped through future research and more research on how to organize reading programs is also required. In-class free reading will motivate students to read even after the program is over and, thus, they will become autonomous acquirers, which, of course, is the goal of all education.

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