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Why might children's literature be difficult for non-native speakers of English?

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Background

It is important to question research findings and so we appreciate this opportunity to further discuss our two studies on the appropriacy of children's literature for foreign and second language learning (Macalister & Webb, 2019; Webb & Macalister, 2013). In the first of these two studies (Webb & Macalister, 2013), we compared the lexical demands of children's literature with graded readers (texts written with a controlled vocabulary for language learners) and texts written for adult native speakers of English. The findings revealed that children's literature included a similar percentage of lower frequency words to the texts written for adults, and a much smaller percentage of higher frequency words than graded readers. This led us to suggest that graded readers were a more appropriate text type for use in extensive reading programs than texts written for children. In the second study (Macalister & Webb, 2019), we looked at the lower frequency words found in a corpus of children's texts and created a list (The writing for children high frequency word list: CH HF) of 245 specialized words found in children's stories (e.g., fierce, groan, hiccup, pilot, stomach). The value of the list was indicated by its relatively high lexical coverage of children's texts (3.39%). Based on the findings we recommended deliberate learning of the list to reduce the lexical demands of children's literature and suggested that with knowledge of the list children's literature would be a useful source of written input after completing an extensive reading program with graded readers.

It is useful to question these (and all) research findings particularly as it is intuitively logical that children's stories would be easy to understand. After all, these stories were written for young first language (L1) learners and there is no question that children enjoy them. So why would second language (L2) learners of English find it challenging to understand children's stories? We believe that there are several reasons for this. First, children tend to have much greater vocabulary knowledge than English as a foreign language (EFL) learners. By the time young native speakers of English start to read at the ages of five or six years old, they know at least 3,000 to 4,000 word families, and this number tends to increase by about 1,000 word families per year until they reach an adult vocabulary size of 15,000 to 20,000 word families (D'Anna, Zechmeister, & Hall, 1991; Goulden, Nation, & Read, 1990). In contrast, research has shown

that after nine years of formal language instruction, only 16% of EFL learners in Taiwan (Webb & Chang, 2012a) and 48% of EFL learners in Denmark (Danelund, 2013) knew the most frequent 2000 word families. It is these word families that make up the vast majority of the words encountered in spoken and written text. The larger vocabulary size of children provides greater lexical coverage of text written for children (and all other forms of spoken and written English) and research indicates that this should help them to better understand children's literature than L2 learners of English (e.g., Schmitt, Jiang, & Grabe, 2011).

Second, because children are at an early stage of L1 learning, they tend to be relatively accepting of imprecise comprehension of written (and spoken) input. This means that a great deal of L1 input may not be well understood by children. Some of it will be well understood, some of it will be partially understood, and some of it will be misunderstood. Perhaps because children experience limited comprehension of a large amount of input, they are still able to engage and enjoy their experiences with input that is designed for enjoyment such as stories, television programs, and movies. The degree to which L2 learners are able to enjoy and engage with input when their comprehension is limited is not clear and deserves investigation. However, it is perhaps reasonable to suggest that adult L2 learners may not be satisfied with limited understanding of text written for children and prefer to read a text type (graded readers) that can be understood.

A third reason why text written for children may be challenging for L2 learners is that they may be less willing than children to read a text multiple times. Repeated reading and listening to stories are common activities in childhood. Similarly, parents may often be surprised by the motivation of children to watch the same television program or movie again and again. There is great value in this repetition, because it is well-established that children's comprehension increases through repeated reading (e.g., Rasinski, 1990), repeated listening (Penno, Wilkinson, & Moore, 2002), and repeated viewing of television programs (Crawley et al., 1999; Sell, Ray, & Lovelace, 1995). The motivation of young learners to repeatedly encounter the same L1 input allows them to gradually increase their comprehension of that input. Furthermore, the increased number of encounters with the same words also allows them to gradually learn more and more words encountered in that input. There is relatively little research on L2 repeated reading, listening, and viewing, but there is evidence that both comprehension (Gorsuch & Taguchi, 2008, 2010) and vocabulary learning (Webb & Chang, 2012b) increase through repeated reading. However, the extent that L2 learners are willing to engage in repeated reading is unclear. If L2 learners were willing to undertake repeated reading of text written for children, their comprehension of these stories would likely improve.

Response to McQuillan

McQuillan's response to our studies highlights three important issues for further discussion. The first of these relates to differences in findings between corpus-driven studies. McQuillan suggests that many children's stories may be easier to understand than those that we analyzed in our studies, and he cites McQuillan (2016) as an example of this. We agree that a different sample of stories written for children may have different lexical demands. In fact, the smaller a sample of randomly selected text, the greater the variation we are likely to find. Corpus-driven

research of the vocabulary in a text type indicates the lexical demands of that sample of the text type. Researchers tend to create corpora around careful criteria, one of which is typically to examine larger corpora of one million or more running words made up of a large number of different text samples written by different authors. This increases the possibility that a corpus is representative of the text type being examined. Creating large corpora poses a challenge for researchers interested in investigating children's literature because texts in this genre tend to consist of small numbers of words. For example, the children's corpus in Webb and Macalister (2013) was comprised of 517 texts totaling 285,143 tokens. Macalister and Webb's (2019) corpus was made up of 174 texts totaling 128,540 tokens. Despite the relatively small number of running words in these corpora in comparison to those consisting primarily of texts written for adults, their size and composition improved on earlier corpus informed studies of children's literature (Macalister & Webb, 2019). The composition of McQuillan's (2016) corpus is less clear but appears to be made up of selections of 14 texts written for children, young adults, and adults that range from short samples of 1500 running words to full length novels. The difference in lexical coverage figures between individual texts should not be surprising. Analysis of a corpus essentially provides the mean lexical coverage figure for all of those texts. For example, Webb and Macalister (2013) found that one would need to know 10,000 words to reach 98% lexical coverage of their corpus of 517 texts. This does not mean that one would need this vocabulary size to reach 98% coverage of each text. There would likely be a great deal of variation with some texts requiring a much smaller vocabulary size, some texts requiring a much larger vocabulary size, and some texts requiring the vocabulary size of 10,000 word families. Therefore, McQuillan's argument that some children's stories may require a smaller vocabulary size is valid. However, it is also likely that some children's stories require a larger vocabulary size.

For his response, McQuillan analyzed the lexical coverage of the Macalister and Webb (2019) article in *Reading in a Foreign Language.* He reported that the vocabulary size necessary to reach 98% coverage was the same as was required to reach 98% of our corpus of children's text. Based on this comparison, McQuillan states that "in term of vocabulary difficulty children's literature is as hard as scholarly articles analyzing children's literature" (McQuillan, 2019, p. 302). We agree with this comment; L2 learners will need to know a similar proportion of mid and lower frequency words in order to understand children's stories and texts written for adults, but they will be different words. Indeed, creating a list of the most useful words in children's stories (e.g., enormous, bubble, fairy, tug, yell) was the focus of our 2019 study.

McQuillan's comparison of the vocabulary size necessary to understand children's stories and our article highlights a second issue: it is important to be aware of the limitations of corpus driven studies of the lexical demands of different text types. Perhaps the most important of these limitations is that lexical profiling studies provide an indication of the vocabulary size necessary to understand spoken and written discourse. However, reaching the lexical coverage levels associated with comprehension of spoken (95%) and written (98%) discourse does not guarantee that something will be understood (Nation & Webb, 2011; Webb & Nation, 2013). After all, we can understand all of the words that we encounter in a text, but this does not ensure that we understand it. We might not understand something because we do not have knowledge of the topic, because our attention wanders, or simply because it is stated in such a way that it is difficult to comprehend. Background knowledge of children's stories and the presence of

illustrations within stories are factors that may have a positive effect on comprehension of text written for children (Webb & Macalister, 2013).

In his response, McQuillan also reports on several case studies of intermediate L2 learners who have been able to effectively transition from graded readers to books written for adults and young adults. We agree that these studies are useful and provide evidence that some L2 learners can indeed read children's stories without the support of a word list. However, it is important to also be aware of the limitations of case studies such as those reported in McQuillan's response. Case studies are useful because they provide greater transparency about all of the factors that may contribute to or reduce learning. Case studies indicate what occurred in a particular case. This means that we have to be very careful about generalizing the results of a case study or several case studies to larger populations of learners. Similarly, research findings with groups of learners show what has occurred with a sample of the population. The smaller and more specific the population, the less likely we can generalize from that sample to other populations. Of course, this does not mean that the results of case studies and intervention studies cannot be generalized to others. However, it is important that readers judge the extent to which participants of studies correspond with learners in their own contexts. McQuillan cites the findings of case studies to show that some learners can move from graded readers to books written for children without the aid of a specialized word list. We do not dispute that. However, we do believe that it is unlikely that all learners will be able to do this. Further research looking at larger groups of learners transitioning from graded readers to children's literature would be useful to follow-up the earlier findings. Moreover, we see the addition of our list to be a useful tool to make it easier for learners to move from reading graded readers to reading children's stories.

McQuillan's response ends with discussion of how best to learn words: through intentional learning approaches or free reading. He suggests that free reading is the better option. Again, we agree that there is great value in learning L2 vocabulary through free reading. However, we believe that the question of whether to learn words through intentional and incidental approaches is problematic for several reasons. First, it is predicated on the assumption that there is a single approach to learning words that works best for everyone. This seems highly unlikely as we know that individual differences play a large role in language learning (Skehan, 1991). Second, it suggests that there are only these two options for learning words. However, there are many other ways to learn words such as through listening to and interacting with native speakers of English, viewing L2 television programs and movies, and playing video games. Moreover, the comparison suggests that a single approach is most appropriate in all contexts and at all stages of lexical development. Again, this seems highly unlikely. Finally, the comparison suggests that intentional learning and free reading cannot be used together. Webb and Nation (2017) suggest that intentional and meaning-focused learning should be viewed as useful complements that can be used together to increase lexical knowledge. We believe that this more inclusive approach is more useful and better represents L2 vocabulary learning.

In conclusion, we see value in this discussion and hope that it sheds greater light on the role that children's literature might play in L2 learning. McQuillan's response touches on some important issues with corpus driven studies of vocabulary, and we hope that this discussion raises awareness of the limitations of these studies, as well as case studies. Finally, differing interpretations of research findings suggest a need for further research in that area. We hope that

these responses will spur more research investigating the use of children's literature in L2 learning.

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