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Becoming a Dragon: Progress in English as a Second Language through Narrow Free Voluntary Reading

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Stephen D. Krashen

Krashen (1981) has recommended narrow reading for language and literacy development. In narrow reading, readers read the works of one author or a few authors or in only one genre, such as a series. In narrow reading, background knowledge gained from previously read text helps make the current text comprehensible, which in turn aids language acquisition. This supposition is supported by Lamme (1976), who reported that better first language readers tend to read more books by a single author.

In a recent study (Cho and Krashen, 1994), it was confirmed that narrow reading can have excellent effects on second language development. In this study, four adult second language acquirers made impressive gains in vocabulary knowledge from reading novels from the Sweet Valley series and reported increased competence in understanding and speaking English.

We report here on the continuing progress of one of these subjects, Mi-ae, a thirty year old female adult native speaker of Korean and currently works in Los Angeles. Although she has been living in the United States for five years, before she began narrow free reading, she reported having difficulty understanding native speakers and television; she was, she told us, afraid of receiving phone calls and was very reluctant to speak with native speakers of English. Mi-ae attended an ESL class soon after arriving in the United States, but dropped out after six months because the teacher overemphasized speaking in class.

Before our study began, Mi-ae, a pleasure reader in Korean, had not read any books in English while living in the United States, because she felt that reading in English would be painful; “Whenever I see English letters, they give me a headache and make me sleepy” (personal communication, Mi-ae to K.C., translated from Korean). Clearly, Mi-ae had only read difficult, academic texts in English, texts assigned in English classes in Korea.

In our previous report, Mi-ae had read eight books in one month from Bantam’s Sweet Valley Kids series, a series of short novels written at the second level that describes the adventures of Elizabeth and Jessica, identical twins. In this study, we examine Mi-ae’s progress after she had read 39 books from the Sweet Valley Kids series and four books from the Sweet Valley Twins series, a series written at the fourth grade level that continues the story of Elizabeth and Jessica. This reading was done over a period of about seven and a half months, during which, Mi-ae told us, she read during every spare moment. In addition to Sweet Valley novels, Mi-ae also started reading magazines, such as Vogue, People, and the National Inquirer.

It is important to point out that in this study, and in our previous study, subjects were not required to read, nor was any specific amount of reading assigned, nor were subjects tested on the content of what they read. The subjects themselves decided what, when and how much to read. All we did was suggest that they try the Sweet Valley novels, gave them some background knowledge about the series, and supplied them with the books.

Listening Comprehension

Conveniently, Mi-ae provided her own listening comprehension pre and post-testing:

“I had two movie video tapes. I did not understand them as all five

years ago, and just looked at the pictures. I did not understand them two years ago either. Last Tuesday, I watched them again to see if I could understand them. I understood them from the start, I could not catch everything, but I understood the entire story. I was so happy that I could understand words that I knew from the reading, such as 'envy', 'avoid', and 'wet'."

Since becoming a dedicated English reader, Mi-ae has also gotten more interested in English-language television. Her favorites include Full House, Disney movies, 21 Jump Street. In the Heat of the Night, Chips, and Home Improvement.

Speaking

We have informal evidence that Mi-ae's speaking ability in English has improved. She reported that a friend of hers, whose husband is a native speaker of English, commented recently that Mi-ae's English had improved since the last time they had seen each other one year ago. Mi-ae's friends, in fact, asked her if she had been taking English classes. All she had been doing, she responded, was reading Sweet Valley novels.

Mi-ae's older sister also noticed a change:

"I happened to listen to my sister's conversation with somebody on the phone. I was very surprised to hear her speaking in English for quite a long time, over a half an hour. She talked most of the time. I had never heard her speaking in English so much before...."(translated from Korean).

K.C. also spoke to an English speaker who had been doing business with Mi-ae for the last ten months. He had also noticed the change:

"When my wife and I met her last year, she fumbled for words. Now she speaks easily, without hesitation. My wife and I both noticed that Mi-ae is now very confident in speaking English."

Interestingly, he also inquired whether Mi-ae had studied English, asking if K.C. had taught her.

Mi-ae's Personal Theory of Language Acquisition Mi-ae was quite aware of her progress, and specifically gave reading the credit.

“There are several adult female Koreans in my working place. They have been living in the United States for several years but they do not understand English, just as I didn't before. I am proud of myself. If I had not read books, I would have ended up like them.”

At the start of the study, Mi-ae like so many others, felt that she had to attend classes to improve her English. Now, however, she feels that she can improve through reading:

“I do not have to go to school to learn English. I have learned that reading in English is a really good way to increase my English ability. So I am encouraging people to read books in English. My sister has started to read Sweet Valley Kids.”

Of course, we need to point out that Mi-ae was not a beginner; Sweet Valley Kids was, for her, comprehensible input. Her conclusions about language classes are not valid for beginners, who will have difficulty getting comprehensible output outside the classroom. In addition, we also recommend sheltered classes in popular literature (Krashen, 1992; Cook, Dupuy, and Tse, in press) to introduce language acquirers to the possibilities for free reading, that is, to give them the kind of help we gave Mi-ae.

Conclusions

While our study does not meet the standards for a true experiment, there is good reason to hypothesize that Mi-ae did, in fact, progress in English and that reading for pleasure was the cause of her progress. Pleasure reading was the only change in her behavior;

before beginning the reading program, she had been in United States for five years, and had made very little progress in English. The reading itself was a valuable source of comprehensible input, and it also made the aural input of television and conversation more comprehensible; it thus had both direct and indirect effects on her competence.

It can be argued that the “tests” used, namely her reactions to films, what does others noticed, and her own feelings about her English competence, are actually more valid than formal tests, which focus subjects on form and raise anxiety levels.

As we noted earlier, Mi-ae herself gives reading the credit, as she reveals in the following quote, which also shows awareness that output emerges as a result of input:

“My eyes and ears toward English are open and my mouth is opening gradually. I have become a dragon* thanks to reading books.”

*= in Korean, a dragon in a symbol of success.

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