

The Effect of Free Reading on Language and Academic Development: A Natural Experiment

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Free reading done outside of school makes an important contribution to literacy development. Most of the studies showing this, however, are correlational: those who read more show greater literacy development (Krashen, 1993). It is therefore possible that factors other than reading were responsible for the readers' greater literacy development. Studies using multivariate designs (Gradman and Hanania, 1991; Y.O. Lee, Krashen, and Gribbons, 1996; Constantino, S.Y. Lee, Cho and Krashen, 1997) can help resolve this problem, but far preferable is a natural experiment in which subjects differ only in the variable under examination. The case of two Korean-speaking junior high school students comes close to being such a natural experiment.

Both J and K came to the United States when they were in the sixth grade, and neither had studied English in Korea (at the time they lived in Korea, English instruction began at grade six). They went to the same public school in the United States, and went to the same junior high school. They were also in the same or similar ESL classes throughout their elementary and junior high school years in the US.

J and K also come from similar socioeconomic backgrounds, but there is a profound difference in parental attitudes: J's parents encourage their children to read. J had been an avid reader in her first language. In an informal interview, conducted in her first language, J told one of us (J.C.) that in Korea she read comic books, story books, biographies, and magazines, and read, on the average, one book a day in Korean. K read

much less in Korean, averaging only one book every two months.

Progress after two years in the United States

J's reading habit transferred to English. She continued to read, in English, the kinds of books she enjoyed in Korean. After two years in the United States, she owned 39 books in English and averaged about one English book every two days. K owned only five English books and read about one book per month in English.

The difference between J and K's English proficiency was not evident in their ESL grades: both were "A" students in ESL classes. An informal study, however, confirmed that a difference clearly existed. We obtained two writing samples from their summer ESL class (see appendix) and presented these samples to 25 graduate students in Education at the University of Southern California enrolled in a class in language education. We asked our judges to indicate, using whatever criteria they wished, which composition was better. *All twenty-five judges rated J's composition to be better.*

Progress after six years in the United States

Four years later, J continued to read more in English, reading for pleasure about one hour per day. Her reading included *Newsweek*, and novels such as *Clockwork Orange*, *Damion*, *Go Ask Alice*, and *The Color Purple*. K reported that she reads English magazines, but only for about 20 minutes at a time, two or three times a week.

J has been very successful in school. She was selected to participate in the Young Scholars Conference in Washington, D.C., one of

three selected from Los Angeles. Her overall grade point average in school is A+ (4.3), her grade in summary writing in English class is "A" and her grade in analytic writing is "B". K is a "C" student in English and her grade in writing is "C".

Discussion

Our results can be interpreted in several ways. They are fully consistent with the "Reading Hypothesis", the hypothesis that free reading is responsible for our competence in writing style as well as other aspects of literacy. There are other possible explanations, however:

1. The Writing Hypothesis:

In addition to reading more than K, J also wrote more, both in Korea and in the United States. While in Korea, J wrote regularly, about two to three times per week and attempted to write several short stories. K reported that she wrote some letters and occasionally made entries in a diary, but most of her writing was required school writing. In the US, J continues to write voluntarily in English about three to four times per week, while K writes in English (letters or notes) only two or three times per month. It could thus be argued that differences between J and K are consistent with the Writing Hypothesis, the hypothesis that writing practice promotes growth in literacy. There is, however, good reason to doubt the correctness of the Writing Hypothesis: those who write more do not necessarily write better (Krashen, 1993).

2. The Instruction Hypothesis:

While J and K had similar amounts of formal instruction in English, perhaps one of them took it more seriously. Interviews with both subjects revealed, however, that both of them valued grammar study (but both also felt that reading was more valuable). Both also valued the use of the dictionary in early stages.

Of course, we can never be sure that J and K did not differ in other ways. While they both said they

valued grammar, it is possible that J studied much harder. Nevertheless, we can eliminate many social, environmental, and school factors in trying to explain why J did so much better, and the difference in free reading is quite clear.

References

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Appendix

Comparison of Two ESL Students' Writing

Subject: K

Writing Sample #1:

Autobiography

I was born in the Korea, and I live in los angeles gramercy place. my family is very kind

I have a dad, mom, and my brother I go to John Burrough Junior high school

I like a food my best favorite food is Korean foo. Korean foos is a hat, I lke food. But I'm not fat I was thin My best friensa is Jua Yean and Jou Young. Tpp many people I have best friend my hobby is doctor and madel I was playing the free time and listen the radio Korean sang. I have pepal dag it's stupid dag.

I was go to beach at sunday. Very fun eating, the hamburger. We are playing the game. and than I am bruring a swim very hat at sunday.

Yesterday is my birthday, But my family and my causin going to a restaurant a lot of eating a rice and beef and my father and my

cousin gave to me a presents. and I go to the disey land

— King is very fun and we are eating a hamburger yesterday was a very fun day.

Writing Sample #2

Title: My favorite season.

My favorite season was a summer. Because. At summer. we are can swim. And Go to camp. Wating the watermelon. I like a watermelon. But a farmmer. was a trouble. earth was a drought. Many people wear a short T-shirt. The winter was very cold. The cloth buy the at season was very disgusting. Because spend a lot of money for on cloths But I like it. buying the cloth very cold I don't like a winter. At summer is the temperature is high. and winter is the Temperature is low. Many people like a warm day. I like a too but warm day. Fall is cool. Spring is a little cold Summer came on and we are goes. to the beach. Summer was very hot every Day. I like a winter. Because very cold.

This season many people go to beach I am go to beach too. Very hot there.

So, Season was very beautiful.

Subject: J

Writing Sample #1:

My Autobiography

I was born on March 5th 1979. I have lived in Korea. On September 22nd 1990, I came to the United States if America. I was eleven years old. I'm living in the United States of America almost two years but still, I don't speak English a lot.

When I was coming in the United Staes of America, I was very afraid to speak to the forin people from other countries. Because, I couldn't speak English a lot. I worried a lot about when I speak English, I will speak wrong way. But, now I ddon't worry about that I don't speak English very much. Because my father told me to don't worry about that, and I will speak English well someday.

My favorite T.V. show is Beverly Hills, 90210 and I Love Lucy. I don't really speak English, but i enjoy it.

I like all kinds of music, Especially, I like pop and soul best.

My best friend is Jung Hwa Kim who sits in front of me in the summer school in period 1st and 2nd. She's very nice and she take cares of everything that she likes.

I want to be a doctor.

Writing Sample #2

What is My Favorite Season?

My Favorite Season—I like all the seasons, because i like all kind of weather.

First, in spring, the weather is warm. The children and adults feel like small plants are growing and they fall sleep often

The place where I wan to spend my time is country, because I want to see the plants' growing.

In summer the weather is very hot, children and adults go the the beach.

I want to go to the mountain to get cool and drink a clean water from the mountain

In fall, the weather is cool, the people are wearing shorts and T-shirts.

I want to go to everywhere that I can spend time with my friends.

In winter, the weather is very cold and the people wear the heavy clothes.

I want to visit Korea. Because, Korea have all four seasons and we can see the snow in winter.

I love all the seasons and
How good the seasons are!

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