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Teaching Poetry Day by Day.

Hypotheses About Free Voluntary Reading

Stephen Krashen

I am not claiming that the following hypotheses are true. They are, after all, hypotheses. Thus far, they are supported by the evidence, and there is no counter-evidence. Research directed at finding supporting evidence or evidence contrary to these hypotheses will advance the field. This means that they are "good" hypotheses, right or wrong.

These hypotheses assume the correctness of: the acquisition-learning, natural order, Monitor, comprehension (including the Reading Hypothesis), and affective filter hypotheses, for both aural and written language, first and second language, and acquirers of all ages (Krashen, 2003, 2004).

The Forgetting Hypothesis: Language acquisition occurs most efficiently when we are so interested in the message that we "forget" it is in another language. This hypothesis follows from earlier hypotheses: "Forgetting" requires that the message is comprehensible and that anxiety be low. In addition, the Forgetting Hypothesis requires that the message be not only interesting, but compelling, which focuses all attention on the message, so that thoughts of anxiety do not even occur.

The Forgetting Hypothesis is influenced by the concept of "flow", (Csikszentmihalyi, 1993). Flow is the state people reach when they are deeply but effortlessly involved in an activity. In flow, the concerns of everyday life and even the sense of self disappear – our sense of time is altered and nothing but the activity itself seems to matter. "Forgetting" and flow occur in reading when readers are "lost in a book", when they are aware only of the story or the message in the text. It is when this happens that language acquisition occurs most effectively. Note that this position is the opposite of the "focus on form" or "focus on forms" points of view.

The Effortless Reading Hypothesis: The best reading for language development is easy reading, reading that seems to be completely comprehensible without struggle. Effortless Reading may be a prerequisite to "Forgetting".

Getting lost in a book is only possible when comprehension is not a barrier. Thus:

Effortless Reading > Forgetting

The Effortless Reading Hypothesis is consistent with Laufer (1992): For optimal vocabulary development, at least 95% of the words in a text need to be known, which suggests that optimal acquisition requires a high level of comprehension.

The Unawareness of Acquisition Hypothesis states that readers will not be aware that they are improving while they are reading, but will only be aware of reading interesting books.

I suspect that those who "forget" they are reading in another language are also unaware that they are acquiring. Thus:

Forgetting > Unawareness of Acquisition, and thus: Effortless Reading > Forgetting > Unawareness of Acquisition

Evidence for this hypothesis are cases in which: (1) acquirers are "surprised" to discover that they had acquired something they didn't know they had acquired; and (2) were aware of their competence but didn't know where it came from.

Here are two examples:

Y. Cohen (1997) attended an English-language medium school in her native Turkey, beginning at age 12. The first two years were devoted to intensive English study, and Cohen reports that after only two months, she started to read in English, "as many books in English as I could get hold of. I had a rich, ready made library of English books at home ... I became a member of the local British Council's library and occasionally purchased English books in bookstores ... By the first year of middle school I had become an avid reader of English."

Her reading, however, led to an "unpleasant incident" in middle school:

"I had a new English teacher who assigned us two compositions for homework. She returned them to me ungraded, furious. She wanted to know who had helped me write them. They were my personal work. I had not even used the dictionary. She would not believe me. She pointed at a few underlined sentences and some vocabulary and asked me how I knew them; they were well beyond the level of the class. I had not even participated much in class. I was devastated. There and then and many years later I could not explain how I knew them. I just did."

Lin, Shin and Krashen
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The idea that compulsion is not ideal for learning in general is an old one: "Compulsory physical exercise does no harm to the body, but compulsory learning never sticks in the mind ...." (Plato, The Republic, Part VIII, book 7, pages 269–270; Translated by Desmond Lee, London: Penguin, second edition, 1974).

Consistent with this hypothesis is the finding that sustained silent reading, which does not require comprehension checking, typically produces results superior to traditional instruction.

Conclusions

These hypotheses claim that language development happens in small steps beneath the level of awareness, and occurs when the reader's attention is directed not at the language but at a message that the reader (or listener) thinks is very interesting.

They claim that grim determination and struggle are not part of the language development process; that there is no need for the delayed gratification that is core to skill-building. In fact, the hypotheses presented here claim that pain and struggle are an indication that language acquisition is not taking place (although conscious language learning might be).

They also maintain that the path of language and literacy development, while obeying universal principles of language acquisition, is individual, in the sense that different people have different interests and backgrounds. A text that results in flow in one reader will not necessarily have this effect in other readers.

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