

The potential of series books: How narrow reading leads to advanced L2 proficiency

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Abstract

Nobody disagrees that reading is good for students' language development. The more they read texts that they can understand, the more confident and adept they become. However, it can be quite a struggle to get students started on their reading journey. We suggest that this is partly due to a lack of access to comprehensible and compelling reading materials. We argue that book series, which contain highly familiar language, easy-to-follow story lines and relatable characters, can potentially be used to get students hooked on reading and to keep them reading.

Keywords: Series reading, narrow reading, self-selected pleasure reading, extensive reading, comprehensible input

Introduction

Many teachers believe that self-selected pleasure reading is good for students' language development. They believe that students who read a great deal become more fluent readers, more confident writers and speakers and tend to perform well on standardized language proficiency tests, such as TOELF, TOEIC and IELTS. Their beliefs are supported by research. Decades of research have shown that reading is an excellent way of developing students' literacy and language skills. Krashen (2004a) provides substantial evidence demonstrating the positive effects of reading on L1 and L2 students' literacy development (see also Krashen, 2011). Studies show that those who regularly read books outperform those who rarely do so. This is particularly so for those who read over an extended period of time (12 months or longer). The positive impact of reading on language development is also observed in a wide range of L2 learning contexts, as demonstrated by two recent meta-analysis studies (Jeon & Day, 2016; Nakanishi, 2015).

The principal concept behind extensive reading is the Comprehension Hypothesis, which claims that we acquire language when we read and hear language we understand. Extensive reading, defined as reading highly comprehensible and interesting target language material, allows language acquirers to be immersed in comprehensible input, leading to the acquisition of "literacy-related aspects of language" (Krashen, 2018, para 3). There is substantial evidence supporting the Comprehension Hypothesis, evidence coming from a variety of sources (Krashen, 2009).

However, teachers' beliefs do not always get translated into classroom practices. In a survey involving 119 L2 teachers from Asia, Chang & Renandya (2017) reported that in response to a question about why students need to do extensive reading, a large percentage of the respondents reported that reading could improve students' reading skills (68.9%) and more importantly, their overall English language proficiency (82.4%). Our conversations with teachers from around the world seem to confirm the survey results above, i.e., that teachers believe that extensive reading can have a positive impact on L2 learning. And yet, many of these teachers also tell us that they either do not include extensive reading in their teaching, or if they do, they do it only half-heartedly; thus, their students fail to reap the full language learning benefits of extensive reading.

We have been told that students have low reading motivation, and do not enjoy reading. These teachers tell us that they have tried different ways of motivating their students, but none seems to work. Perhaps the teachers are not aware of the fact that book series can be extremely motivating and that series readers often become so engaged in their reading that they won't put the book down until they get to the last page? We discuss below what series reading is about and why it can be used to promote a healthy and lasting reading habit.

Series reading

Series reading is a special form of narrow reading. Krashen (2004b) defined narrow reading as 'reading several books by one author or about a single topic of interest' (p. 17). In series reading, students read books that come in a series written by the same author. A familiar example would be JK Rowlings' Harry Potter series, one of the most widely read series in the world. There are many other popular series, such as The Hardy Boys, Nancy Drew, Little House on the Prairie, Perry Mason, Sweet Valley High, The Famous Five Collections, Goosebumps and Geronimo Stilton.

Series reading is very popular with young novice readers because series books contain highly familiar language, easy-to-follow story lines and relatable characters (McGill-Franzen & Ward, 2015). Many people report that they become interested in reading only after they read series books. They then continued doing series reading and gradually widened their reading selections, trying out books of different topics by different authors.

Many avid readers remember the first series books that got them hooked onto reading. The first author, for example, still remembers vividly how he stumbled onto the Perry Mason Series by Erle Stanley Gardner. His level of English was quite low back then; so, it was quite a struggle for him to comprehend an original English novel. Fortunately, after reading two or three titles, he found that the language became more comprehensible and the story lines more predictable, which enabled him to read faster and with greater confidence and enjoyment. By then, he had become completely hooked on the Perry Mason series and read the whole 40 or 50 titles by the same author.

This experience is not unique. We have met countless second or foreign language learners who became avid series readers. Cho & Krashen (1995), for example, reported a case study of a low proficiency ESL Korean woman living in the US who became an enthusiastic series reader within a short period of time. In one year, she read more than 60 series books, starting with the easier "Sweet Valley Kids" and "Sweet Valley Teens" books, then moving up to the linguistically more challenging "Sweet Valley High" volumes. After graduating from the "Sweet Valley" series (books for children and teenagers), she explored popular adult books, such as Harlequin Romances and novels by Danielle Steel and Sydney Sheldon. Incidentally, many of these book series find their way on to TV or the silver screen e.g., Little House on the Prairie, Perry Mason, Harry Potter and Twilight. TV series are a great source of comprehensible input and incidental vocabulary learning, as they contain words and

expressions that reoccur throughout the episodes (Rodgers & Webb, 2011). For instance, TV viewing is a popular means of learning English among Moroccan youths. Dressman, Lee, & Sabaoui (2016), for example, found that “Many, and in particular those who are the most skilled in speaking and listening, estimate that they have learned 70% to 85% of their English by going online or watching satellite TV” (p. 71).

In a recent study on the reading habits of primary school children in Singapore, Jones (2015) investigated children’s book choices and reasons for reading. All 67 of the study’s participants reported that they were reading series books and were able to name the titles of the series and their authors. When asked which they preferred to read: books of their own choice or books used in schools, one of the study’s respondents, Ramesh (not his real name), showed a clear preference for reading books of his own choice, stating that:

Hmm, these [referring to the textbook stories), because the textbook stories are just like the blurbs. They just give you an idea of what’s going to happen. But these you can read the full story and then you get the full idea and everything. So each time you turn a page, you get more interested rather than reading the textbook ... like if you want to read this page, you want to know what’s going on on the next page (Jones, 2015, p. 14).

Another student, Ronald (not his real name), was very articulate in describing why he found the textbook stories uninspiring and a series book he was reading “The Murderous Math” particularly compelling, as the excerpt below shows (Jones, 2015, p. 15).

SAJ [the researcher]	Okay. And so can you tell me why you prefer those ones?
Ronald	Because the ones that I don’t like, when I read it, I only read a few pages and I fall asleep.
SAJ	Okay. How about these ones?
Ronald	Hmm?
SAJ	The Murderous Maths.
Ronald	Yes, once I get to read it, I read non-stop until the end of the day and I finish the entire book in a day.

Unfortunately, teachers seem to be unaware of the important role that book series play in students’ reading development. When students and teachers implement extensive reading, teachers tend to choose and make available what they consider to be “books of substance,” i.e., books that in their opinion contain informational or literary value for their students. They encourage wide reading, instead of narrow or series reading. Series books, such as Goosebumps or Geronimo Stilton, are often considered ‘fluffy’ i.e., lacking in substance, and therefore to be discouraged.

Chang & Renandya (2017) found that 68% of their teacher respondents were not familiar with narrow reading. This agrees with the results of their poll, which revealed that the teachers in their study did not recommend narrow reading of graded readers (see Table 1).

Table 1: Which way(s) of reading did you suggest to your students?

Statement	Responses
Reading a wide range of graded readers	87 (73.1%)
Reading many graded readers of the same genre	23 (19.3%)
Reading many graded readers by the same title	15 (15.6%)
Reading many graded readers by the same author	7 (5.9%)

We are not, of course, suggesting that wide reading is a bad thing. We all have to read outside of our zone of interest at least occasionally. But those who have done a great deal of narrow reading will be well-prepared when this happens. This is because all reading results in the acquisition of a great deal of language used elsewhere (Krashen, 2004), as well as knowledge of the world (e.g. Stanovich, West, and Harrison, 1995). In addition, narrow readers do not usually stay with the same genres forever; their reading material changes as their interests develop (Schoonover, 1938; LaBrant, 1958; Krashen, Lee, and Yao, 2017).

What is so special about series reading?

Students need to regularly read texts they can understand and from which they derive pleasure. As they read more books, they find that they can read fluently and confidently, and with greater enjoyment. In addition, the more they read, their background knowledge about the specific topics of their reading increases, which helps them read the next title in the series with ease and greater comprehension, as well as to write on the topics and in the styles of the books they have been reading. Prior knowledge, Krashen (2004b) maintains, 'is a tremendous facilitator of comprehension' (p. 17). Armed with greater background knowledge, students can deepen their understanding of the contents of the book, make more elaborate and personally relevant connections between characters in the story and make more meaningful text to text, text to self and text to world connections.

In her reflections on the importance of series reading, Morrison (2017) sums up why series reading is a powerful way to get young readers hooked on books.

What happens when we read a series book? We fall in love with characters and their conflicts. We become a character in the books—feeling all passions and losses the character feels. The more books we read in the series, the more comfortable we become with the author's writing style. We know how the author will begin the next chapter. We know the key phrases and actions associated with each character. We know how the author will end a chapter. We just know. (para. 3)

We summarize below a list of compelling reasons why series reading should be introduced early in a school's reading programme.

1. Series books are highly motivating. What Ronald said in response to the question about series reading, referred to earlier, is worth repeating: he couldn't put the book down until he finished reading the whole book. We feel that series books contain two critical ingredients that make reading in a foreign language exciting and rewarding: the contents are of great interest to the students and the language is comprehensible. Novice L2 learners often have to read uninteresting and linguistically demanding texts. Not surprisingly they often complain about having unhappy and frustrating experiences. Reading series books potentially bring the joy of learning a foreign language back into the classroom.
2. Series reading is a great source of narrow input, which, according to Krashen (2004b), facilitates language development. Multi-volume books on the same topic and by the same author provide students with multiple exposures to vocabulary and grammatical structures (Kang, 2015). Familiarity with the language and writing style of the author makes the subsequent reading of each book in the series easier and more enjoyable.
3. Reading serialized fiction can greatly reduce the problems often encountered by novice and struggling readers. These readers often lack the necessary language and experience to read non-series books, which typically contain complex and challenging vocabulary words. When they read series books, they find that the books contain

familiar vocabulary and formulaic language, which greatly facilitates interpretations of the meanings of challenging vocabulary words.

4. The effect of reading is most pronounced after students have read a large number of books over a period of time. In other words, quantity of reading matters a great deal. Renandya, Rajan & Jacobs (1999), for example, reported that quantity of reading is significantly correlated with students' learning gains. When students find the right book series to read, there is a higher chance that they will stay with it for a period of time and read the whole series, thus benefitting from the large exposure to compelling and comprehensible language input.
5. Students often report a first positive experience with a book, which may then stimulate their interest in reading. This type of book is called a home run book (Trelease, 2001). It is interesting to note that students' home run books often include popular book series such as Harry Potter and Goosebumps (Ujiie & Krashen, 2002). Home run books can potentially lead to more lasting reading habits in our students.
6. Reading book series can improve students' reading proficiency as well as their vocabulary, grammar and knowledge of text structure (Krashen, 2004). With increased proficiency in reading, students may find themselves in a better position to develop their listening competence. In a recent paper, Krashen et al. (2018) hypothesized that "acquirers' previous English competence gained through reading can help make aural input comprehensible, resulting in rapid improvement in listening" (p. 1). Given that listening is a challenging skill for many foreign language learners, this hypothesis is worth testing.
7. The Conduit Hypothesis (Krashen, 2018) posits that the path to developing competence in academic language involves three interrelated stages, with each stage serving as a conduit to the next stage. The first stage typically involves children listening to high interest stories via parent or teacher read-alouds. The second stage involves students doing extensive self-selected recreational reading. Often, this stage is characterized by students doing narrow reading, which includes series reading. The last stage, interestingly, also consists of students doing narrow reading of academic or specialized texts of their choice, excellent preparation for continuing on their life path.

Conclusion

Teachers often encourage students to do 'serious' reading, telling them to avoid reading series books. They believe series books are too easy and students won't learn much from easy books. Students, these teachers believe, should instead read harder books on a wider range of topics and written by different authors so that they can learn new vocabulary and more complex grammatical structures and learn a diverse range of writing styles. On the surface, this seems like sensible advice. But, research done over the past decades shows that students develop their literacy skills by reading books that are highly interesting and within their current levels of proficiency. Research also shows that when students read comprehensible and compelling books (Krashen, Lee, & Lao, 2017), they are on the way to becoming fluent and confident readers.

Series books have been around for a long time, and are a popular way to help novice readers get interested in reading and improve in literacy. It is time the English language teaching profession started to take advantage of this resource.

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George M. Jacobs has written widely on such topics as cooperative learning, extensive reading, environmental education, and humane education. Many of his works are available for free download at georgejacobs.net. He teaches Writing at James Cook University, Singapore. George is a member of the board of the Extensive Reading Foundation, the International Ecolinguistics Association, Kampung Senang Charity and Education Foundation and Vegetarian Society (Singapore).

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