

Developing Competence in a Second Language Through Reading Fiction

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Abstract

There are two approaches to science, both valid: The “Popper” view is that we progress by making hypotheses and by looking for counterexamples. The “Emerson” view that “the value of a principle is the number of things it will explain.” I present a hypothesis that is consistent with both: Reading self-selected fiction is the key to reaching higher levels of competence. There is no counterevidence to this hypothesis and a substantial amount of supporting evidence from first language, second language, and heritage language research.

Introduction: We need both Popper and Emerson

Today, Karl Popper’s view of science is the dominant one: Proper scientific method means generating hypotheses and then trying to show they are wrong - in other words, we try to disprove the hypothesis with counterevidence.

This has resulted in an enthusiastic search for counterevidence: A young scientist can establish a career by finding a counterexample to a famous hypothesis. And no hypothesis, no matter how well-established, is safe from disproof. As Einstein pointed out “No amount of experimentation can ever prove me right; a single experiment can prove me wrong.”

The Popper approach, in my opinion, is valid and very useful. But it’s not the only game in town.

Ralph Waldo Emerson stated a complementary view: “The value of a principle is the number of things it will explain.” Under the Popper approach, a hypothesis does not gain in strength when it is confirmed, no matter how many times this happens, as Einstein pointed out. Popper is still right. We don’t prove anything when we replicate, but if the hypothesis is confirmed several times it “gains in value.”

I think that some kinds of replication are more impressive than others, e.g.

- (1) When we find highly similar results in very different language and cultures.
- (2) When a hypothesis explains results it was not designed for.

In this paper, I will claim that the “comprehension hypothesis,” or “input hypothesis” explains a variety of aspects of language acquisition. My focus will be on the impact of one kind of comprehensible input, reading, specifically self-selected reading for pleasure, which is usually popular fiction.

In this paper, I report on case histories and correlational studies, two of the many kinds of research that come to the same conclusion: More self-selected pleasure reading leads to high levels of language competence as well as knowledge of subject matter.

Case history: Elizabeth Murray (First Language)

Elizabeth Murray was a child of poverty, but was a dedicated reader, thanks to her father. He joined a number of public libraries in the New York area, took out lots of books, and . . . never returned them, providing his daughter with a huge supply of reading material at home. She rarely attended school, showing up only for the final exams given at the end of the year. She passed the exams, thanks to her reading. "Any formal education I received came from the few days I spent in attendance, mixed with knowledge I absorbed from random readings of my or Daddy's ever-growing supply of unreturned library books. And as long as I still showed up steadily the last few weeks of classes to take the standardized tests, I kept squeaking by from grade to grade" (Shanahan, 2010).

Case history: Sodam (based on Cho, 2017). (English as a Foreign Language)

Sodam lived in Busan, Korea, a city with an English library intended for students. Her reading adventure began when she was in fourth grade and her school instituted a new English reading program. In reaction, Sodam's mother started to provide her English books.

Sodam was already a reader in Korean, and soon became an enthusiastic reader of books in English. She was unable to take out as many books from the library as she wanted to read (the library had a five-book two-week limit), so her mother used family and family friends' library cards to get access to more books.

In middle school, Sodam won nearly every possible major prize for mastery of English, including the grand prize for middle school students in a nationwide English contest based on her writing and public speaking, and also won a number of local English contests in speaking and reading. One of her teachers, a native speaker of English, said this: "When I talk to her I almost feel as if I'm speaking to another native English speaker."

Sodam did not go to cram school, and never lived in an English-speaking country. But she was a reader.

It is important to point out that at first Sodam read books from recommended reading lists, but soon after she selected her own books from the library. Between 4th and 6th grade, Sodam and her family took out 1,124 books from the Busan English library, as well as many more from a site provided by her school for free reading.

Case history: Sophia (from Lin, Shin, and Krashen, 2007) (Advanced English as a Second Language)

Sophia and her family arrived in the US from Taiwan when she was in grade 6. She was successful in high school, but showed an interesting test score pattern. Her high school tested students in reading in both the fall and the spring. Oddly, her reading scores were higher in the fall than in the spring. During the academic year, her scores declined, but they then increased over the summer. When she returned to school in the fall, her tests showed that she had more than made up for the decline during the year.

What did she do to make this happen? She didn't study vocabulary, read challenging books or write book reports. All she did was read for pleasure and all of her reading was self-selected.

Sophia read about 50 books each summer, nearly all from the public library, beginning with Nancy Drew and the Sweet Valley series and moving on to Christy Miller.

Her summer experience was in contrast to what happened during the school year: because she had so much school work, she had hardly any time to read. Her mother joked that perhaps her daughter should not go to school during the school year if she wants to improve in reading.

Case histories reported by G. Cho (from Cho and Krashen, 2000). (Heritage Language)

Cho conducted interviews with seven Korean-American adults she met at a social gathering. All had high levels of proficiency in Korean: They rated themselves as 5 out of 5 in listening, 4.7 in reading and 4.3 in writing, even though they had been in the US for more than 33 years, arrived as teen-agers, and had no instruction in Korean since leaving Korea. Also, six of the seven had little access to Korean speakers. But five out of seven were “dedicated readers” and three explicitly gave reading the credit for their high level of competence, specifically reading books that they wanted to read and had chosen themselves.

Here are some details:

- Howard, now a high school math teacher, told Cho: “I read every day. When I was hooked on Chinese novels (translated into Korean), especially historical novels, I read for three to four hours a day, spent many hours trying to finish a novel in one sitting.” Among other novels, Howard read the popular “Three Kingdom” series.
- Tony, a California state-certified professional Korean translator, stated: “To me, Korean language classes didn’t help much... I think I maintained Korean from simply reading books, magazines, and newspapers and from watching Korean dramas and talking about them with church friends and teachers afterwards.”
- Lucas said he became a dedicated reader in Korean after arriving in the US. Eventually, “my understanding of the Korean language improved to the college level. I read Korean fables [and] Korean historical biographies such as King Sejoing [founder of the Korean alphabet]. One of my favorite books was Mu So Yu [not possessing anything], written by a Korean monk.” Lucas also mentioned that his Korean reading helped him develop his Korean well enough to volunteer as an interpreter for the police department.

Case histories reported by L. Tse (from Tse, 2001) (Heritage Language)

Most of Tse’s subjects, ages 18 to 24, were born in the US and had no extended residence or education in the country where the heritage language was spoken. They were, however, clearly successful at developing the language (Cantonese, Japanese, Spanish). “Nearly all ... developed (an) interest in reading for pleasure, which they credited for their advanced reading ability as adult.” Reading material for several of her subjects included “light reading” (magazines and comic books) and “For the most part, the participants read fiction for pleasure” (p. 262).

Access to reading material was provided by family members: “Helen’s father brought home a newspaper in Chinese every day to read after work, and Julie’s mother read newspapers on a regular basis which she bought at the Japanese market ... Frequently, parents brought home heritage language magazines purchased at a local market or news stand, or borrowed them from friends who regularly traded periodicals with one another.

Helen had access to her mother’s celebrity magazines and occasionally read articles from her brother’s car magazines in Chinese. As the participants grew older, they purchased or subscribed to magazines themselves“ (p. 261). Several parents were dedicated novel readers and brought novels home regularly.

Correlational: Gradman and Hanania (1991) (English as a Second Language)

Gradman and Hanania (1991) interviewed 101 international students enrolled in an intensive English program at Indiana University. Using multiple regression, they were able to determine the independent strength of various predictors of their scores on the TOEFL test (“beta” in table 1). Those who reported more voluntary reading (“extracurricular reading”) did better on the TOEFL, as indicated by the beta in table 1. More exposure to English and more voluntary speaking did not result in higher TOEFL scores; in fact, the relationship was negative. (I have no explanation why “native speaking teachers” had such a strong positive relationship with scores on the TOEFL.)

Table 1. Predictors of scores on the TOEFL test (from Gradman and Hanania, 1991).

Predictor	Beta
extracurricular reading	0.53
native speaking teachers	0.43
total exposure	-0.21
extracurricular speaking	-0.2

Correlational: Constantino, Lee, Cho, and Krashen (1997) (English as a Second Language)

Constantino, Lee, Cho and Krashen (1997) is a similar study. They asked 43 international students enrolled in an American university to fill out a questionnaire and provide their TOEFL scores.

The significant predictors of TOEFL are presented in table 2: The amount of study of English in the home country was the best predictor (average 8.6 years) and another significant predictor of TOEFL, length of residence in the US (LOR/US). also did well in the regression analysis. The average of length of residence in the US was about a year and a half.

Table 2. Predictors of TOEFL scores (from Constantino et. al., 1997).

Predictor	beta
Free reading/books	0.41
English study/home	0.48
LOR/US	0.42

The “free reading/books” predictor is a combination of a measure of book reading frequency and the number of books read before taking the TOEFL. “Free reading/books”

was a strong predictor of TOEFL scores, which is remarkable because of the small number of books written in English that subjects reported reading (see table 1 below). The simple correlation of this predictor with TOEFL scores was very high; $r = .714$.

Here is another interesting table from the same study, showing the relationship between TOEFL scores and the number of English books students reported reading before taking the TOEFL (table 3). As Constantino et. al. note, “this data needs to be interpreted cautiously, because of the small number of subjects in some of the categories” (p. 116), but it is remarkable.

Table 3: Amount of Self-selected reading and TOEIC scores

Number of books read	mean	s.d.	number of subjects
None	543.1	43.03	10
1 to 5	555.13	42.88	20
6 to 10	583.71	63.9	7
11 to 50	605.33	18.58	3
over 50	613	47.62	3

From Constantino et. al. (1997)

Correlational: Mason and Krashen (2017) (English as a Foreign Language)

Mason and Krashen (2017) reported on the progress made by eight EFL students in Japan who engaged in independent self-selected reading (supervised by Beniko Mason). They kept a record of what they read and the number of pages read, and took alternate forms of the TOEIC test, a standardized test of English as a second language. They were not asked to write summaries or book reports. The youngest subject was 21, the oldest 78, and time spent reading ranged from four months to three years. Subjects reported reading mostly books for young adults (e.g. books written by Judy Blume) and graded readers.

Mason and Krashen correlated gains on the TOEIC with the estimated amount of time students spent reading, based on the students’ records. The correlation was a spectacular .94, nearly perfect: More reading meant larger gains. Of great interest, there was only modest variation among subjects, even though they read different books. Mason and Krashen also calculated that subjects gained about .6 of a point on the TOEIC for each hour read. At this rate, a reader could move from the bottom of the "Elementary Proficiency" level of TOEIC performance to the beginning threshold of "International Proficiency" in three years of relaxed, self-selected pleasure reading.

All of the subjects except one did other things to improve their English in addition to reading, including test preparation, vocabulary study and listening to English programs on the radio. None of these factors had a significant effect: Only hours spent reading was a significant predictor of TOEIC gains (Krashen and Mason, 2015).

Summary

I have presented only a small sample of the research showing a clear relationship between language proficiency and self-selected pleasure reading (for more, please see

Krashen, 2011). As far as I know, there are no counterexamples; self-selected pleasure reading has been a winner in every study in which interesting and comprehensible reading material was available.

According to Popper, however, critics can always demand more evidence, despite the huge number of confirming studies. But critics are very eager to turn to methods that have lost every empirical test they have participated in (Krashen, 1982, 1985, 2010) and the data presented here satisfies Emerson's criteria for a hypothesis of value.

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