

Is Self-Selected Pleasure Reading the Cure for the Long-Term ELL Syndrome? A Case History
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“I read so much that sometimes I would hide under the covers with a flashlight and not go to sleep until I was finished with my book. (Reyna Grande, *The Distance Between Us*, p. 241).

One of today’s topics of concern is the existence of Long Term ELL’s, English acquirers who remain classified as limited in English for an excessively long time. The professional literature on this topic does not, to our knowledge, mention what may be the most important factor: whether the acquirer is a dedicated pleasure reader. There is overwhelming evidence supporting the powerful impact of self-selected reading on literacy-related aspects of language competence, in first and second language acquisition (Krashen, 2004). In fact, self-selected reading might be the only way we acquire academic language (Krashen, 2012).

A recent case supporting this is Reyna Grande, who recently published her autobiography, *The Distance Between Us* (2012). Grande came to the US at age nine, after a life of astonishing deprivation, both emotionally and physically (which improved only in some respects in the US). She was not a long term ELL – she tells us that she “successfully completed the ESL program and got rid of my status as an ESL student” at the end of seventh grade (p. 240). She did well in school, winning writing awards in English, attending the University of California at Santa Cruz, and eventually became a successful author in English, publishing two novels in addition to her autobiography.

Reyna Grande became a pleasure reader in English when she was a seventh grader; this, we hypothesize, contributed to her reclassification that year. She continued to read: In grade eight, she “would stop at the Arroyo Seco Library for books” every Friday before going home. She borrowed the maximum every week: ten books, beginning with some classics such as the Brothers Grimm and, at the suggestion of the librarian, moving on to young adult fiction: *The Sweet Valley Series*, *Babysitters Club* and eventually to her favorite, books by VC Andrews.

Midway through grade eight she described her English as “almost as good as the native speakers,” except for her accent (p. 242). Her assessment of her English was correct: she entered a district-wide short story contest and won first place. She kept reading, and expanded her choice of books, thanks to her English teacher at Pasadena City College, Diana Savas, who introduced her to Latino literature and encouraged her writing.

This is only one case, but it is consistent with what has been published about what advanced literacy development requires: a source of genuinely interesting reading material, in this case, the library.

Reyna Grande also had “significant others,” a term used in sociology to indicate someone who influences one’s behavior and self-esteem (dictionaryreference.com). Her first significant other was the school librarian, and her second was her English teacher, Diane Savas, who provided Grande with greater knowledge about and access to reading material.

Here is a reasonable hypothesis: Access to books does not guarantee avoidance of the Long Term ELL syndrome, but having a reading habit does. In addition, having a long-term reading habit leads to the development of high levels of literacy.

Note: As is well-established, reading ability in the first language facilitates the development of reading in the second language (Cummins, 1981), and there is some evidence that the reading habit transfers as well (Kim and Cho, 2005). Reyna Grande could read in Spanish; in fact, she mentions that “I’d always liked to read in Mexico,” (p. 215) suggesting that both her first language reading ability and reading habit facilitated her becoming a reader in English.

References

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