

The Power of Reading: Case Histories of Second and Foreign Language Readers

Willy A. Renandya, George M. Jacobs, Stephen Krashen and Crystal Ong Hui Min

In this paper, we will present two case histories of learners of English as a second/foreign language. We will focus on how their reading habits resulted in remarkable improvements in their linguistic competence. These case histories provide additional evidence in support of the Reading Hypothesis, which claims that high achievement is possible when L2 learners engage in self-selected reading, that contains comprehensible and compelling language input.

Introduction

Case histories have the potential to make important contributions to both theory and practice (Nye, 2012). In terms of theory, although they have largely been used to help generate new hypotheses, they can also be used to test existing hypotheses by providing supporting or contradictory data. In terms of practice, they can be used to give guidance on application by examining cases of successful and unsuccessful implementation. Lastly, case histories serve to inspire other language learners by demonstrating that high achievement is indeed possible.

The case histories presented here focus on the Reading Hypothesis, which derives from the more general Comprehension Hypothesis. Comprehension Hypothesis claims that we acquire language when we understand what we read, when we obtain comprehensible input.

Research strongly suggests that the most potent form of reading is one that is not only comprehensible, but also “compelling” or highly

interesting (Krashen, Lee, & Lao, 2017). A good way to increase the likelihood of obtaining compelling input is to encourage self-selection. There is strong evidence from experimental and correlational research that confirms that self-selected reading leads to superior development of literacy, including vocabulary, grammar, writing style, reading ability, and spelling (Krashen, 2004; Krashen, Lee, & Lao, 2017).

The two cases of self-selected reading examined in this paper are superficially different, but in both cases, the similarities are far more important than the differences between them. In the first case, the learner’s reading habit started before she began school; she read in a second language that she spoke very well. In the second case, the reader developed the reading habit in English as a foreign language, when he was a young adult. In this case, there was clearly room for improvement in the learners’ foreign language competence.

Crystal Ong Hui Min

Crystal Ong Hui Min was born in Singapore in 1998. The reading culture in her family was, and still is somewhat varied. Her maternal grandmother grew up in Malaysia at a time when society generally thought that girls did not need to go to school. Thus, Hui Min’s grandmother was illiterate, a fact that she bemoaned till her death. Hui Min’s maternal grandfather left school when he was about 12 years old, but he did learn to read, and he continues to read a daily newspaper in Chinese. On Hui Min’s father’s side, her grandmother

moved from China to Singapore, and lived her life as a non-reading Hainanese monolingual speaker. Her paternal grandfather, who passed away long before Hui Min was born, dropped out of school after the primary level, but was literate. Hui Min's parents dropped out of secondary school. Their reading is largely restricted to newspapers, with the mother preferring Chinese newspapers, and the father English newspapers.

Since her birth, Hui Min has lived in a multi-generational home. Currently, she lives with more than ten extended family members in the same flat. Although Mandarin is the main language spoken in her family, Hui Min has always been quite comfortable in English, since she was very young. She attended a bilingual preschool, and spent the weekends with her uncle and another of the authors of this paper George Jacobs (GJ) and his wife. Conversation with GJ was in English and he and his bilingual wife read to Hui Min in English. In fact, it would be accurate to describe Hui Min as an English dominant bilingual.

Even before starting primary school, Hui Min stood out as an avid reader of fiction in English. Her family supported her reading habit by taking her to well-stocked public libraries and bookshops, and her aunt (Hui Min's father's sister) who lives in the US regularly sent her English books.

A few things were significant about Hui Min's reading habits. First, she read the same book as many as five or more times. Second, she enjoyed series books, such as the Junie B. Jones series, as well as multiple books by the same author, such as Beverly Cleary and later Jodi Picoult and Haruki Murakami. Third, she was a quick reader, as GJ realized one day when he asked the then eight-year old Hui Min if she was enjoying a book she had been reading. When Hui Min said that she had already finished the book, GJ was very surprised. Unable to

escape his role as a teacher, GJ decided to read the book himself and give his niece a quiz, which she passed with flying colours.

A fourth characteristic of Hui Min's reading was her insistence on reading fiction exclusively. Even when she was told about the many academic and knowledge benefits of including non-fiction in her reading portfolio, and even when she was offered inducements, she insisted on keeping to fiction for her out-of-school reading. Fifth, Hui Min read anywhere and everywhere—at the dinner table, when travelling on public transport and even when she was supposed to be asleep.

What have the results been so far for Hui Min? She has consistently been a top student at all levels of school. At the time of writing this article, she was about to begin studies at Singapore's Nanyang Technological University, rated among the world's best on many international indices. In addition to excelling in her studies, Hui Min also has an active social and extracurricular life. In contrast, Hui Min's only sibling, a brother born in 2001, never developed a reading habit despite receiving the same encouragement that his sister received, and despite having his older sister as a role model. According to our observations, to date he has been markedly less successful in his studies and markedly less active in social and extracurricular activities.

Willy A. Renandya

Willy Renandya was born in Indonesia and did all of his primary, secondary and undergraduate education in Indonesia itself. Like most Indonesians, he acquired several languages, including Indonesian, Javanese and a bit of Mandarin and Hokkien. Hokkien was spoken mainly with his father and his circle of Hokkien-speaking friends.

The reading culture in Willy's family was rather weak during his childhood. Besides school

textbooks, there was practically no reading material at home. When he was in secondary school, Willy started reading comics and series books in Bahasa Indonesia, the national language of Indonesia. He borrowed these books from the neighbourhood libraries. He became a ferocious reader of serialized fiction; rarely, if ever, did he read non-fiction material such as newspapers, magazines, or any “serious” books.

Willy’s favourite author was Asmaraman Kho Ping Ho, a Chinese Indonesian writer, who had written some 120 serialized kung fu stories. His novels were among the best-selling novels, attracting millions of fanatic readers who impatiently waited for the next title of his book to be released. Kho’s books were not just about fighting and revenge, the usual staple of kung fu stories. He skillfully infused other powerful ingredients into his stories such as love, friendship, hatred, loyalty and betrayal. Born in 1926 into a Chinese Indonesian family, Kho died in 1994. Many of those born in the 50s and 60s fondly remember reading Kho’s delightful novels.

Like most of his peers who spent six years studying English in high school, Willy’s English proficiency was almost non-functional, probably at the A1 level on the CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference) band scale. He was familiar with a few words and knew how to put these words into sentences, but that was about all. He had never used the language for any meaningful communication, either orally or in writing.

Willy graduated from high school in 1975, and armed with this very basic knowledge of English, he applied for admission into the English language education department of a teacher’s college in Yogyakarta, Indonesia. Willy admitted that he got accepted by sheer luck. All the lectures were conducted in English, so it was quite a struggle for him to understand the

lessons. Most of the time, he would just listen without really comprehending much of what was happening in class.

The English Department had a small reading library that was managed by the students. The collection in this library mainly consisted of simplified classics such as Moby-Dick, David Copperfield, Wuthering Heights, and Oliver Twist. Willy had to read these books and then write book reports on them. He found the books boring for the most part, and the book reports burdensome. His initial enthusiasm died very quickly and he began to lose interest.

One day, Willy stumbled upon a novel in a local book shop—a Perry Mason book written by Erle Stanley Gardner (Perry Mason is the main character of more than 80 detective novels written by Gardner). He had never heard of the author before, nor had he watched the Perry Mason TV series. He picked up the book simply because the title and the book cover looked attractive. Although it was an unabridged novel, Willy was able to read it with sufficient comprehension. This was partly because the novel contained dialogues written in simple, conversational language. There were words and expressions he did not understand, but the storyline was so captivating that he continued reading the book and finished it within hours. He felt exhilarated. He had been able to finish reading an entire novel in English with complete comprehension and enjoyment! This produced in him a strong urge to read more books by the same author. He went back to the bookshop and bought a new Perry Mason title. Five more books later, he was addicted to Perry Mason. He kept going back to the shop and eventually bought and read about 50 Perry Mason titles. He then moved on to the Sherlock Holmes and Hercule Poirot series. In the meantime, his classmates continued to read graded readers from the department library.

This self-selected reading of books had a huge impact on Willy's language proficiency. He had started out at the bottom of the class in terms of language proficiency, and was even falling behind in his studies. By contrast, his classmates were quite fluent (most of them were able to express themselves clearly), and did not seem to have any difficulty with their lessons. However, by the end of his undergraduate studies, Willy had become very fluent in English and was able to communicate both orally and in writing, as well as if not better than most of his classmates. He graduated with the highest GPA in his class. Other than his reading habits, there was nothing that could explain his extraordinary progress. He did not have any friends or family members with whom he could practise speaking in English, nor had he travelled to any English-speaking countries to practice his English.

Soon after Willy completed his education degree, he landed a teaching job in an English language school in Indonesia, joining the staff of ten English teachers. Since they all had different educational backgrounds, their levels of proficiency in English were rather varied too. To support their professional development needs, the school asked the teachers to take the TOEFL test (paper-based), so that they could identify the skill areas that needed improvement. All 10 teachers signed up for the test. The majority of them scored slightly above, at, or below the mean score of 500. However two teachers, both of whom were avid readers of English novels, scored above 600, placing them roughly in the 85th and 97th percentiles. Willy was one of these two.

At the time, Willy could not understand how he had managed to increase his fluency in English in such a short period of time. When people asked him how he had done it, he simply said, "I don't know, I just did". It was much later when he did his graduate studies in TESOL, and was introduced to the works of Stephen Krashen,

Richard Day and other SLA experts, did he understand the power of self-selected narrow reading in the context of language development.

Conclusion

The impressive growth in the language of Hui Min and Willy described in the case studies presented here is consistent with the results of experimental and correlational research, as well as previously reported case histories (Krashen, 2004). Recent results include Sullivan & Brown, 2014; Yeo, Chew & Krashen, 2016; Cho, 2016, 2017; Mason & Krashen, 2017. Both learners showed unexpected and unusual development in literacy and school performance. They did not read for improvement, but for pleasure. As was the case in previously published case histories, superior language development and school success were unexpected and came as a surprise (Lin, Shin & Krashen, 2007; the case of Cohen in Krashen, 2004; Mason 2017).

Outside of their schoolwork, both Hui and Willy largely read fiction, which they selected themselves. Both were "series" readers and read books by a single author, thereby continuing the same story or theme. Previously published case histories show that many dedicated readers prefer fiction, and often stay with a few favourite authors and series books (Cho, 2016, 2017; Mason, 2017; Henkin & Krashen, 2015; Mason, 2017). Both Hui and Willy maintained their reading habit for a number of years.

Based on case histories of second language acquirers who were long-term pleasure readers in English, Cho and Krashen (2016) concluded that the following conditions contributed to the establishment and maintenance of a reading habit:

1. An initial pleasant reading experience
2. Access to interesting reading material
3. A time and place to read regularly

4. The freedom to select own reading
5. No tests, no workbook exercises and no rewards for reading

It appears that all these conditions were met in the cases presented here. The two case histories thus confirm not only the Reading Hypothesis, but are also consistent with the importance of a pleasant initial reading experience, access, time and place to read, and self-selection.

Meeting these conditions can result in impressive achievement in a pleasurable manner.

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Willy A. Renandya teaches at the National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University Singapore. He is an executive board member of the Extensive Reading Foundation and actively promotes extensive reading in Asia. He manages a large teacher development group on Facebook called Teacher Voices.

willy.renandya@nig.edu.sg

George Jacobs is a learning advisor at James Cook University, Singapore. He helps to lead the Extensive Reading Foundation, the International Ecolinguistics Association, and Vegetarian Society (Singapore).

george.jacabs@gmail.com

Crystal Ong Hui Min studies Psychology at Nanyang Technological University. A fan of Haruki Murakami, Crystal is working on a children's story set in the context of intergenerational language differences in Singapore.

<http://www.linkedin.com/in/crystal-ong-hui-min>

Stephen Krashen is Emeritus Professor of Education at the University of Southern California.

skrashen@yahoo.com