

The Incredible Frog-Boy is on the Loose Again (1): When Adult Second Language Acquirers Read the National Enquirer

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Abstract

Fifteen Korean-speaking adults in living in the United States and acquiring English as a second language were asked to read the National Enquirer for ten minutes a day for 20 days and record their reactions. Eight completed the 20 days and said they found the Enquirer to be comprehensible and enjoyable, and six subjects continued to read the Enquirer after the 20-day period. Light reading of this kind may make an important contribution to second language development.

Introduction

There is substantial evidence that reading, especially free voluntary reading, makes a major contribution to the development of literacy-related aspects of first and second language competence. Reading, it has been argued, is the source of much of our competence in reading comprehension, vocabulary, writing style, grammar and in spelling (Krashen, 2004, 2011).

Light reading, such as comic books and magazines, appears to play an important role in developing higher levels of literacy. While light reading alone may not lead to high levels of attainment, it may serve as a bridge. Despite claims to the contrary (e.g. Wertham's Seduction of the Innocent (1954), an attack on comic book reading), there is no evidence that light reading in the form of comic books is harmful, and several cases have been reported in which comic book reading served as a "conduit" to more serious reading (Krashen & Ujiie, 2005). There is, in addition, evidence that magazine reading can lead to increased proficiency for less advanced readers. Rucker (1982) reported that simply providing Junior high school students with high interest magazines resulted in substantial growth in CTBS reading scores.

Many people do not take advantage of light reading. In some cases, the problem is financial. In other cases, the problem is lack of knowledge. Acquirers simply do not know how helpful light reading can be in providing a transition to advanced competence. Our study is aimed at this second group, specifically adult second language acquirers who have access to light reading, can afford it, but do not utilize it.

Our study probed whether educated adult acquirers of English as a second language would accept light reading, what kinds of reading strategies they would utilize, and their subjective reactions to light reading. We choose a well-known English language newspaper, the *National Enquirer*, a tabloid that attempts to present extremely high-interest, entertaining, and short articles on topics that are familiar to many readers.

Methodology

Subjects

Fifteen (15) adult second language acquirers, all native speakers of Korean, were invited to participate in the study. Length of residence in the United States ranged from one to ten years. Thirteen of the subjects had studied English in Korea for six years, while two had studied English for ten years.

All subjects reported that their EFL classes had been traditional, that is, focused on form, with an emphasis on memorizing vocabulary and repetition exercises. All subjects reported that they had few English reading materials and spent little time doing pleasure reading in English. In addition, all subjects had a negative attitude toward reading in English because of their past unpleasant English reading experiences in class reading difficult short passages.

Procedure

Subjects were simply asked to read the *National Enquirer* for at least ten minutes a day for 20 days. They were also asked to keep a diary to record reactions to their reading. In addition, one of the authors (K.C.) conducted open-ended in formal interviews with the subjects and asked about reading strategies they used, comprehensibility of the reading, and how much they enjoyed the reading. Thirteen subjects were interviewed either in person or on the phone two days a week over three weeks, and two subjects were interviewed briefly every day of the project. Subjects were called one month after the completion of the study to see if they were reading the *Enquirer* on their own. Subjects had not been informed that this final interview would take place.

Results

Three subjects refused to read the *Enquirer*, stating that it was beneath their reading level (and, we speculate, possibly beneath their dignity). Of the remaining subjects, nine stayed with the daily reading for at least ten days and eight kept reading for all 20 days. Several of those not staying with the reading said they were too busy and tired after working or studying.

Reading Strategies

Eight of the nine who completed the 20 days of reading reported that they used what could be called "natural" reading strategies. They read only those stories that interested them, and used the dictionary only occasionally, often skipping words they did not understand. One subject, however, treated the Enquirer as if it was a textbook, reading all the stories in a given issue, regardless of whether she was interested in them, and looking up all unfamiliar words in the dictionary. After ten days of reading, this subject burned out and stopped reading, complaining of a headache.

Comprehensibility

The eight subjects who read selectively found the articles to be comprehensible, even though they contained some unfamiliar words. Evidence that the Enquirer was at the right level for one subject are these comments (written in Korean, translated by K. C.):

I read only one copy of the National Enquirer. There is a lot of American slang I don't know. But I wanted to read something worthwhile, and I am interested in politics. So I switched to the LA Times. It was difficult to read. I had to look up words in the dictionary too often. If I didn't understand what I read, I analyzed the sentence structure, but most of the time this didn't help me understand. Finally I gave up reading the LA Times, and I started reading the Enquirer again. It is interesting and I forget about grammar while I am reading.

Enjoyment

Six subjects became enthusiastic Enquirer readers, and were still reading the Enquirer one month after the study ended. One subject reported that she was so excited about an article on *Different Strokes* that she read it while stopping for a red light. Another reported that she seriously considered sending away for Zsa Zsa Gabor's facial cream. Another reported that she stopped studying from her English conversation textbook and now reads the Enquirer regularly to improve her English.

Language Acquisition

No formal testing of English was done, but the eight who read for ten days all felt that they improved their English. Most frequently mentioned was vocabulary acquisition. One subject mentioned that she learned the words "mammography" and "vasectomy," another mentioned "heart-attack" and "patriotism."

Three subjects indicated that reading the Enquirer was useful for English conversation, and two others felt that the Enquirer gave them information that was

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useful for life in America, one subject commenting: "After I read the Enquirer, I feel like I am living in America."

Conclusions

Our study suggests that the National Enquirer may not be for everyone, but indicates that the Enquirer has been successful in publishing stories that are of interest to at least some non-native speakers of English. In addition, the Enquirer contains stories that intermediate ESL acquirers can understand.

If the Comprehension Hypothesis and the related Reading Hypothesis are correct, our results also suggest that reading material such as the Enquirer can be helpful in second language acquisition. Enquirer texts were clearly interesting and comprehensible, and contained some language that was unfamiliar to the readers, but that they could understand with the help of context.

For at least some acquirers, light reading of this sort may be a valuable bridge leading to the ability to read more difficult prose. Readers could move from the Enquirer to less demanding conventional newspapers, such as *USA Today*.

Notes

- (1) Lyrics from "I read it in the Morning Star" by Weird Al Yankovic.
The spirit of Elvis is in your living room.
Your cat could be an extra-terrestrial.
You can learn to live with stress.
You can beat the IRS.
The incredible frog-boy is on the loose again.

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