

## Why Don't Educators, Scholars, and the Media Pay Attention to the Research?

### Comments on Lichtman and VanPatten

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Foreign Language Annals (in press)

Of course my initial reaction to Lichtman and VanPatten (Foreign Language Annals, in press) as well as to the reaction papers was satisfaction that there was so much agreement with my conclusions. However, because the focus was on hypotheses that are attributed to me, I was surprised to see that my work was hardly cited at all. In fact, throughout the entire collection, with one exception, there was only one item cited, *Principles and Practice*, published in 1982. Nearly 90% of my publications appeared after that and there are quite a few of them, (n= 473).

Moreover, many of my papers and books published since 1982 deal with the hypotheses and issues that are the focus of the papers that we are discussing here. My papers since 1982 provide a lot more evidence for the Input Hypothesis, including experimental results, correlational results with multivariate designs, and case histories, using different populations in different countries. There are studies in first language acquisition, second language acquisition among children, and second language acquisition among adults. In my opinion they provide strong evidence for the Input Hypothesis and its first cousin, the reading hypothesis.

In addition, they cover other topics discussed in the review papers, eg. the role of output (including spoken and written output), the status of the comprehensible output hypothesis, the role of consciously learned grammar, correction, and the role of interaction.

Most important, several recent papers include a discussion of Optimal Input, the idea that not all methodology that includes comprehensible input is of equal value. A number of papers present evidence supporting methodology that is consistent with Optimal Input, Story-Listening and Guided Self- Selected Reading, developed by Beniko Mason.

The papers since 1982 also present evidence for the hypotheses as they apply to spelling, phonics, and phonemic awareness as well as the application of the theory to bilingual education and animal language. There are also papers on the impact of writing on problem-solving and creativity.

The work of others impacting these topics was also not mentioned in any of the papers.

Am I whining that my work was not honored enough? No. Scholars can make the same complaint about my failure to cite their work. In fact, I was unfamiliar with many of the

citations in each of the papers in this collection. But there are good reasons why my work wasn't cited more and good reasons why I had not read all the papers cited in the articles in this collection. It is a problem that concerns all of us and concerns the future of research in language acquisition. Professional papers in our area of interest are (a) much too long; (b) often very difficult to read and (c) the journals and books that include them are much too expensive.

I suspect that these factors are the reason scholars are not familiar with a great deal of the research literature and why information about research results has not "trickled down" <sup>(1)</sup> to practitioners <sup>(2)</sup> or to the general public, the media, <sup>(3)</sup> and to other scholars. It has not trickled anywhere.

## TOO LONG

When we ask the time, we don't want to know how watches are constructed. Georg Christoph Lichtenberg (1742-1799)

## A study of length

Clearly, many journal papers today are written to get published, not to be read, and often read like dissertations. In my opinion, they contain a lot of unnecessary information.

Journal papers are intended to report on current progress in the field. They are aimed at specialists. Scholars should assume that readers are somewhat familiar with the topic under discussion. They are not textbooks for those new to the field, nor are they supposed to be critical reviews of the literature.

Introductions should only orient the reader to the problem the author is dealing with and not provide a detailed review of every study done <sup>(4)</sup>. Conclusions need contain only a brief summary of the results and the usual (but brief) "apologies" for possible flaws in the study. Also, journal papers should not include more than a short statement about what studies should be done next. This should be obvious from the introduction and results.

In preparing this paper, I listed all the journal papers and book chapters cited in the four other papers that made up this collection that seemed relevant to the topic, and that I had not read. They totaled about 2000 pages. This would take me weeks or even months to read carefully, and I am generally up-to-date in my professional reading (I am retired, and have much more free time than most people.) This could, I estimate, be cut to 20% or even 10% of

that total. (I have found that it is a mistake simply to skim papers.) Authors can make life much easier and more efficient for readers by not making papers unnecessarily long and by including only sources that are clearly relevant.

## **DIFFICULT TO READ**

I suspect that a great deal of academic writing is deliberately hard to read and understand. This happens for one or both of these reasons.

### **(1) More respect from colleagues:**

Kohn (2003) suggests “...that scholarship is valued by other academics in direct proportion to its inaccessibility “ (Kohn 2003). It may, in fact, be the case that comprehensible academic prose even disdained by some academics: “It has been my experience with literary critics and academics in this country that clarity looks a lot like laziness and ignorance and childishness and cheapness to them. Any idea which can be grasped immediately is for them, by definition, something they knew all the time. (Vonnegut, 1982, p. 320.)

### **(2) Avoiding risk**

Hedges ( 2010) accuses academics of deliberately writing dense, long papers and publishing them in obscure journals and books, with “no attempt to reach wider audience or enrich public life” (p. 125) in order to avoid risk: “As long as academics write in the tortured vocabulary of specialization for seminars and conferences, where they are unable to influence public debate, they are free to espouse any bizarre or ‘radical’ theory” (p.125).

It is also a way of avoiding criticism. Here is an experience that occurred at an Acoustical Society Meeting I attended when I was a graduate student that illustrated the power of dense language to deflect criticism. Phonetics researcher Peter Ladefoged decided to shorten his presentation from 12 minutes to seven, in agreement with a resolution that passed by the society the day before. Instead of reading his paper, he presented it in plain talk. Because it was clear and jibberish-free, his presentation stimulated far more comments and, most interesting, for more criticism, than any other presentation I attended at the conference.

In areas where our work impacts the public, and our conclusions are contrary to public opinion (e.g. issues such as bilingual education, phonics and grammar teaching) scholars can continue to earn the admiration of their colleagues and get tenure and salary increases without harsh rebukes from the popular media.

Long papers full of jargon make it difficult even for people like me, those who have a great deal of experience in reading scholarship and who have plenty of time to read. Teachers have neither. Unnecessarily long and dense papers exclude them from the discussion, a profound loss to the profession.

## THE COST

My work covers several fields and when subscriptions were cheaper, I used to subscribe to about 20 journals. If I did not have access to a university library and had to pay for subscriptions to all of them, today this would amount to a lot of money; some journals in our field now charge \$100 per year. Others, happily, do their best to keep expenses down and offer reasonable subscription rates, even giving discounts to junior and retired faculty). Individual copies of articles are generally available, but the usual cost is about \$40. The journal/publishing company gets the money, not the author.

Today we can obtain many journal articles illegally through services such as researchgate and Sci-Hub. Elsevier has been trying to sue Sci-Hub but it is doubtful that this will have a major effect. (<https://www.nature.com/news/us-court-grants-elsevier-millions-in-damages-from-sci-hub-1.22196>). But the research appears in places other than journals. Most of the edited collections related to this discussion are very expensive; even soft-cover versions can cost \$50.

Please note that this analysis applies only to journals and books needed to fully understand just a few reports focused on a few ideas. It is a small fraction of what a competent scholar needs to be aware of and understand.

Cost, of course, is not a problem for those with easy access to a first-rate university library, but this is a small percentage of the people who need to read and understand professional literature.

## **SOLUTIONS**

**We can solve all three problems at once: the long articles and the dense prose, and the cost. The solution is publishing in open-access papers that are clearly written and without unnecessary prose.**

**Open-access means that there is no charge for the reader and no charge for the writer. Open-access journals are available on the internet and can be accessed and downloaded by anyone. Articles are refereed in the usual way.**

**Thanks to the efforts of a few scholars, e.g. Timothy Gowers of the UK and Albert P'Rayan of India, we appear to be gradually moving toward reporting all scientific progress in free, open-access publications.**

**University libraries, including the libraries serving to University of California, are starting to cancel subscriptions to some journals due to the substantial increase in costs (Resnick and Belluz, 2019; Napolitano, 2020).**

**But there are barriers:**

- 1. "Prestige-obsessed" scholars who insist on publishing in expensive closed access journals (Resnick and Belluz, 2019) and**
- 2. University committees who do not value open-access and who are responsible for hiring and promotion.**

**Short, clearly written articles, of course, make the work of these committees much easier. It is nearly impossible, under current practices, to read candidates' work, even if committee members are familiar with their area, because of the length and writing styles so prevalent in our field.**

**These barriers will disappear as more scholars try to write concise and clear papers, and make them easily accessible. The change will happen when highly respected senior scholars, less concerned about tenure and promotion and not job-hunting, go this route.**

**My experience tells me that length and complexity are still a serious problem. I am regularly asked to review papers for journals, and I am happy to do this: It is a professional responsibility. About six years ago I adopted a new policy: I will not review papers that are longer than five pages. The invitations continue to come regularly, but I have not reviewed a paper for the last six years.**

## **NOTES**

1. I think “trickle up” is more accurate. Let’s remember who(m) we are working for.
2. We are told that teachers, unlike professionals in other fields, don’t read professional journals and don’t keep up with research and theory. In one study Marsden and Kasprovicz (2017) reported that over half the classroom teachers they surveyed reported never having read an original research report. The average number of research papers read during their entire career was nine. Non-school based education professionals (e.g. university-based teacher educators, consultants and advisors) reported doing more reading of research papers but 27% reported having never read about research in a journal.
3. See e.g. McQuillan and Tse (1996), who show that over a ten-year period media reports were generally unsupportive of bilingual education while research reports were generally positive over the same time period.
4. I have therefore not included a list of my papers published since 1982 in this paper, along with detailed descriptions. Links to many of them can be found in sdkrashen.com. Highly relevant is Jeff McQuillan’s work at backseatlinguist.com, and Beniko Mason’s at beniko-mason.net.

## SOURCES

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