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When an ESL Adult Becomes a Reader

Lucy Tse

Despite the well-documented benefits of reading, few second language (L2) learners' do any reading in their L2 in or out of the classroom (Huber, 1993; McQuillan, 1994). As Krashen points out, language learning requires large amounts of input (1993), and although extensive reading has been shown to be highly effective in languages acquisition, L2 learners are reluctant to pursue this method. Learners may feel that reading in the L2 is difficult, laborious, and unpleasant, contributing to what Krashen (1985) calls an "Affective Filter." This filter includes one's negative feelings and perceptions and may in turn prevent new language input from reaching the brain's language acquisition device (LAD), thereby slowing language acquisition.

This case study focuses on the effects of an extensive reading program for an adult English language learner. The subject participated in a course designed to introduce and promote pleasure reading among English as a second language (ESL) students by encouraging them to read both assigned and self-selected books in English. Over a period of approximately six months, the subject was presented with a variety of genres of English language books and given the opportunity to discuss those read in low anxiety environments. This article will first give a brief review of the literature on the role of reading in language learning and the research on

L2 reading attitudes. Then, it will describe the subjects' reactions to the extensive reading approach using a qualitative framework drawn from Patton (1987), and finally, discuss implications for the teaching of adult literacy.

Reading and language development

Language acquisition occurs when a learner is exposed to language that is comprehensible and slightly above current levels of proficiency (Krashen, 1985). Acquisition can occur through oral or written input, but as Hayes and Ahrens (1988) demonstrated, learners are exposed to new input far more often while reading than while listening in conversation or watching television. These researchers examined the vocabulary in children's books and found that they included 50 percent more rare words than the conversations of college graduates or that found in adult television programs. Other research (reviewed in Krashen, 1993) shows that reading benefits language learning in several ways: increased vocabulary, writing, grammar usage, and reading comprehension.

The more words one encounters, the more opportunities there are for acquisition. Nagy, Anderson, and Herman (1987) and Nagy and Herman (1987) showed that the more frequent the contact with a word, the faster that word is acquired. When a reader encounters unfamiliar words, "a small but statistically reliable increase of word knowledge" typically occurs, giving the reader between a 5 to 20 percent chance of acquiring the word (p. 26). If a reader encountered "about 1 million words per year, just a 5 percent chance of acquiring a word's meaning from context with each exposure will result in vocabulary growth of 1,000 words per year" (Anderson, Wilson, and Fielding, 1988, p. 262).

Aside from vocabulary building, there is substantial research in and out of school that shows that learners who

participate in free reading in schools or report doing more free reading perform better on general language proficiency tests than those who do not. Elley's (1991) studies, involving a total of approximately 3,000 ESL students ages six through nine, found that school reading programs improved students performance on tests of reading, comprehension, vocabulary, oral language, grammar, listening comprehension, and writing as compared to the traditionally taught students.

Light reading is a good way to acquire a second language for two reasons; it is highly enjoyable in nature and the texts possess high levels of vocabulary (Krashen, 1993). In addition, Schoonover's (1938) and LaBrant's (1958) results suggest that light reading is a conduit to more difficult and sophisticated texts.

Second language reading attitudes

Little research has been done on second language students' attitudes toward reading. McQuillan (1994) found that 80% of the 49 LS students surveyed, who had participated in both grammar and reading-based courses, believed reading was more beneficial for language learning than grammar study. However, McQuillan and Rodrigo (in press) also found that none of his Spanish language students had ever read a book in Spanish even though they believed reading was an important part of language learning. Kaminsky (1992), an ESL teacher, discovered through observations, interviews, and questionnaires that her 12 ESL students did not elect to read in school when they could choose between reading and drill work, and they did not read recreationally at home. She set out to change her ESL students' attitudes toward pleasure reading by reading to them during class time, allotting time for self-selected sustained silent reading, allowing students to take books home, and encouraging parents to read with them. As a result, Kaminsky reported, student attitudes dramatically

improved by the end of the school year, as evidenced by the fact that a majority of the students said they would choose reading over television watching in their free time.

To motivate university-level ESL students to get into the habit of reading English language books, Cook, Dupuy, and Tse (1994) designed an extensive reading program that introduced students to novels of different levels and genres. The students in the class read 13 books, nearly a book a week, from six genres of popular literature. Results of a semester-end survey revealed that students found the course enjoyable and worthwhile, though no affective measure was used to determine changes in reading attitudes. The purpose of this study is to examine the impact of an extensive reading course on an L2 non-reader in terms of attitudes toward reading and reading habits.

Subject

The subject of this case study is a 36-year-old Indonesian woman studying in an intensive English language program at a major American university. Joyce came to the United States with her husband, Tom, and her two children one month before the course began. Her purpose for studying in the program was to improve her English so that she could gain admittance into an American university and be able to successfully complete a master's degree.

Her English language learning began in junior high school at about age 12. She recalled drill study of grammar and vocabulary two hours each week until she completed high school. When she entered college, she was required to read health-related textbooks in English, though she explained she seldom read these texts with much attention because the professors' lectures would cover nearly all of the textbook material, assuming that students had limited

comprehension of the texts. She recalled feeling that English language study was stressful, difficult, and uninteresting.

Before coming to the United States, she had never read a book in English, other than the textbooks in college. In her first language, she read only for information, primarily in newspapers, and said she didn't view reading as a leisure time activity, adding that "If I had time, I didn't want to spend it reading."

The course

The 15-week course was a general intermediate-level English course, considered the foundation course of the intensive language program. The students attended the foundation class daily, Monday through Friday, for one and a half hours. It was supplemented by vocabulary, grammar, oral skills, and test preparation (TOEFEL, GRE, etc.) courses for an average of four hours of coursework per day.

The purpose of the course was to introduce students to pleasure reading materials and to have students read from several genres, beginning with lower level books and graduating onto more advanced ones. The students in the course began by reading short stories selected by the instructor and were taught some simple reading strategies to help them read faster and with more ease. They were encouraged to read quickly and to guess the meaning of new words, rather than to interrupt their reading to consult a dictionary. If they could not guess the meaning of the unknown word, they were encouraged to skip it altogether and continue reading. Since students needed to get the maximum amount of comprehensible input possible, it was believed that frequent interruptions for dictionary use would slow reading and reduce the amount of input.

The students read four books: the political satire *Animal Farm* by George Orwell (sixth grade reading level), the teenage romance *Forever* by Judy Blume (third grade reading level), the autobiography of a World War II Japanese internee *Farewell to Manzanar* by Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston and James D. Houston (sixth grade reading level), and Sue Grafton's modern detective novel *'B' is for Burglar* (sixth grade reading level), in that order (see Table). The first two books were selected by the instructor and the last two books were chosen by the class as a whole from a selected number of available books.

Grade Level of Books Read by Subject¹

<u>Book</u>	<u>Grade Level</u>
<i>Animal Farm</i>	6
<i>Forever</i>	3
<i>Farewell to Manzanar</i>	6
<i>'B' is for Burglar</i>	6
<i>To Kill a Mockingbird</i>	7
<i>You Just Don't Understand: Men and Women in Conversation</i>	10

¹Fry readability formula used

The majority of class time was spent discussing the reading — an average of 45 minutes per day. Students were asked to read about 15 to 25 pages per night and to come to class with questions about language or content. The teacher emphasized that their questions and comments would guide the class discussions and no subject was barred from conversation unless any of the participants objected. Approximately 25% of the

discussion time was spent on language questions and 75% spent on content questions. The instructor normally had guide questions ready to stimulate conversation but found that they were often not needed. Students were not pressured to speak in class and participated when they felt comfortable and inspired to do so. The discussions followed student interests, and often departed from talk about the book per se. For example, *Forever*, a candid book about a teenager's first romance and sexual experience, prompted a two-day discussion about teenagers' views of love and sex in the students' own countries and intergenerational relationships.

Data collection and results

Data were collected through the teacher-researcher's participant observations and student interviews over six months, four months in the classroom and two months in private tutorials. The teacher took notes of student reactions and responses throughout the four-month semester. During the first week, the instructor orally asked the students about their L1 and L2 reading habits and their attitudes toward reading. Joyce continued to be tutored about twice a week by the instructor for two months after the end of the course.

During four of the tutorial sessions, Joyce spoke about her attitudes toward reading and her reading habits. Joyce's comments and reflections were recorded in notes taken by the teacher. Due to Joyce's reluctance, no tape recordings were made during those meetings. When a draft of this paper was completed, a member check was conducted where Joyce received a copy of the draft and was asked to confirm the accuracy of the information and interpretations of the researcher.

Teacher-researcher observations

The students generally completed the assigned reading and attended class with questions and comments for

discussion. Based on student suggestions, some adjustment of the reading schedule was made to provide students with more reading time. The class discussions were often lively and student run, with the instructor answering cultural questions or providing other kinds of background information.

The students, including Joyce, expressed apprehension about reading novels in the early part of the course. None of the students had ever read a book in English and doubted that they had sufficient language proficiency to do so. The discussions in the first two to three weeks primarily centered around language questions, reflecting students' reliance on form. However, by the time the students had finished the first book, the talk had largely shifted to the content and issues from the text. When Joyce began the course, she remained fairly quiet during discussions, though occasionally asking language questions. Very quickly, however, she began to carry much of the discussions by expressing her opinions about the various issues raised by the book and the other students. She appeared to have crossed a juncture near the completion of the second book. She talked about her reading and her reflections on the books with confidence and appeared to enjoy the reading.

Joyce's observations and responses

Joyce's comments and responses to questions were collected in four meetings after the completion of the course. Data was gathered and analyzed according to three of Patton's (1987) categories of inquiry: 1) opinion and value; 2) feeling; and 3) knowledge.

Opinion and value

During one of the sessions, Joyce was asked to recall her belief about the role of reading in language learning before

she arrived in the U.S. She said she had believed reading was an important component of language learning that had been excluded from her education, though she believed grammar and vocabulary study were equally important. When asked about her view of reading after taking the course, she said that she believed reading was the most efficient way to learn English and to improve her vocabulary, spelling, and writing. As evidence of this, she had expected her husband to enroll in the same course the following semester as he was in the academic level below hers at the time. When it was suggested that possibly a different teacher and another curriculum, presumably a traditional textbook-based course be substituted, she expressed extreme concern. She remarked that she wanted her husband to know about books and to learn through them. She believed that her language had improved significantly from reading novels and she wanted her husband to have similar experiences.

Joyce believed that her view of reading had changed dramatically since she began reading in English. Although she still viewed it as a way to access information, she now realized that books, namely fiction, provided vast and numerous possibilities to gain information and insight.

Feeling

The majority of the questions and collected data fall under the category of feeling, which refers to how subjects respond emotionally to their experiences. Joyce said that she had been afraid to read books, being a non-reader of fiction in her first language. She said that the first book, *Animal Farm*, was particularly difficult because she concentrated on form rather than meaning. She consulted the dictionary often and reread each page several times. She found this strategy to be frustrating and tiring, and she was tempted to give up many times. However, she persisted because she was determined to

give reading a chance. In addition to her inefficient strategies, reading was difficult because she found the vocabulary to be above her level of proficiency and had difficulty following the plot.

By the end of the semester, Joyce said she felt confident about reading. She recalled an incident in which she realized her progress. Her husband, Tom, enrolled in the extensive reading course the following semester. When Tom brought home the first assigned book, this time the adult romance *Love Story* by Erich Segal, she examined the book and realized that she could read it with facility and considered it an "easy book." At the time, she was reading Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, a book on the seventh grade reading level, that has fairly difficult vocabulary and a race relations in the American South theme with which she was not at all familiar. She found *To Kill a Mockingbird* to be at a comfortable level for her and its engrossing plot kept her reading late into the night.

Knowledge

Joyce also felt that reading yielded more than simply language development; she gained knowledge about American culture and about herself. She said,

The extensive reading course was a different method to learn English, about reading ... not only reading — how to get the main idea, to understand, to guess the new vocabulary — but I learned more than that; (I learned) about American culture. After I finished these books, I feel that I'm not learning, I can finish this book. That makes me feel excited. I'm not a student.

Joyce also stated that she realizes that reading about other people's experiences gives her power to widen her

outlook on life, philosophy, and beliefs. In one of the tutoring sessions, while discussing *To Kill a Mockingbird*, she said that reading about the African-American experience in the U.S. made her aware of power relationships between majority and minority peoples. As a result, she reflected on the situation in Indonesia where the number of minorities from other Asian countries was steadily increasing. Before reading *To Kill a Mockingbird*, she had never thought about these types of issues.

Joyce's view of reading and of her own reading competence changed dramatically during the extensive reading course, and it can be argued that her reading proficiency also improved drastically. Joyce began by reading books on the third grade reading level as determined by the Fry (1977) formula with fairly familiar themes and moved onto books on the seventh grade reading level with fairly unfamiliar themes. Admittedly, the Fry formula is flawed; it does not take into account background knowledge, which is an essential component of reading comprehension (Dubin, Eskey and Grabe, 1986). However, it provides some rough indication of a book's difficulty level.

Discussion and Implications

Overcoming affective barriers is one of the most difficult barriers faced by second language learners on the road to fluency. The case study presented above shows that an introduction to extensive reading in a low anxiety environment can produce positive affective changes. Joyce reports the increase in the difficulty of the books she read provides evidence that an extensive reading course can improve students' reading ability. There are two likely explanations for Joyce's improvement. First, she may have learned better reading strategies, and while her proficiency did not improve per se, her overall reading ability improved. Second, the large

amount of written input caused a dramatic improvement in her English reading proficiency. Regardless of which explanation accounts for change in Joyce, at the conclusion of the course, she was able to read higher levels of English books with facility and confidence, replacing previous apprehensions, fear, and stress when reading simpler texts. This study suggests that the introduction of reading in a low anxiety environment and providing students with assistance according to their expressed needs fosters positive effects on their reading attitudes and proficiency.

What is especially encouraging is that Joyce has continued to read independently six months after the end of the course. This result is consistent with McQuillan's and Rodrigo's (in press) study that found 75% of the Spanish language learners who had gone through a 10-week extensive reading course continued to read seven months after the completion of the course. If this is an indication of Joyce's long-term reading habits, then her learning through books has only begun with her formal introduction to extensive reading. She now has the strategies and confidence to tackle adult English language books and to acquire the language and knowledge she desires.

In light of the research that shows reading is the most effective and efficient way to learn a second language, a reading orientation should be taken in developing L2 curriculum. To encourage reading in ESL adults who may have serious apprehensions about their ability, the introduction of pleasure reading in low anxiety environments is a viable and effective method. Once L2 learners begin reading, their language levels increase, leading to more complex texts, resulting in higher levels of efficacy. This upward spiral of language development leads students to the proficiency they desire and access to the knowledge and information they need.

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Interacting with Authors and Poets as "Wordcrafters"

Announcing: *Books That Invite Talk, Wonder, and Play*, edited by Amy A. McClure and Janice V. Kristo. Publication date: September 4, 1996. National Council of Teachers of English, 1111 W. Kenyon Road, Urbana Illinois 61801-1096. Phone: (217) 328-3870; Fax: (217) 328-0977.

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