

The Role of Reading in Language Learning

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Abstract: This paper discusses the role of reading in language learning, making use of the case of my own and two Indonesian teenagers that manage to pass the TOEFL prediction test above 500—one after finishing the senior high school, the other after junior high school. Since they were toddlers, the two of them were made to learn English without being aware that actually they were “taught” English by exposing them to books, both in Indonesian or English, and films that used English. They never study in English courses and make use of the English lessons at schools to enhance their learning of English. Reading is the two teenagers’ hobby. The cases are explained using the theory of language acquisition.

Key words: (extensive) reading, language learning, L1, L2.

In my paper presented in Hong Kong (Rini, 2001), I show how second language (L2) learning can be enhanced through films; the subjects I observed was three Indonesian children. I have started to observe them since they were toddlers. The three of them were made to learn English without being aware that actually they were “taught” English by exposing them to books, both in Indonesian and English, and films that used English. Now the children are already teenagers and only two of the three who are going to be discussed in this paper because the two read a lot in L2, while the other one does not. The fact that reading plays a very important role in their L2 learning can be deduced from the experience of the two children observed and my own. I also relied a lot on reading when I learn foreign languages. The methodology I use here is observing the children who are now teenagers and reflecting my own experience in learning other foreign languages besides English.

Cases Observed or Reflected

One of the two children observed succeeded to get 510 in TOEFL prediction test after finishing his junior high school. When he was still in elementary school, he read stories in bilingual books and also in Indonesian. When he was in junior high, he often went to his school library to read books on topics that he liked, for example, motorcycles. The other gets the same score and improves to 577 after she finished senior high school. When she was in the third grade of elementary school, she started reading Laura Ingals' novels in Indonesian translation, one novel a week. When she was in junior high, she read other thick novels and biographies in Indonesian and also music theories in English. She also took written music test in English and passed the test with a pretty high score.

My own experience in reading also varies. I remember that when I was still in the second year of elementary school, I used to read the short stories in *Sinar Harapan* newspaper that my grandfather subscribed. The Petruk Gareng comic books were also my weekly delight, not to mention other children stories in Indonesian. I remember reading *Star Weekly* magazines, either to read the Sie Jin Kui comics or Prabu Anglingdarma who can understand animal language. When I started studying English, I also made use of reading to enhance my English. When I was in elementary schools, I often read my mother' books, *Essential English*, four volume books for studying English that tell the stories of an English teacher with seven students. The books also have exercises on grammar and reading comprehension. When I was in junior and senior high school, I read short stories in English, easy reading novels, and Oxford simplified graded series of famous novels, such as Dickens' *Tale of Two Cities*. When I learnt German, I read first children stories, then magazines, and popular science on psychology or education. When I learnt

French, I read a lot *français facile* (simplified famous novels) and comic books like *Benoit and Tin Tin*.

Besides my own experience and the children's that I observe, an interesting essay concerning reading and L2 learning which is necessary in my reflection is *The Professor is a Drop Out* (Johnson, 2008). This essay tells about a Hispanic family, a mother with three children, moving to USA. They are excellent learners and avid readers in Spanish, but they do not really understand English. When they have their IO tests, they are labeled as retarded and slow learners simply because the IQ tests are given in English while they do not speak the language. After they make an effort to learn English as their L2, the four of them succeed in schools and end up as Ph.Ds in education, law, medicine, and physics.

From the four people's experience in the essay, the two teenagers' and my own, it can be deduced that reading, even done in the first language, plays an important role in language learning and have some points in common. First, we flood ourselves with reading texts. Second, we read what we like. Third, we determine our own pace. Fourth, the reading texts are within our level of comprehension.

What Do Research and Language Acquisition Theory Say about Reading?

In his article on extensive reading, Renandya (2007) explains first the difference between extensive and intensive reading (IR). "In intensive reading, students normally work with short texts with close guidance from the teacher. The aim of intensive reading is to help students obtain detailed meaning from the text, to develop reading skills—such as identifying main ideas and recognizing text connectors—and to enhance vocabulary and grammar knowledge" (p. 135). About extensive reading (ER), he quotes from Carrel and Carson as follows. "Extensive reading ... generally involves rapid reading and of large quantities of material and longer readings (e.g.

whole books) for general understanding, with the focus generally on the meaning of what is being read than on the language” (p.134). In short, as the names suggest, IR is more detailed on limited texts with the focus on the language, while ER is broader in terms of texts and the focus is on the content rather than the language.

He further describes the most important characteristics of a successful extensive reading program (2007, pp. 144-145). First, students flood themselves with reading materials until they are ‘hooked’ on reading. Second, they pick up the readings by themselves. Third, the readings are varied in terms of topic and genre. Fourth, the readings are not too difficult to understand. Fifth, there are post-reading activities that students do, for example, designing a book mark, designing a poster, reading aloud the interesting parts, copying interesting words and useful expressions. Sixth, teachers also read to motivate the students. Seventh, there is a track record of student progress.

In his research done with Rajan and Jacobs (2009), there are three points found out concerning reading which are important in developing second language. First, “ER could be implemented with older adult ESL learners” (p. 192). The learners enjoyed it and some (about 40%) even read more than they are required to do. Second, learners need large amounts of language input which they can comprehend. Third, on the point of the relationship between higher proficiency related to more reading, the result does not show any significant correlation. Another important point put forward in the research—although not included in the point of the research—is listening in L2 and the importance of L1.

Future researchers may wish to consider other variables that were not included in this study but which potentially affect reading proficiency. One of these variables would be listening practice. Students had televisions in their rooms, and many spent several hours a week watching English programs, such as CNN. This provided another potential source of comprehensible input. Other variables that

could have been considered include L1 proficiency and quantity of L1 reading. (p. 194).

Besides reading in L2, listening in L2 seems very important. Surprisingly, proficiency and the quantity of reading in L1 also contribute to the ability of reading in L2.

About the role of reading in first language acquisition, Lightbown & Spada (2006, p.8) say that “learning to read gives a major boost to metalinguistic awareness.” Metalinguistic awareness (MA) is “the ability to treat language as an object separate from the meaning it conveys” (p.8). In their book it is explained how MA contributes to language acquisition during the preschool and the school years. A three year old child can tell that it is silly to say ‘drink the chair’; however, they never say ‘cake the eat’, although they do not know what is wrong with it. A five year old child knows that those two are different kinds of errors; one is silly and the other is ‘the wrong way around.’ (pp. 8-9). In the school years, children learn that “language has form as well as meaning; that a word is a separate entity from the thing it represents. They can see that words are represented by letters and other symbols on a page. The book gives an example that the word ‘caterpillar’ is longer in words, but shorter in the thing than the word ‘train.’ Children also learn that language and sentences have multiple meanings. For example, the Indonesian phrase *kembang desa* (the flower of the village) can have two meanings: 1) the real flower and 2) a beautiful girl in the village. Children have access to understand jokes, trick questions, and riddles (p. 9). In the school years children acquire different registers; children acquire that spoken register is different from the written one. Quoting Dee Gardner, Lightbown and Spada (2006, p.9) also agree that “Reading a variety of text types is essential in vocabulary growth because narrative texts and non-fiction have different range of vocabulary. The three points contributed by reading in L2 learning are MA, vocabulary growth, different registers.

Discussion and Conclusion

There are some points in common between my observation and reflection and the theory of language acquisition and the research on ER. First, through film watching, certainly listening in L2 was not a problem for the two children observed. They could pick up words and phrases and use them in speaking. I myself also developed my listening skill in French and German through films. The helpful ones were the films about children that talked about the here and now topic. In other words, it is within my level of comprehension. Second, besides flooding ourselves with such films, the two children and I flood ourselves with books that are within our level comprehension. Third, we flood ourselves with books that we like. The difference is that we had no target like the one in ER research and there is no written track record.

Reading will certainly not make learners suddenly have native speakers' ability or skill in learning an L2. However, reading in L2 certainly plays an important role in vocabulary growth provided that post reading activities is done, for example copying the expression or vocabulary and try to use it either in speaking or writing; if not, those new vocabulary will stay in learners' passive vocabulary.

Concerning L1, it seems that we (the two children and I) and also the four people in the essay are avid readers in L1 too. Both L1 proficiency and quantity in L1 reading help reading in L2. My explanation to this ability is that reading skill is transferrable. If one is accustomed to apply reading strategies to understand how the words produce meaning in their native language, the same reading strategies can be applied in reading L2 texts.

From the discussion, some points that can be concluded as obstacles are as follows. First, ER is best applied at home because at home there is no force of giving a score, while there is such a force if it has to be applied at school. Unless a score is given, both learners and their

parents might be reluctant to support it. Some parents might be reluctant to buy books for their children to read because the books they buy do not directly relate to the score students receive at school and are not counted as a part of the student report card. They can say that it is useless since it does not have immediate effect. Second, unless a school has a good library that can cater children's choice, reading that is in accordance with the students' desire and pace is not something easy to implement. Third, although ER seems very powerful in L2 learning, it does not mean that intensive reading (IR) is not useful at all in L2 learning.

After having been reflecting the children's experience and my own, I can give this analogy to explain the importance of reading, especially ER. Pianists never disregard the importance of finger exercise in developing their performance. For the laity, finger exercise seems useless because it does not contain nice melody, but repeatedly monotonous sound. However, pianists are sure that abundant finger exercise will support their performance in terms of speed. Likewise, reading, especially ER, also supports language learning in terms of speed in understanding the author's meaning, especially if it is of the learners' choice and continuously done.

Although learners need an extra effort in reading, ER is worth doing, at least, in increasing the vocabulary, not to mention other advantages, such as internalizing good values and in virtues of life, character building etc. Last but not least, teachers and, especially, parents need to acknowledge learners' characteristics. Verbal learners might never complain when they have to be immersed in pool of words, while the visual ones, especially, children might be more motivated to read texts with pictures.

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