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Acquisition of vocabulary from the Sweet Valley Kids series: Adult ESL acquisition

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When four adult second language acquirers became fanatic Sweet Valley Kids readers, they made clear gains in vocabulary and reported increased competence in listening to and speaking English.

There is substantial evidence that reading, especially free voluntary reading makes a major contribution to the development of literacy in both first and second languages (Ellen, 1991; Elley & Mangubhai, 1983; Krashen, 1993; Nagy, Herman, & Anderson, 1985). Many second language acquirers, however, do not do much free reading. There are several reasons for this.

First, many second language acquirers do not believe that reading will help them. They believe that language acquisition is the result of the conscious learning of rules and output practice with error correction, rather than the result of understanding messages ('comprehensible input'; see, e.g., Krashen, 1985)

Second, influenced by classroom experiences, some second language acquirers have mistaken notions about reading. They assume that reading must always be hard work, that it must entail word by word decoding of difficult texts.

Finally, it is often difficult for adult second language acquirers to find the right texts. Texts used in traditional second language classes are often comprehensible but are usually not interesting. Authentic reading can be quite interesting but is often not comprehensible. According to theory, however, to promote language acquisition, texts should be both interesting and comprehensible.

Our hypothesis was that if we gave adult second language students the right texts, we would see more free reading and clear progress in second language acquisition. We investigated this hypothesis by working with a small group of immigrants to the United States.

The Participants

We worked with four subjects.

Mi-ae was a 30-year-old female adult native speaker of Korean who had been living in the United States for 5 years. Mi-ae reported that she had studied English in Korea for 6 years (Grades 7 to 12). Classes had been traditional, with a focus on form and an emphasis on memorizing English phrases and idioms, which she found in the bilingual Korean newspapers, but felt that this practice had not helped her much.

Mi-are reported that she had limited interactions with English native speakers and watched some English television. She was afraid to speak English with native speakers and sometimes even avoided them. Although she was a pleasure reader in her first language, she had not read any books in English for the last 5 years.

Our second subject, Su-jin, was a 23-year-old native speaker of Korean who had lived in the United States only 3 months when our study began. She had previously visited the U.S. for 2 months. Su-jin had studied English as a foreign language for 6 years in public school and for 1 year at the university level. Her classes had been traditional. Su-jin had done no leisure reading in English and reported that she was reluctant to speak English with native speakers.

Jin-hee, our third subject, was a 35-year-old native speaker of Korean who had been living in the United States for 5 years. She had studied English in Korea for 6 years, but had also majored in English education at the university, had taught English as a foreign language in a secondary school for 3 years. and had completed a master’s degree in secondary education in the United States.

Jin-hee reported that she had taught English in Korea with a focus on grammar, translation, and memorization, and had not included reading for pleasure. In addition, Jin-hee herself had not done much pleasure reading in English, except for religious books. She told us that she watched English television and had frequent interactions with native speakers of English, but still did not feel very confident in using English.

Our fourth subject, Alma, was 21 years old and a native speaker of Spanish. Alma came to the United States with no knowledge of English at age 13 and attended junior high school and high school in the U.S., where she was mainstreamed in Grade 10. Alma reported that ESL classes in her school were grammar based and that in these classes “I did work hard. I learned some grammar how to use them correctly.” In contrast to our other subjects, Alma interacted with native speakers of English frequently and with only minimum difficulty.

Table 1 summarizes the characteristics of our four participants.

Table 1
Characteristics of participants

Name	Sex	Age	L1	Time in U.S.	English study
Mi-ae	female	3	Korean	5years	6years
Su-jin	female	23	Korean	5months	7years
Jin-hee	female	35	Korean	5years	10years
Alma	female	21	Spanish	7years	3years

As Table 1 indicates, our participants differed quite a bit in their exposure to English and in the amount of formal study they had had. One of them, Jin-hee, was a former English teacher.

Free reading

We asked these four women to participate in a free reading program for several months. They were asked to read for pleasure in English in their free time. No specific amount of reading was requested, nor were they asked to read for a certain amount of time each day.

As noted above, our hypothesis was that if we gave adult second language students the right texts, we would see more reading and increased language development. The right texts for our subjects were from the Sweet Valley series, published by Bantam. The best known books in the Sweet Valley series are the Sweet Valley High novels, which are designed for junior high school girls (Moffit & Wartella, 1992). On the basis of earlier work with other adult female second language acquirers, we felt that these subjects might enjoy these novels as well.

The term “acquisition” technically means the subconscious absorption of language from comprehensible messages (which can include written messages). We cannot, however, be sure that only acquisition was involved at every moment in this study. Some of our subjects may have attempted to consciously “learn “English as they read, despite our instructions to them.

Initially, we asked our subjects to read a Sweet Valley High novel. This proved to be too difficult for Mi-ae and Su-jin. Fortunately, easier versions are available: Sweet Valley Twins, a series written at the fourth-grade level, and Sweet Valley Kids, written at the second-grade level, deal with the same characters at an earlier age. Both Mi-ae and Su-jin were able to read Sweet Valley Kids. We therefore asked all four women to begin with this series. We did not ask them to study new vocabulary, nor were they told they would be tested on comprehension. We asked them only to read for pleasure.

To facilitate comprehension, one of us (K.C.) gave the women some background knowledge about the series, explaining who the main characters were (Elizabeth and Jessica) and describing their very different personalities. For the three Korean speakers, this was done in their first language. In addition, K.C. occasionally discussed the readings with the subjects. These discussions were mostly concerned with the plot of the stories, aspects of American culture, and idiomatic expressions. On a few occasions, subjects were asked about content that they had not understood, but for the most part, they were able to read on their own with good comprehension.

To get some indication of the amount of language acquisition that took place, we asked three of our subjects to underline words they did not know the first time they encountered them. They varied in how they carried out this request. While Jin-hee underlined in all the books she read, Mi-ae underlined only in the first two books; after that, she listed words that were unfamiliar to her in a notebook. As we will see, Su-jin did much more, Alma was not asked to underline at all.

We did not instruct the women to use the dictionary, but we did not forbid it. Our logic in allowing them to use the dictionary was that we wanted them to use their own strategies in reading, and eventually to observe whether these strategies changed with more reading and greater competence.

Mi-ae and Su-jin used to the dictionary throughout. Along with their lists of new English words, they listed the dictionary definitions in Korean, and Su-jin even listed an example sentence from her reading for each word. According to their self-reports, however, neither Mi-ae nor Su-jin studied or reviewed their vocabulary list. In fact, they both told K.C. they were relieved to be able to read without having to memorize vocabulary.

Jin-hee used the dictionary for the first four volumes she read, but then stopped using it. Alma did not use the dictionary at all.

Eager readers

All four women became enthusiastic readers. Mi-ae reported that she read eight Sweet Valley Kids books during 1 month, Su-jin read 18 volumes in 2 months, Jin-hee read 23 in a little less than 1 month, and Alma read 10 volumes over a 2 week period.

In Table 2, we summarize how much the four women read and their use of the dictionary. In computing total words read, we estimated that each volume of Sweet Valley Kids contains about 70 pages of text about 7,000 words.

Table 2
Amount of reading and dictionary use

Name	Books read	Total words	Books per week	Dictionary use
Mi-ae	8	56,000	2	yes
Su-jin	18	126,000	2,25	yes
Jin-hee	23	161,000	5,75	first 4 only
Alma	10	70,000	5	no

Clearly each of the four women had a substantial amount of exposure to print. By way of comparison, Anderson, Wilson, and Fielding (1988) reported that the average middle class child in the United States reads about 1 million words per year in English, both inside and outside of school, or approximately 80,000 to 100,000 words per month, depending on how much reading is done during school vacations. Mi-ae and Su-jin were able to achieve 50% to 60% of this rate in their spare time, despite being slowed down by use of the dictionary, and Jin-hee and Alma read at a considerably faster rate, about 160,000 and 140,000 per month respectively.

After the first volume, all four women were clearly hooked on the Sweet Valley Kids series. After Mi-ae had read several volumes, we suggested that she try a volume from the next series. Sweet Valley Twins, but she preferred to remain with Sweet Valley Kids. She reported reading them in nearly every free moment and expressed the desire to read the entire 33-volume series. In her own words (translated from Korean): “I never get bored reading the Sweet Valley series. This series of English books is the most interesting and understandable I have ever read. The Sweet Valley series are the only English books I keep reading.”

Su-jin made similar comments: When I finished reading one volume of Sweet Valley Kids, I was looking forward to reading the next one. This was the first experience in which I wanted to read a book in English continuously...” [translated from Korean].

Alma told K.C. that she would read all the books K.C. could give her, and Jin-hee, who had a great deal of English instruction and who initially was not interested in this kind of reading material, found she liked Sweet Valley Kids far better than other things she had attempted to read in English. “I read the Sweet Valley series with interest and without the headache I got when reading *Time* magazine in Korea. Most interestingly, I enjoyed reading the psychological descriptions of each character. When I read the second volume of Sweet Valley Kids, I was infatuated by it. I finished reading it without stopping” [translated from Korean].

We found Mi-ae and Su-jin's enthusiasm and willingness to read these books especially interesting, because both subjects used the dictionary consistently, which must have been very hard work. Their perseverance is good evidence of the high level of interest aroused by Sweet Valley Kids.

Acquisition of vocabulary

Somewhat different procedures were used to estimate vocabulary acquisition for each woman. For Mi-ae, Jin-hee, and Su-jin, we made a list of the words they had underlined in the volumes they read, and asked each of them to define the word in Korean. We gave them credit only for providing a synonym or definition that captured the full meaning of the tested word. We do not know whether they could use the words in English conversation, but they certainly had attached the right concepts to those English terms.

This was lengthy procedure and was spread out over several days. Testing was done at times convenient to the learner and to K.C. Thus, the three learners had read different amounts at the time they were tested.

For Alma, we constructed a test of 165 words based on words that other women had underlined consistently. These words were taken from the first seven volumes of the Sweet Valley Kids series. Alma was asked to define each word orally in English. Credit was given only for fully correct answers. We gave the same test to Alma as a pretest and as a posttest. When she took the pretest, she was not even aware that she would be asked to participate in a reading program.

Results of all these assessments are given in Table 3.

Table 3
Vocabulary growth

Name	Number of target words	Number Correct	Percent Correct	Volumes Read	Words/Volume
Mi-ae	535	299	56%	8	37.4
Su-jin	396	316	80%	18	17.5
Jin-hee	275	189	69%	23	8.2
Alma		71		10	7.1

Note: Target words for this testing were the unknown words underlined by Mi-ae, Su-jin, and Jin-hee during their reading. Alma scored 39/165 on the pretest and 110/165 on the posttest, a gain of 71 words.

Nagy, Herman, and Anderson (1985) calculated that native speakers gain about 3,000 words per year from reading one million words. In order to compare these four women's rate of acquisition of vocabulary to that of native speakers, we extrapolated what their rate would be if they had read one million words: Mi-ae acquired vocabulary at much greater than the native speaker rate (over 5,000 words per million), Su-jin at just under the native speaker rate (2,500 per million). And Jin-hee and Alma well under the native speaker rate (about 1,200 and 1,000 words per million respectively.)

Clearly, the two women who used the dictionary learned more vocabulary per words read. We must ask, however, whether the time spent with the dictionary was well spent. Perhaps

this time would have been better used for more reading. Did Mi-ae and Su-jin really need the dictionary? Perhaps books even easier than Sweet Valley Kids would have enabled them to read without the crutch.

It is likely that much of the vocabulary growth of our participants came from reading. Other sources for Su-jin and Mi-ae are unlikely, since they had limited interactions with native speakers of English.

Speaking and Understanding

While our testing was limited to vocabulary, it was clear from the four women's reactions that their ability to speak and understand everyday English improved as well. K.C. interviewed Mi-ae again after she had read 15 volumes of Sweet Valley Kids, and Mi-ae reported this.

Reading helps me understand TV better. I ran across many of the same words and phrased I saw in reading while I was watching TV. I used to be afraid to speaker with Americans. But the other day when I went to Disneyland, I enjoyed talked to some American children and their parents who came from Arizona [translated from Korean].

Alma, after reading 16 volumes of Sweet Valley Kids, felt that her grammatical accuracy in speaking improved:

The other day, my younger brother told me that my English had improved a lot these days. He said he could notice that I spoke right.... [he] thought my English had improved because of speaking with native speaker. But he was wrong. After I read Sweet Valley Kids, I speak more correctly.

Even Jin-hee, the former English teacher, felt improvement. After going on to read 30 volumes of Sweet Valley Kids, seven volumes of Sweet Valley Twins, and eight volumes of Sweet Valley High (all in only 4 months), Jin-hee said that her confidence in casual English conversation increased. Su-jin had similar reactions, reporting much more confidence and competence in everyday situations, such as shopping and in conversation.

What is interesting is that our participants felt that reading helped their oral/aural language proficiency. Books like the Sweet Valley series contain a great deal of useful colloquial language that learners with mostly formal language instruction experience have missed.

After working with Mi-ae, Su-jin, Jin-hee, and Alma, we believe that providing the right texts can result in substantial vocabulary acquisition. The results also show that second language acquirers ranging from low intermediate to fairly advanced can read light literature with great enjoyment and can profit from it linguistically. The fact that Jin-hee and Alma made gains in vocabulary without much use of a dictionary confirms that second language learners, like native speakers, can gain vocabulary from reading alone. This belief is consistent with recent studies showing vocabulary growth in a second language that occurred from reading (Day, Omura, & Hiramatsu, 1991; Pitts, White, & Krashen, 1989).

Our brief case study with these four women also supports the value of “narrow” reading-reading texts in only one genre or by only one author-for promoting literacy development (Krashen, 1985). Narrow reading allows the reader to take full advantage of the knowledge gained in previously read text.

In our experience, such narrow reading does not typically stay narrow. Just as first language readers gradually widen their reading selections (LaBrant, 1938), we expect that Mi-ae, Jin-hee, Su-jin, and Alma will gradually expand their reading not only to the hard Sweet Valley series (as Su-jin has already done) and to adult romances, but also to other areas as well.

Although not all second language learners will be interested in books such as Sweet Valley Kids and Sweet Valley High, there are many other options for pleasant light reading. We suggest that a major goal of intermediate second language classes should be to expose students to a variety of light reading options, so that they will find what appeals to them. The advantage to a series like the Sweet Valley books is that they provide plenty of reading at different levels of difficulty.

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