

From Sweet Valley Kids to Harlequins in One Year

a case study
by Kyung-Sook Cho and Stephen Krashen

This is the third in a series of reports on the effect of reading novels from the Sweet Valley series on adult second language acquisition. In our first paper we reported on progress made by four subjects. Three of our subjects had studied English formally for a substantial amount of time in Korea, had lived in the United States for several years, but reported severe difficulty in using English. A fourth subject was a native speaker of Spanish who had higher proficiency in English.

We suggested to our subjects that they begin their English reading program with novels from the Sweet Valley High series, written at the sixth grade level. As these novels proved to be too difficult, we dropped down to Sweet Valley Twins, written at the fourth grade level, and eventually to Sweet Valley Kids, written at the second grade level. Our subjects, women in their thirties, became enthusiastic Sweet Valley Kids readers. They reported enjoying the reading enormously, made impressive gains on tests of vocabulary, and reported great improvement in their English.

Our second study was a follow-up on one of the original four subjects, who continued reading Sweet Valley novels. She progressed from Sweet Valley Kids to Sweet Valley Twins, and had even penetrated the Sweet Valley High series. Her progress in English was confirmed by her ability to read harder books, and by comments on her English ability by English-speaking friends, as well as her own comments.

In this study, we describe the case of Karen, a 34-year-old native speaker of Korean who had been living in the United States for five years with little interaction with native speakers of English. Even though she had studied English in Korea for six years, Karen described her English competence as limited. In the United States she had studied ESL but dropped the class because of the emphasis on grammar.

Although she was an avid reader in Korean, she had never read any books in English. She had attempted reading in English, but found it too difficult:

"... five years ago, when I came to the United States, I bought over 10 novels in English in order to improve my English, but I could not read them at all ... I was exhausted before finishing one page ... It took me more time to look up the words in a bilingual dictionary than reading itself, and I still couldn't understand the text. Since then I have not touched them ... I think I just wasted my money." (translated from Korean by K-S.C.)

Encouraged by our success in previous studies, we suggested that Karen try books from the Sweet Valley Kids series. She was told that the reading was entirely voluntary, that she could read whenever, as much or as little as she wanted to, and that she need not finish a

book once she started it.

Like our other subjects, Karen became an enthusiastic Sweet Valley Kids reader. She said that she read the books everywhere, taking them with her on the plane when she went on a trip, and reported that she read the *Saga* volume of Sweet Valley High until 2:30 in the morning.

In a one-year period she reported reading 25 Sweet Valley Kids volumes, 21 Sweet Valley Twins books, and over 20 novels from the Sweet Valley High series. This is roughly one million words, which is about the number of words middle-class children who are native speakers of English read in one year, combining in-school and outside school reading (Anderson, Wilson and Fielding, 1988). In addition, Karen also read about 40 copies of the *National Enquirer*, four Harlequin Romances, and eight novels by Danielle Steele and Sydney Sheldon.

We have several reasons for claiming that Karen's competence in English grew dramatically from one year of free voluntary reading:

1. She was able to read novels at high reading levels as the year progressed, moving from books written at the second-grade level to popular novels, which are typically written at the seventh-grade level. In fact, Karen read one popular novel in only four days at the end of the year. As Frank Smith has noted, the best way to see if growth has occurred in reading is simply to compare what the reader is reading now with what he or she read previously.

2. At the end of the year, she tried reading the novels she bought five years ago, the ones that she found, at that time, unreadable. She could now read them:

"... when I tried to read them five years ago, all the letters looked complicated and blurred. But now they look simple and understandable without any strain. As a matter of fact, I was not sure I could read any books other than Sweet Valley books ... but now I am certain that my reading comprehension has improved without my knowing it while reading books during this past year."

3. Karen also had the strong conviction that her English had improved, and gave the Sweet Valley series the credit:

"(Five years ago) I bought many books and tapes but none of them helped me much. When conversing, I couldn't move my tongue naturally because I was thinking about how to use what I had studied from the tapes and bilingual conversation books. As a result, I felt that learning English was nothing but complicated and was unnatural for me. I was tired of not being able to apply things in real life. But I am certain that I've gained something from reading Sweet Valley books. Now I feel I have acquired some English after reading. I like these books very much because they are natural stories."

Karen's reading strategy evolved during the year. When reading

It took
me more
time to
look up the
words in a
bilingual
dictionary
than
reading
itself, and I
still
couldn't
understand
the text

the Sweet Valley Kids books, she would read each volume once without a dictionary and then reread the book using the dictionary. Sometimes she even read the book a third time just to make sure she had understood it. She soon dropped this painful strategy when she started the Sweet Valley Twins series. These books, written for slightly older children, were more interesting to her and her involvement in the story led her to drop her rereading strategy. As she told K.C. soon after beginning the Sweet Valley Twins series,

"Reading Sweet Valley Twins is getting interesting for me now. A strange thing is that Sweet Valley Twins is easier to read than Sweet Valley Kids. I do not read a book two times any more. Rather, I am anxious to see what is going to happen."

This result suggests that good strategies evolve naturally as a result of interaction with genuinely interesting and comprehensible texts.

Karen's experience confirms that free reading alone can result in considerable language and literacy development, and that readers can develop more efficient strategies through reading appropriate texts.

Karen's experience also confirms the value of reading books in a series. Reading books from one series or of one type not only allows the reader to stay with material that he or she finds interesting, but also allows the reader to take advantage of background information to make the text more comprehensible.

Adolescent fiction and Harlequins are not, of course, the highest level of literature. But nearly all good readers have read these "lesser lights" (Russikoff and Pilgreen, 1994), and it is likely that they serve a valuable function by providing the literacy and language development that makes more difficult input

comprehensible. Such light reading has rarely been tried in formal second-language programs, programs that usually jump from basic courses to authentic, difficult, and even classical literature. Affluent native speakers of English nearly always do this kind of reading outside school. Less affluent children may not have access to light reading because of financial limitations, and this may be part of the reason for the oft-observed correlation between literacy development and social class.

Sweet Valley may not appeal to all readers, but our subjects' progress strongly suggests that light reading can make a significant impact on language development. ■

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