

Why Don't Language Acquirers Take Advantage of the Power of Reading?

Haeyoung Kim and Stephen Krashen

It has been established that reading, especially free voluntary reading, is a powerful means of developing second language competence. Those who read more have larger vocabularies, do better on tests of grammar, write better, and spell better (Krashen, 1993). There is also suggestive evidence that extensive pleasure reading can contribute to oral/aural competence as well (Cho & Krashen, 1994, 1995a, 1995b). Nevertheless, second language acquirers do not typically take advantage of the power of reading (Lao, Krashen, Gribbons, Schafrik-Arenault, & Michael, 1996). Why is this so?

In this report of a study we conducted, we describe five female adult acquirers of English as a second language living in the United States. All are dedicated readers in their primary language, yet have not considered reading as a means of developing their second language ability. All of our second language acquirers are native speakers of Korean and live the Los Angeles area. They were interviewed four times, either by phone or in person. Their interviews were conducted in Korean and subsequently translated into English for analysis.

Yoon, age 54, a post office employee, is an avid reader in Korean, reading at least five books per month. She does not read in English, but sends English books to her daughters, who are in col-

lege in the United States. Yoon has been in the United States for 18 years.

Kim, age 47, has lived in the United States for 8 years. She reads the Korean bible every day, belongs to a literature circle, and borrows Korean books from the library. Kim has resisted English because she feels she was forced to come to the United States for economic reasons.

Lee, age 40, came to the United States 6 years ago, when she married a Korean American. She has recently become more interested in improving her English since her daughter entered

primary school. She feels frustrated when she has to communicate with the teacher and help her daughter with homework. She reads Korean newspapers and buys a Korean monthly magazine. She blames her shyness for her reluctance to interact with native speakers, which she feels is the most effective way to learn English.

Shin, age 64, a former medical assistant, is now an accomplished calligrapher whose works won the grand prize in a citywide contest. Ever since she came to the United States 24 years ago, Shin has enrolled in continuing educa-

1 Provide access to a wider variety of books.

2 Provide easier access to books.

tion classes to improve her English. In order to perform better at her job, she went to medical terminology classes at night. At one point, she even took legal terminology courses when she was on jury duty and had difficulty understanding the conversation between attorneys and the judge. At present, Shin is taking computer courses.

Song, age 31, came to Los Angeles a year prior to this study with her husband and two daughters. She reads a Korean newspaper every day and reads English storybooks to her daughters. Song intends to return to Korea in 4 years, but is very eager to acquire English and is frustrated with her slow progress. Song rents videotapes from her school every week, has a tutor come to her house once a week for English lessons, and takes advantage of every opportunity to speak English. She has an MA in political science from Korea and is interested in pursuing a graduate degree in the United States.

All five acquirers are highly literate in Korean. Three of the five (Lee, Shin, and Song) are also very motivated to improve their English.

Attitude Toward Reading

None of our five acquirers had even considered reading as a means of improving their English. They were, in fact, surprised when we asked them what kind of books they read in English. Yoon, for example, felt that reading interesting books in English was beyond her level of competence:

I sometimes find books that sound interesting from the book reviews in the Korean newspaper. For example, there's this book entitled *The Native Speaker*, written by a Korean

American. It's an autobiography of the author trying to assimilate into American society and his struggle along the way. I plan to go to the bookstore and send a copy to my daughter, since I don't think I will be able to read it myself.

The interviews revealed the cause. All five had studied English as a foreign language in Korea, where the emphasis was on grammar rules and drill. This emphasis, according to our subjects, resulted in a lack of security in using English. Yoon, for example, blamed the emphasis on grammar for her reluctance to speak:

Maybe we would have been better off had we not learned grammar at all. Then at least we wouldn't be conscious of grammar all the time. So I just keep quiet because when I talk I know I'm going to make mistakes.

Lee expressed similar opinions:

I don't remember enjoying English classes that much. I always thought my pronunciation wasn't good. I didn't do badly on tests because they were written and on grammar, which means I

could memorize the rules. Now, I don't remember any of the rules anymore. When I help my daughter with her homework, I get confused. I continually ask myself, "Is this grammatically correct?"

The traditional approach extended to reading. Reading in EFL classes meant decoding every word. The only English books to which the five women were exposed were textbooks, grammar books, and workbooks. When coherent texts were included, the material was often boring and difficult; the five acquirers reported that they never had the chance to enjoy a story. English education in Korea convinced them that English books existed to be dissected and thoroughly analyzed; reading in English for them was a laborious, time-consuming task.

Song, for example, told us:

The sentences of English magazines that are popular in Korea, for example *Time* and *Newsweek*, were so long. It was written language, not colloquial. I saw that kind of English in textbooks all the time. Besides, the topics weren't interesting.

EFL teaching failed to inform them that reading can be beneficial for all aspects of second language competence. Lee spoke of the lack of access to and information about interesting reading:

During the 6 years of English education in Korea, I did not have a single English teacher recommend reading books other than textbooks and workbooks. The first thing that comes to my mind when anyone mentions English books is grammar books, materials used in the classroom.

Shin felt that reading would not contribute to her aural competence:

Reading books and the ability to speak are two different things. Reading

3 Provide Guidance.

4 Tell acquirers about the benefits of reading.

doesn't seem to help in developing oral skills ... I guess you do learn vocabulary from reading books sometimes. But when people use unfamiliar idioms or expressions or if they go too fast and speak with an accent, I don't understand.

EFL classes, in other words, did not consider recreational reading as an option, and even created a phobia toward reading.

An Attempted Intervention

Cho's approach (Cho & Krashen, 1994, 1995a, 1995b) quickly turned nonreaders of English into avid readers by introducing light reading material: novels from the Sweet Valley High series. In addition, her students made excellent gains in vocabulary and reported improved listening comprehension and fluency. A similar intervention was attempted two of the acquirers in the study, Song and Lee. Both reported that the books were not interesting, although they were at an appropriate level of English.

Kim recommended that they try abbreviated simplified English classics and ordered copies of Jane Austin's *Emma*, a book she had used successfully in other ESL classes. Lee, Song, and Shin expressed interest and tried reading *Emma*. They reacted positively. Song told us, "I just read on. It was so much fun. I didn't care about words I couldn't understand. I could enjoy these kinds of books."

Kim then suggested that they go to a secondhand bookstore or community library to find similar books to read. None of them did so. What this suggests is that a single positive experience was not enough to help them overcome their phobia about reading in English.

What Can We Do?

There are several possibilities.

1. *Provide access to a wider variety of books:* Sweet Valley books, which worked so

well for Cho's subjects, were not right for the women we worked with. Second language acquirers' tastes and interests vary, just as native speakers' do, and they need to have access to a wide variety of reading materials.

2. *Provide easier access to books:* Because light reading is so helpful to language development, access to light reading needs to be made easy. Easier access to books results in more reading (Krashen, 1993).

3. *Provide guidance:* Second language acquirers need to know what is available. They need to become familiar with different authors and genres in order to select what will be interesting to them.

4. *Tell acquirers about the benefits of reading:* Most acquirers are simply not aware of how powerful reading can be in improving second language competence.

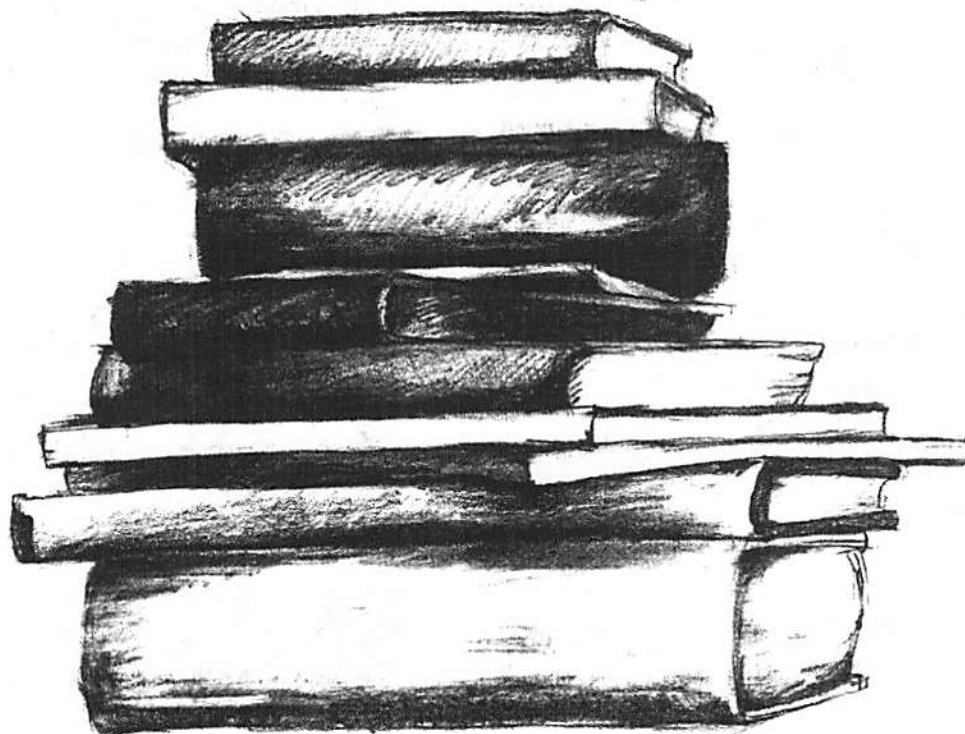
5. *Deprogram acquirers:* Acquirers need to overcome the ineffective strategies they have developed in foreign language classes, such as looking up every unfamiliar word. Most of these bad habits will disappear gradually as they read easier and more interesting material, but some direct instruction may help.

Constantino (1995) and Tse (1996a, 1996b) used these strategies in courses for adult second language acquirers and noted a significant reduction reading apprehension and increased interest in free voluntary reading. For detailed guidelines in organizing such a course, see Dupuy, Tse, and Cook (1996).

The case for free reading is very strong. In addition, free reading is much more pleasant than traditional instruction (e.g., McQuillan, 1994). It is a shame that intermediate-level adult second language acquirers do not take advantage of it. Teachers and other educators can, though, effectively address any lack of interest and lead their acquirers into language competence.

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5. Deprogram acquirers.

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