Free Voluntary Web-Surfing

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Summary: This paper presents a simple message: We are taking the wrong approach in our use of computers in language and literacy development. Also, the wrong way is the hard way; the right way is the easy way. "Free voluntary web-surfing" promises to be a great help for second language acquirers.

The computer can be used to great advantage in language and literacy development. I present here a view of how this can be done, one that is heavily influenced by the Comprehension Hypothesis, the claim that we acquire language and develop literacy when we understand messages.

The computer can also make things difficult. Approaches that do this assume the correctness of the rival hypothesis, the Skill-Building Hypothesis. Studies of the effectiveness of computer-aided instruction, in fact, typically compare two wrong approaches.

I will first mention some of the problems with current approaches, and then present a much simpler, easier-to-use alternative: Free voluntary surfing – doing free voluntary reading on the internet, or using the internet to locate printed material of interest for free reading. Free voluntary surfing is rarely mentioned as a possible means of language development. Yet, it may have the best potential of all current "computer applications."

The Computer as Skill-Builder

Nearly all applications of the computer to language and literacy development in the early days of computer-aided instruction were based on the Skill-Building Hypothesis, the view that we learn language by first consciously learning about it (learning the rules), getting corrected (which helps use "refine" our conscious rules), and practicing the rules until they become "automatic." This tradition continues, despite the overwhelming evidence that skill-building results in very modest amounts of superficial knowledge about language that is difficult to apply to real language use (Krashen, 2003).

Inspection of articles published in journals devoted to computer-based instruction (CALICO and ReCALL; see Zhao, 2003 for a review) since their beginning reveals a nearly complete focus on skill-building, and the computer programs involved are generally quite complex. Studies typically deal with the effect of feedback on grammar and pronunciation (Vol. 20, 3, 2000 of CALICO is devoted entirely to error correction),

various means of presenting and practicing vocabulary and grammar, and comparisons of doing traditional skill-building based instruction with and without the computer.

It is no surprise that some studies show that computer-aided approaches are better than non-computer approaches, or that some kinds of computer-aided instruction work better than others, but when both conditions of a study involve skill-building, if skill-building is not the fundamental means by which we acquire language, the information is only of peripheral value.

There is also indirect evidence that this approach has not been useful, i.e. reports that money in schools invested in books is better spent in terms of achievement than money invested in technology (Krashen, 1995; Hurd, Dixon, and Oikham, 2005).

The Computer as a Source of Written Comprehensible Input

The Comprehension Hypothesis

The Comprehension Hypothesis claims that the process of comprehension and acquisition are closely related. Comprehension occurs when we make predictions about what we are going to read (or hear) and then attend to enough of the text to confirm that our predictions are correct. Good readers do not examine all details of the text, just enough to have confidence that their predictions are right (Smith, 2004; Goodman, Flurkey, A., & J. Xu, 2003).

For acquisition to occur, the comprehended text needs to contain aspects of language that the acquirer has not yet acquired but is developmentally "ready" to acquire ("i+1"). I have hypothesized that given enough input, i + 1 is present automatically. We do not need to program texts to make sure the appropriate structures or vocabulary is present, nor is this a good idea (Krashen, 1985). When a prediction regarding a previously unknown vocabulary item is successful, we acquire some of the meaning of the word, and as we read and understand the word in subsequent contexts, we gradually build up the full meaning of the word and its grammatical properties.

Our predictions are based on our knowledge of the world, our knowledge of the language, and, in reading, our knowledge of the writing system. This view thus claims that more competence in any of these three sources will increase comprehension by making readers' predictions more accurate, and will thereby increase language acquisition. It also predicts that "easy" texts, texts that contain a high percentage of known language, and that are about content familiar to the reader (but with enough new information to stimulate interest) are optimal for language and literacy development, because readers can make better predictions. This prediction is consistent with conclusions that optimal vocabulary development takes place when texts are 95% or even more comprehensible (Laufer, 1992).

In summary: we acquire when we understand what we read or hear; we understand by confirming our predictions about the input and when the input contains new aspects of

language we are "ready" to acquire. Acquisition happens gradually, and occurs best when texts are very comprehensible.

Acquisition via comprehensible input also happens subconsciously: while it is happening we are not aware that it is happening, and the competence developed this way is stored in the brain subconsciously.

For acquisition to take place optimally, the acquirer also needs to be "open" to the input: High anxiety, low self-esteem, and lack of motivation can lead to a high "affective filter": The acquirer may understand the input but it is will not enter "the language acquisition device."

In previous publications, I have also hypothesized that input needs to be interesting for acquisition to take place optimally; high interest ensures that the acquirer will actually pay attention to the input. I now suspect that "interesting" is not enough: The input has be compelling, so interesting that all attention is focused on the message, and thoughts of anxiety do not even occur, so interesting, that the acquirer "forgets" that the input is in another language.

A profound difference between the Comprehension Hypothesis and the Skill-Building Hypothesis is that in the former, acquisition of aspects of language such as vocabulary and grammar are the result of acquisition, of receiving comprehensible input. For skill-building, mastery of these aspects needs to precede language acquisition: We first "learn" grammar and vocabulary, then (someday) we can actually use them in comprehension and production. In this sense, the skill-building hypothesis is a delayed gratification hypothesis.

The Power of (Free Voluntary) Reading

There is a great deal of research showing that reading is an excellent source of comprehensible input, and the kind of reading that appears to help the most is the kind most consistent with the principles outlined above: Reading that is easily comprehensible and compelling, reading that the reader selects, also known as "free voluntary reading" (Krashen, 2004), reading that is done with no "accountability," no testing, no book reports, but for its own sake, for pleasure.

The Computer as a Source of Comprehensible Texts

There have been some attempts to use the computer and the internet to supply comprehensible input. (I will not discuss aural comprehensible input here, but invite the reader to visit eslpod.com, which is an excellent source of interesting aural English input for second language acquirers).

The internet offers many simplified texts in English. Only a small minority, however, have the potential of being genuinely interesting. But even when the texts are reasonable,

they are often followed by a long parade of comprehension questions and exercises.

Of course, the internet also supplies authentic texts in English, and the selection is enormous. Nearly every acquirer can find something of interest. The question is how to make these texts comprehensible for second language acquirers.

Before proceeding we need to discuss one more aspect of the comprehension hypothesis and how it is applied: Narrow reading.

The Comprehension Hypothesis predicts that self-selected, narrow reading is optimal for language and literacy development. As described elsewhere (Krashen, 1981, 2004), narrow reading means focusing on one topic, author or genre, according to the reader's interests, and gradually expanding the range of what is read over time. It is the opposite of the "survey" approach.

Self-selection and narrow reading nearly guarantee interest and comprehensibility, because of greater background knowledge, which increases as readers read more, and greater knowledge of the language: Each writer has favorite expressions and a distinctive style, and each topic has its own vocabulary and discourse. Thus narrow reading results in rapid acquisition of the "language" of the author or topic, and provides built-in review.

The evidence in favor of narrow reading is of two kinds. First, there is overwhelming evidence supporting free voluntary reading in general, evidence from case histories, correlational studies, and studies of in-school sustained silent reading (Krashen, 2004). Also, studies specifically show that those who do narrow reading make excellent progress (Cho and Krashen, 1994, 1995a, 1995b), that better readers are typically narrow readers (Lamme, 1976), and that a substantial percentage of books that children enjoy are "series" books of some kind (Ujiie and Krashen, 2002, 2005).

It also appears to be the case that narrow readers gradually expand their reading interests (LaBrant, 1958); we need not fear that narrow readers will stay with one kind of reading forever.

Also, narrow reading does not result in the ability to read in only one area. Deep reading in any topic will provide exposure to a tremendous amount of syntax and vocabulary that is used in other topics.

Reading instruction for those beyond the initial stages, according to the Comprehension Hypothesis, is focused on helping readers find appropriate texts, and encouraging narrow reading.

Free Voluntary Surfing

The best use of the computer, given today's technology, may be the most straightforward: Free Voluntary Surfing (FVS), simply encouraging English as a foreign language (EFL)

students to wander through the internet and read what interests them, following their interests from site to site, and from site to print.

In this section, I present some evidence that FVS can, in fact, result in higher levels of literacy, that many EFL students already possess the necessary competence to do it, but do not. I then consider what might be holding them back and what we can do about it.

FVS and Language/Literacy Development

Evidence for the potential of the internet in EFL comes from Cho and Kim (2004), who reported that children in EFL classes in Korea that included reading interesting stories of their choice from the internet gained significantly more in English than comparisons did. This was not, however, genuine "surfing." The children read from selected websites, and the duration of the study was only 14 weeks, so the full potential of surfing was not realized.

Jackson, von Eye, Biocca, Barbatsis, Zhao and Fitzgerald (2006) provided computers with internet access to 140 children (ages 10-18, but mostly between 12-14) from low-income families. Jackson et. al. reported that more internet use resulted in improved reading, as reflected by grades and standardized tests. The improvements were present after six months of internet use for test scores and after one year for grades. There was no impact on mathematics test scores, and the data did not support the hypothesis that better readers used the internet more; rather, internet use improved reading.

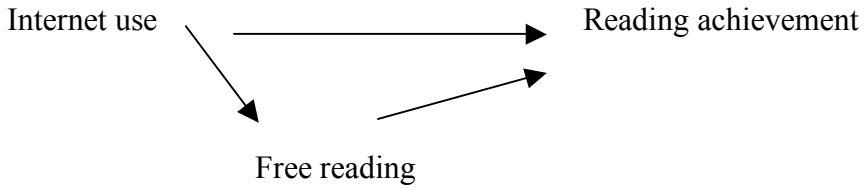
Jackson et. al. (2006) point out that "web pages are heavily text based" (p. 433), and suggest that it was self-motivated reading of these texts that was the cause of the gains in reading. de Haan and Huysmans (2004) reported, however, that for adolescents in the Netherlands, greater use of the internet is modestly positively correlated with use of print media ($r = .31$): those who used the internet more also read regular print more. In addition, Lee and Kuo (2002) reported that an increase in use of the internet over a one year period was associated with more newspaper reading (and less television) for secondary school students in Singapore: During this time, internet use increased from 73% to 87% of the sample ($n = 817$). A similar result has been reported for adults in Taiwan (Liu, Day, Sun and Wany, 2000).

Of course it is possible that this result is influenced by social class: More affluent people have more access to both computers and books. Despite this lack of control, it is possible that internet use does indeed lead to more reading off the computer, which in turn may be responsible for growth in reading.

(Jackson et. al. (2006) reported no relationship between non-internet use of the computer and amount of use of printed media ($r = -.04$); the positive relationship held only for the use of the internet. For adults in the US, however, more computer use in general is associated with time spent reading, even when controlled for social class. The relationship, however, is modest (Robinson and Godbey, 1997).)

A logical study would be to determine the existence of the relationships (regression coefficients) in the model presented in figure 1, controlling for poverty. Both reading from the internet and free voluntary reading stimulated by internet use may be directly related to reading achievement or the effect of internet use might be indirect, with only reading print media directly relating to reading achievement. (In the case of the low-income children studied in Jackson et. al., 2006, however, it is doubtful that they had much access to print media; see Neuman and Celano, 2001.)

Figure one: Hypothesized relationships among interest use, free reading (use of print media), and reading achievement



An obvious gap in the research, as Jackson and colleagues note, is that only "time on the internet" was considered as a predictor, with no attempt made to determine the impact of different kinds of internet use (e.g. blogs, reading the news, games, etc.). Nevertheless, the results of Jackson et. al. (2006) are consistent with the Comprehension Hypothesis.

The Popularity of the Internet and Web-Surfing

It has been widely reported that internet use is increasing in many countries, and that a significant number of people use the internet for free voluntary web-surfing. Horrigan (2006) reported a tremendous increase in internet use in the US, with estimated growth from 60 million in March, 2005 (30% of all adults) to 84 million one year later, in March, 2006 (42% of the adult population).

Two-thirds of internet users admit that they engage in free voluntary surfing "at some time." Fallows (2006) concluded that "surfing for fun" is the second most popular online activity, behind using email. Similarly, Zhu and He (2002) reported that 52% of the 1007 Hong Kong residents they interviewed were connected to the internet at home, averaging 350 minutes per week on the net at home (and another 629 minutes at work). Interviewees said they spent an average of 104 minutes "searching for personal internet information," about 30% of the total home-use time.

The children studied in the Michigan State study clearly liked web-surfing: When asked what their main activity on the computer was, 33% said it was "web search" (Jackson, von Eye, Biocca, Barbatsis, Zhao, and Fitzgerald, 2005, p. 263).

A Reluctance to Surf in EFL?

A survey done in of adults (over age 18) in Taiwan in 2000 (Liu, Day, Sun and Wany,

2000) reported that about 25% of those interviewed (488/2015) were internet-users. Most of this use, however, was on Chinese-language websites, with 84% of users' time on Taiwanese websites and about 6% on overseas Chinese websites. Liu et. al. cite a previous survey done by Yams (a search engine used in Taiwan) that found similar results. According to the Yams study, about 70% of the time spent on websites using other languages was with English language websites, and about 7% with Japanese language websites. We can thus estimate that only 7% of users' time on the internet involves English.

Of those using English websites, however, some are undoubtedly those with very high proficiency in English already. These results suggest that few people take advantage of the internet as a source of input in English as a second or foreign language.

In addition, use of the FVS for helping language development is rarely mentioned in articles devoted to pedagogy; when the internet is mentioned at all, the discussion is usually about how helping students learn to use the computer – the target population we are talking is already comfortable surfing the web in their first language – or finding specific information on the internet as specified by the teacher (see e.g. articles in the "internet" section of http://iteslj.org/Lessons/).

I suspect that the reasons for the lack of use of FVS are similar to the reasons why free voluntary reading is underused. Instructors and those creating materials may be hesitant to include it because of a belief in the Skill-Building Hypothesis, the importance of knowing every word in a text, and a lack of faith in language acquisition. Another factor could be the fear that EFL web-surfers will stick with easy, familiar reading and never progress to harder material that will help them make progress. As noted above, this is not the case in print reading, but this possibility should be investigated.

The most obvious reason EFL students do not try FVS is that it is never mentioned in class, which is also the case for FVR. Thus, most students have developed the same personal theories about language acquisition and literacy development that the curriculum reflects, i.e. the Skill-Building Hypothesis. They have little choice: In general, no alternative is presented to them.

EFL students may also fear that authentic texts will be incomprehensible, unaware that narrow reading on familiar and compelling topics, without knowing every word, will contribute to making these texts comprehensible and thereby contribute to language acquisition.

The best way, in my experience, to get a feel for narrow FVS is to try it. The internet provides us with a unique opportunity to test the effects of narrow reading on oneself without expending a lot of effort in finding relevant and related reading material.

Let me suggest the following guidelines:

1. Do FVS in a language you are "intermediate" in, one in which you can read some authentic texts.

2. Start FVS by looking at google news, or websites on any topic you are interested in. It is, I think, crucial not to choose a topic that is professionally relevant, or even important to your life. If the reading is "serious" you may revert to intensive word-perfect reading. Choose sometime genuinely interesting but not essential: In other words, don't use FVS, at least at first, to make you a better person.

3. Accept the fact that it will take you a while to find a topic, and it will take you a while to overcome the habit of not looking up words. The two problems will probably be solved at the same time: When you find an area that is really compelling, you will not be tempted to look up words. In fact, you will barely be aware that you are reading in another language. And that is when real language acquisition takes place (see chapter eight, this volume).

Conclusion

We should at least consider the most obvious, least expensive, and least complex application of the computer to language education, especially with those students who have already mastered the technical aspects of internet use. All we need to do is to encourage them to do something they already enjoy doing in their first language.

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