

Language Acquisition without Speaking and without Study.

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This paper describes a case of second language acquisition without speaking, without instruction, and without any kind of study. The subject, in fact, disdained study.

Paul is a young man, now a teen-ager, growing up in a Cantonese-speaking family in California. His parents are both native speakers of Cantonese, but highly proficient in English, and his mother speaks Mandarin very well. His grandparents live with the family and speak Cantonese with Paul and his brother.

Cantonese and Mandarin are different languages. They are related, and share some common vocabulary, but they are not completely mutually comprehensible. With the help of context, Cantonese speakers are able to understand a limited amount of Mandarin and vice versa.

Today, as a teen-ager, Paul speaks Mandarin quite well, in addition to Cantonese and English. He has a Cantonese accent when he speaks Mandarin and makes only a few errors. When Mandarin-speaking guests are at his home, he has no trouble conversing on everyday topics, and on occasional visits to China with his family he is comfortable speaking Mandarin.

This paper describes how Paul did it. Nearly all of his exposure to Mandarin has been through media, through TV and CD's, with no classes, no study, and no interaction.

When Paul was a baby, his grandmother took care of him most of the time. Grandma liked to sing Paul lots of Cantonese and Mandarin songs and they watched Chinese MTV for children, which was in Mandarin.

Cartoons

Paul grew up watching Mandarin language cartoons. When he was a small child, and his parents were at work, a caretaker liked to turn on Mandarin cartoons, which Paul loved. Of course, Paul was interested in the cartoons, not in acquiring Mandarin. At age five, Paul and his grandmother watched all episodes of a Mandarin cartoon, *Ne Zha Conquers the Dragon King*. At six, he watched *The Winter of Three Hairs*, and at eight he watched *The Adventures of Tintin, dubbed in Mandarin*.

Jylha-Laide and Karreinen (1993) described the case of Laura, a 10-year old girl living in Finland who acquired an impressive amount of English over four years by watching cartoons on video. Laura, however, had the habit of stopping the video and replaying parts she wanted to see again or did not understand. Paul did not do this, but even without this advantage, cartoons supply rich extra-linguistic context and of course stories that young children find compelling. In

addition, Paul's grandmother often watched the cartoons with him, and was a source of explanation.

Movies and Television Series

Over the weekend, Paul's father would check out Chinese (Mandarin) videos from the library and watch them with his sons. They watched at least one movie every weekend for more than four years.

When Paul was seven, he started watching the adult version of *Journey to the West*, and when he was ten he watched *Water Margin*. At about this time, he and his dad and brother started watching *The Romance of The Three Kingdoms* – all three were faithful viewers of this series and they watched every episode, often for two to three hours at a time. He also watched the entire *Hua Mulan* series. Paul loved TV so much he even watched the TV news in Mandarin with his grandparents every evening.

Books on Tape

Paul's mother bought a number of books on tape in Mandarin for Paul and his brother to listen to when they were in the car together. At first, Paul had difficulty understanding, but with the help of his mother, he soon became interested. Once, when Paul was eight years old, he asked his mother to stay with him in the car even though they had arrived at home so that he could finish listening to a story. His mother was very surprised because the story she was playing (*The Cock Crows at Midnight*, 半夜鸡叫[视频连接地址](#)) was complex and presupposed historical knowledge that only those living in China would fully understand. Nevertheless, Paul was completely absorbed in the story.

Table one presents Paul's TV watching history for series, starting with cartoon series:

age began	title	# episodes	Duration (min)	total hours
5	Ne Zha Conquers the Dragon King	26	5 (minimum)	2
6	The Winter of Three Hairs	26	24	10
7	Journey to the West	25	45	19
10	Water Margin	43	45	64.5
10	Romance of the Three Kingdoms	84	45	63
10	Hua Mulan	48	48	38

His series viewing totals up to about 200 hours of viewing. If we add to this four years of watching movies (one movie a week, each movie estimated to last 1.5 hours), the total becomes

500 hours. This must be an under-estimate of the amount of input Paul received in Mandarin – he watched other programs in Mandarin, such as *Tin Tin* and the news, and, as noted earlier, he heard books on tape in the car.

Disdain for Mandarin Instruction

Paul has consistently resisted any kind of instruction in Mandarin. His mother had organized a literature and story-based Mandarin program that had been shown to be highly successful with heritage language Mandarin speakers and non-native speakers who had had some Mandarin instruction. Paul came to the program only to find comic books and participate in singing Mandarin songs. He and the other students got interested in Mandarin songs because of Chinese MTV.

A Natural Sequence

Our sparse description is sufficient to formulate the hypothesis of a natural sequence for listening comprehension, beginning with stories and cartoons and eventually progressing to movies and TV shows, leading from conversational language to more sophisticated language.

Paul's Motivation

In none of these stages was Paul watching TV in order to improve his Mandarin. In fact, Paul had no obvious motivation to improve his Mandarin and has never shown a strong desire to identify with Chinese culture. At all times, his motivation was entertainment and interest in content. His acquisition of spoken Mandarin was a by-product, a result.

Self-selected and narrow

None of Paul's viewing was "assigned" – Paul decided what he wanted to watch, and never felt compelled to watch a program to the end if he wasn't interested. He made no attempt to watch a wide variety of cartoons, movies and TV shows, but stuck to what he liked.

Conclusion

Superficially, Paul's path to Mandarin proficiency is not traditional. It is, however, fully consistent with current theory of language acquisition: The reasons for Paul's success are the same reasons certain methods are more effective than others: Paul had access to great deal of highly interesting, comprehensible input (Krashen, 2003).

In one important way, the input that Paul had in Mandarin was superior to that generally found in even excellent language classes: It was compelling, so interesting that it engaged him fully, so

interesting that he, in a sense, "forgot" that the input was in another language. This kind of input may be optimal for successful language acquisition (Lao and Krashen, 2008). Paul's case is also consistent with an important corollary of the Comprehension Hypothesis: Talking is not practicing.

These kinds of cases are probably far more typical than educators realize.

References

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