

Yew Hock Yeo: A Literacy Autobiography

Yew Hock Yeo. Singapore Armed Forces (Ret.)

Phyllis Ghim-Lian Chew, Professor, Dept of English Language and Literature,
National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University

Stephen Krashen, Professor Emeritus, University of Southern California

Language Magazine, July 2016, 35-37.

It is difficult to draw conclusions from individual case histories. We can, however, learn a great deal from case histories when they are considered as a group: in this way, we can conclude what features of the cases provide evidence for or against hypotheses.

We therefore present the case history of Mr. Y. H. Yeo of Singapore in annotated form, in order to connect his experiences to those of others.

The main hypothesis of interest here is the reading hypothesis, the claim that self-selected free voluntary reading leads to the acquisition of many aspects of literacy (e.g. reading ability, writing ability, and vocabulary). The case history presented here not only supplies important information about the reading hypothesis, it also gives us data on the relationship of a free reading habit and school and career success, where and how young people living in poverty get access to reading material, the importance of "narrow" reading, the value of comic books, the value of fiction, and the role of reading in lowering anxiety.

I am the first literate member of my family. Before I started school in 1959, I did not know the English language as my family spoke Hokkien at home.¹

When I was about five years old, we lived in a squatter house in Singapore as we were poor and my father was often unemployed. The hut was made of old pieces of wood, cardboard, and zinc, and in a heavy downpour the roof would leak.

One day my parents bought a bag of charcoal and in it was a book without a cover. I was fascinated by it and would look at the words and pages knowing that there were meanings in it. It was the jewel in the charcoal and I kept the book for a long time without understanding a word. I wondered when I would be able to unravel the meanings of these pages.

Elementary education is compulsory in Singapore, so in January, 1959, when I was six years old, I was enrolled in primary school in a class of about 40 pupils. I had not been exposed to English at all but by staring at the books as if it was a puzzle, the meaning came to me, thanks to the cartoons and pictures. And as I looked at more books, more meanings came to me by intuition. Soon I was able to read.²

Besides my brother, one year younger than I, I had a sister younger by 3 years. I had to look after her. Besides the library books, I read my English text books, even passages that the teacher had not yet covered. I also borrowed comics (especially Beano and Dandy) and storybooks from my friend Sin Boon Wah who is from a middle class background, as his father was a primary school teacher at Windstedt Primary School near Newton.³

My mother often went to wash clothes at nearby houses - the richer residents - to earn money to supplement my father's meagre wages so she often was not home and I had to look after my younger brothers and sisters.

Sometimes I was fortunate and Sin would loan me about a dozen comics at once. That was heaven! But I had to read all of these comic books as quickly as I could before hell broke loose: all the reading I was doing

infuriated my parents, who preferred that I spend my time helping with housework and doing other things that could help pay the bills. We were always short of money.

For example, the baker delivered one loaf of bread on his bicycle each day and shouted out a number. If it was e.g. “35”, it meant we had not paid for 35 loaves. Once we found money, he would start from “1” again.

My mother ironed clothes for a neighbor for a fee and I had to carry the ironed dresses through the village to return the dresses. I hated it as I was self-conscious! I had to hold the hung clothes high above my head by lifting my arms as the dresses were taller than I was. This may have caused me to become a shy person when I grew older and I found reading fiction was a good way to escape.⁴

Back in the classroom, I was a keen student and would do my homework diligently. I liked the assigned books and would volunteer to read aloud in class. We read about autumn and the falling brown leaves, as these were British books!

About the third year of primary school, one of the teachers noticed that I kept borrowing books from the small school library. He put me in charge of the 200 books! I continued to read these books, in particular a science fiction series about space traveler called Kemlo.⁵

I kept reading all the way through elementary school: I voraciously read Enid Blyton books such as The Famous Five Series and The Secret Seven Series. I borrowed these books from the richer classmates.

At the end of my first year of primary school, I was ranked 12th out of about 100 students in my class. At the end of my second year, I ranked 4th, and at the end of my third year, I was first in my class, a rank I held all the way to my sixth year.⁶

I also did well in writing: In second grade my composition about the

coconut tree and its uses was displayed on the school notice board.⁷

My younger brother was not interested in books or in studying. In fact, he often ranked as last in his class. I felt that his academic problems were the result of my mother not having adequate nutrition when she was pregnant with him due to poverty. It may, however, have been because he did not develop a reading habit the way I did.

At the end of primary school, I took the Primary School Leaving Examination. I was one of only six who qualified for the Raffles Institution, one of the top secondary schools for boys in Singapore. All this was done without extra tutoring; I simply continued to read fiction.⁸ I feel that this is what helped me do so well. I didn't (and still don't) use the dictionary and don't ask teachers to explain the meanings of words.⁹

Secondary School

When I was in secondary school, (ages 13-16), I continued my love affair with the English language and reading. In particular I read books by P.G. Wodehouse and Arthur Conan Doyle, all borrowed from the secondary school library. Some of my schoolmates also bought books on fiction and they loaned the books to me.¹⁰

I also read World War II stories by W.E. Johns. The hero of the series was a pilot named John Bigglesworth, with the nickname "Biggles." I read several books from the James Bond series, by Ian Fleming, such as Thunderball and Dr No.¹¹

I sometimes went to the USIS library and read books in the Reading Room on the US Navy and their many battles with the Japanese Navy in the Pacific War during WWII. It was exciting reading and the books were thick and bulky - but we were not allowed to take the books out of the library.

One of my secondary school teachers, David Paul, encouraged me to write a fictitious World War II adventure story based in Singapore and it

was published in the school journal. Again, reading should get the credit for my writing ability. My grades for English and English literature were always very good in primary and secondary school, and I earned a grade of A for the English Literature and the English Language Cambridge O level Examinations in 1968.

Post-script

After finishing secondary school, Mr. Yeo joined the Singapore Armed Forces at the age of 18 as an officer-cadet and was awarded the prestigious Ministry of Defense scholarship for tertiary education. The generous allowance from the army enabled him to lift three generations of his family out of poverty, and to support his younger siblings through university. He has had a successful career with the Singapore Armed Forces and on retirement from active service at the age of 55, and has continued to work with the Armed Forces as a civilian officer and adviser.

NOTES

1. Hokkien is a Chinese language spoken in several countries, including Singapore, Taiwan, China, and the Philippines.
2. Goodman (Flukey and Xu, 2003) and Smith (2004) have concluded that we learn to read by understanding what is on the page. Context (visual, linguistic and background knowledge) helps make the text comprehensible. The research literature contains many case histories of children who learned to read in their first language the same way Mr. Yeo did in his second language, with very little or no formal instruction (e.g. Goodman and Goodman, 1982; Krashen and McQuillan, 2007).
3. Other case histories mention friends as an important source of reading material for children living in poverty (G. Canada, described in Krashen, 2015). Several second language case histories confirm the value of comic books (Desmond Tutu, Mark Mathabane, in Krashen, 2004) and research

shows that comic books can make a substantial contribution to literacy development (Krashen, 2004.)

4. A reader interviewed by Nell (1988) tell us that “reading removes me ... from the irritations of living ... for the few hours a day I read ‘trash’ I escape the cares of those around me, as well as escaping my own cares and dissatisfactions" (p. 288).
5. Studies confirm the importance of the school library, especially for students living in poverty (Krashen, Lee and McQuillan, 2012).
6. A number of case histories show that pleasure readers do better in school, and typically the students give reading the credit (Krashen, 2004, 2015). Second language cases are described in Henkin and Krashen (2015), Krashen and Williams (2012), and Mathabane (1986). In addition, a number of studies show that those who read more for pleasure, know more about a wide variety of subjects (Krashen, 2004), which contributes to school success.
7. Studies show that those who do more reading write better Krashen, 2004, p. 132; Lee, 2005. Also, several studies show that more writing does not result in better writing (Krashen, 2004, 135-6; Lee, 2005; Sari 2013).
8. Evidence supporting the value of reading fiction: Krashen, 2015.
9. Research confirms that vocabulary can be gradually but very efficiently acquired through reading (Nagy, Herman and Anderson, 1985; Pitts, White and Krashen, 1989).
10. Friends continue to be an important source of books; see note 3.
11. Research supports the strategy of narrow reading, the practice of reading texts by one author or about a single topic of interest, such as "series" books. Narrow reading helps ensure comprehension and natural repetition of vocabulary and grammar (Krashen, 2004). Evidence supporting series reading includes Lamme (1976), for reading in the first language and Cho and Krashen (1994) for reading in a second language.

References

Cho, K.S., and Krashen, S. 1994. Acquisition of vocabulary from the Sweet Valley High Kids series: Adult ESL acquisition. *Journal of Reading* 37: 662-667.

Cho, K.S. and Krashen, S. 2016. What does it take to develop a long-term pleasure reading habit? Turkish Online Journal of English Language Teaching. 1(1): 1-9. <http://www.tojelt.com>

Flurkey, A., and Xu, J.. Eds. 2003. On the Revolution in Reading: The Selected Writings of Kenneth S. Goodman. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Goodman, K., and Y. Goodman. 1982. Spelling ability of a self-taught reader. In Language and literacy: The selected writings of Kenneth S. Goodman, vol. 2. ed. F. Gollasch. London: Routledge, pp. 135-142.

Henskin, V. J. and Krashen, S. (2015). The home run book experience. Language Magazine, 15(1): 32-25.

Krashen, S. 2004. The Power of Reading. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, and Westport, CONN: Libraries Unlimited (second edition).

Krashen, S. 2015. Fact or fiction? The plot thickens. Language Magazine 15(3): 22-27.

Krashen, S. and McQuillan, J. 2007. Late intervention. Educational Leadership 65 (2): 68-73.

Krashen, S. and Williams, C. 2012. Is self-selected pleasure reading the cure for the long-term ELL syndrome? A case history. NABE Perspectives, September-December 2012, 26

Krashen, S., Lee, S.Y. and McQuillan, J. 2012. Is the library important? Multivariate studies at the national and international level. Journal of Language and Literacy Education, 8(1): 26-36.

Lamme, L., 1974. Authors popular among fifth graders. Elementary English 51: 1008-1009.

Lee, S. Y. 2005. Facilitating and inhibiting factors on EFL writing: A model testing with SEM. Language Learning 55(2): 335-374.

Mathabane, M. 1986. Kaffir boy. New York: Plume.

Nagy, W., Herman, P., and Anderson, R. (1985). Learning words from context. Reading Research Quarterly 17, 233-255.

Nell, V. 1988. *Lost in a Book*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press.

Pitts, M., White, H., and Krashen, S. 1989. Acquiring second language vocabulary through reading: A replication of the Clockwork Orange study using second language acquirers. *Reading in a Foreign Language* 5: 271-275.

Sari, R. 2013. Is it possible to improve writing without writing practice? *International Journal of Foreign Language Teaching* 8,1

Smith, F. 2004. *Understanding Reading*. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum. Sixth Edition.