

# **Do Libraries and Teacher Librarians Have the Solution to the Long-Term English Language Learner Problem?**

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Long-Term ELLs are students who are English Learners in school who have remained classified as English Learners for a long time, too long, according to certain standards. In general, this means six years or more.

There is widespread agreement that Long-Term ELLs lack competence in academic English, the language of school, of subject matter classes, which means they cannot succeed in subject matter classes designed for competent English speakers.

The most common suggestion for helping Long Term ELLs is direct instruction in academic language. This is, in my opinion, hopeless. The special vocabulary, text structure and grammar of academic English is far too vast and complex to be taught; in fact, scholars have not even described it fully. Also, there is not a single recorded case of a former ELL who mastered academic English through hard study alone.

My goal in this paper is to suggest another approach that is consistent with theory and research: self-selected pleasure reading in English. Libraries and teacher librarians play a central role in carrying out this suggestion.

## **Three Stages in Developing High Levels of Literacy**

I have hypothesized that there are three stages in the development of specialized forms of language, and academic language is one of these forms. Both first and second language acquirers go through these stages.

### **STAGE ONE: Stories, in the Form of Storytelling and Read-Alouds:**

The research on hearing stories is very strong. Children who hear more stories in their first language, either at home or at school, outperform comparison children in vocabulary, are more aware of how stories are put together (they have better grasp of "story grammars" or text structure), and are better in understanding and producing the grammatical constructions used in academic language (e.g. Blok, 1999; Trelease, 2006).

Hearing stories and read-alouds also promotes an interest in independent reading. The title of Brassell's paper (Brassell, 2003) tells it all: "Sixteen books went home tonight: Fifteen were introduced by the teacher."

The use of stories is an important methodological advance in second/foreign language development, and has produced results similar to those seen in first language development: In Storylistening, developed by Beniko Mason, the teacher tells stories and makes the stories comprehensible using a variety of techniques, including drawings, occasional translation, synonyms, and gestures with facial expressions. Although students are not told to remember the

meanings of new words, studies show Storylistening to result in vocabulary development at a rate similar to that reported in first language studies of hearing stories (e.g. Mason, Vanata, Yander, Borsch, & Krashen, 2009).

In TPRS (Teaching Proficiency Through Reading and Storytelling), developed by Blaine Ray, teachers and students co-construct stories. TPRS has been shown to be more effective than traditional language teaching in several published studies (Varguez, 2009; Watson, 2009).

In addition, Cho and Choi (2008) reported that 6<sup>th</sup> graders in EFL classes in Korea who heard stories made superior gains in reading, writing and listening, and Wang and Lee (2007) reported substantial vocabulary growth in an eight-year old girl acquiring English in Taiwan from listening to stories.

**STAGE TWO: Self-Selected Free Voluntary Reading**

Hearing stories prepares language acquirers for stage two, self-selected free reading. The research shows that those who do more self-selected reading make far greater gains in nearly all aspects of literacy, including reading comprehension, writing style, vocabulary, grammar, and spelling. In fact, it is safe to hypothesize that self-selected reading is the cause of literacy competence.

Research in this area can be divided into three categories. In each, I focus on research involving second language acquirers.

**1. Sustained Silent Reading**

Sustained Silent Reading (SSR) means setting aside a certain amount of time each day and students read what they want to read. There are no book reports, quizzes, or other forms of accountability. Generally, the amount of time set aside is modest, especially at first, and SSR is used as soon as students can do at least some independent reading. Studies show that successful SSR depends on having an adequate collection of interesting and comprehensible reading material close at hand, so that students are not required to bring their own book each time. In SSR, students need not finish each book they start: Atwell (2007), in fact, comments that "abandoning a book that a reader doesn't enjoy (is) a smart move, not a character defect," p. 17).

There have been many studies comparing students in SSR with those who spent an equivalent amount of time in traditional instruction, both in first and second language development. An efficient way of summarizing this research is the use of meta-analysis: An "effect size" is calculated for each study, quantifying the size of the effect, that is, the degree of superiority of one treatment versus another. An effect size of .2 is considered to be small, .5 is considered to be medium, and .8 is considered to be large.

Table one presents the results of three of meta-analyses using students of English as a foreign language, each reviewing mostly different studies. In all three, the average effect size was positive, indicating that those participating in SSR did better on tests of vocabulary and reading than those spending the same amount of time in traditional classes. SSR works.

Table 1: Effect Sizes for Three Recent SSR Meta-Analyses: English as a foreign language (EFL)

	Vocabulary	Reading Comprehension
Krashen (2007)		.87 (15)
Nakanishi (2015)	.18 (9)	.68 (15)
Jeon & Day (2016)	.47 (17)	.54 (46)

Number of studies analyzed in parentheses ( ).

**2. Correlational Studies**

Reading for pleasure correlates with higher scores on the TOEFL and TOEIC tests., measures of academic language. Gradman and Hanania (1991) reported that “extracurricular reading” was a strong and significant predictor of performance on the TOEFL examination for international students taking the

test abroad and Constantino, Lee, Cho and Krashen (1997) reported similar results for students living in the US.

Mason and Krashen (2017) concluded that students of English as a foreign language in Japan improved slightly more than one-half point on the TOEIC test for every hour they read for pleasure. This result suggests that a second language acquirer can move from the low intermediate level to advanced by reading for pleasure for an hour a day in three years.

The subjunctive is always a challenge for students of Spanish as a foreign language and mastery of the subjunctive is a marker of advanced competence. The best predictor of competence in the subjunctive, however, is not study of the subjunctive, years of Spanish study, or even years lived in a Spanish-speaking country: It is reading (Stokes, Krashen, & Kartchner, 1998).

### **3. Case Histories**

My hypothesis in this paper is that Long-Term ELLS have developed a reading habit in English, while those who do not stay classified as ELL for excessive periods of time have.

Reyna Grande told her own story in her autobiography, *The Distance Between Us* (2012). She arrived in the US at nine from Mexico, and she "exited" the ESL program by the end of grade 7. She won several awards for her writing in English in school, eventually attended the University of California, and became a successful published author. While still in elementary school she had become a dedicated pleasure reader in English and her major source of books was the local public library. She notes that the librarian helped her select books, which were largely fiction. Her English teacher at Pasadena City College, Diana Savas, introduced her to Latino literature and encouraged her writing (Krashen and Williams, 2012).

Henkin and Krashen (2015) describe the case of Ramon, who had only six years of education in Mexico and was placed in grade 9 when he arrived in the US, knowing very little English. By the end of grade 10, he had nearly placed at the reclassification level on English tests, did well in his classes, and was reading young adult novels in English.

Ramon became an enthusiastic reader in English during the winter break in grade 9 when he discovered the Naruto series, manga stories about a teenage Ninja. He had been watching Naruto programs in Spanish in Mexico. He took Naruto manga out of the school and public library and also read them online. He continued to read them for the next year, but also read *The Lightning Thief* and other Percy Jackson works in graphic novel form.

Other case histories of second language acquirers have been published, confirming the power of self-selected reading for pleasure for English as a foreign language. See the series of papers by Beniko Mason, discussed above (Mason and Krashen, 2017), as well as Cho and Krashen (2016). Cho and Krashen review a number of cases of second language acquirers who have become dedicated pleasure readers in English, and list the factors common to all of these cases, which included access to reading material, a time and place to read, and self-selection of reading material. The readers did not appreciate tests, exercises, and incentives and some made excellent progress without them.

### **STAGE THREE: Self-Selected Reading in an Area of Special Interest**

Stage two alone does not bring readers to the highest level of literacy development. It is, however, a bridge to the highest level, making challenging reading more comprehensible. The Stage Three hypothesis claims that we reach the highest levels when we read in specialized areas of great interest to us: this reading, like the reading in stage two, is self-selected and narrow, limited to certain topics and authors.

This is the kind of reading that professionals do: Successful academics read "narrowly," only reading what they need to read for the paper or project they are working on now. They do not attempt to "keep up

with the literature.” Bazerman (1985) noted that physicists read current journals regularly, but only read and studied those papers that related to their current projects, filing the others for later reading, if and when they became relevant. Keeping a narrow focus and ignoring much of the rest also happens during graduate student years, a riskier practice: Ohanian (2008) notes that this was true of both Einstein and Newton, who consistently "neglected the standard curriculum, with the result that he (Newton) did poorly in his final exams ..." (p. 59).

### **The Role of Poverty**

A large percentage of English Language Learners in American schools live in poverty. This is a neglected but very important factor when discussing educational achievement among ELLs, and especially literacy development.

In order to develop a reading habit, one must have easy access to books. Access to books does not guarantee that the books will be read, but studies have found a clear relationship between access to books and frequency of reading (Krashen, 2004).

Children living in poverty live in homes with far fewer books, live in neighborhoods with few bookstores and underfunded public libraries, and attend schools with little funding for classroom or school libraries (Krashen, 2004). Not only do those in poverty suffer from limited access to books, the libraries available to them do not provide the same quality of services available to those who live in more wealthy areas (LeMoine, Brandlin, O’Brian, and McQuillan. 1997)

We have denied Long-Term ELLs the only path that will help them.

### **Summary and Conclusions**

To some extent, the concern about long-term ELLs is a needless concern; it represents our allegiance to arbitrary standards, and our obsession with speed of learning. But there is reason to be concerned about ELLs who do not seem to be making much progress after many years. Of all the solutions tried and discussed, the one that shows the most promise is absent: encouraging a pleasure reading habit in English.

Several steps can be taken: one will be extremely helpful - bilingual education. It is easier to learn to read in a language you already understand, and this ability makes learning to read in any other language easier, even if the writing systems are different. Students in well-organized bilingual programs consistently outperform those in all-English classes on tests of English reading (McField and McField, 2015). Also, the reading habit can transfer across languages, as was the case for Reyne Grande, a dedicated reader in Spanish before coming the US.

The second step is essential: Make sure all children have access to interesting reading material, and provide a time and place to read for pleasure, without accountability. This means well-funded and well-supplied libraries everywhere. It also means staffing libraries with credentialed teacher librarians who can connect readers with books that are right for them.

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