Self-Selected Pleasure Reading and Story Listening for Foreign Language Classrooms

Beniko MASON

INTRODUCTION

Reading books and listening to stories for acquiring a foreign language may sound like nothing new. We have been teaching reading and listening for the last 50 to 100 years in foreign language programs in schools all over the world. But the way we have been offering reading and listening classes to students has been ineffective, inefficient, and insufficient. It seems in Japan that most college students who have taken foreign language courses are still at the beginning level even after years of foreign language education in school.

What has been ineffective, inefficient, and insufficient about the way we offer reading and listening classes is that we teach in skill-based explicit ways. Teachers have been misled to believe that conscious learning of the rules of the language is necessary, and that output practice helps consciously learned knowledge become automatic competence.

What is needed is a drastic change in teachers' understanding of what the cause of language acquisition is. Teachers must understand that without comprehensible input, acquisition is not possible. Without this students will never reach upper levels. Explicit teaching can be included but in a different and limited way, such as using pop up grammar（Ben Slavic: http://benslavic.wordpress.com/2008/01/21/pop-ups/）.

Teachers must understand that consciously learned knowledge is fragile and easily forgotten, but unconsciously acquired language competence is permanent. Most language rules do not have to be explicitly taught. They can be acquired without teachers' spending hours on explanation, and without students' doing hours of drill-based homework. They can be acquired through reading many books and listening to many storties（for more research evidence of the effects of reading on language acquisition, see Krahsen, 2004）. Besides, when students are forced to do drills, they do not learn much. People have said that conscious learning is a short cut, but this is not the case（Mason, 2005, 2007; Mason & Krashen, 2004）.

The comprehension way is faster and more pleasant: students do not resist this teaching approach and

actually enjoy it. When they enjoy an activity they remember what they did in class, and they want to do it again. When they are forced to learn, they do not enjoy the work. Thus, it is a waste of time, energy, and resources.

In an effort to make learning fun, some teachers use computer language programs with cartoons and sound effects. Using cartoons and sound effects to guide students to do grammar drills and exercises on the computer screen is not comprehension-based, but is merely "… sugar coating on the bitterness of the official theory of learning" (Smith, 1998, page 87). Krashen (2007a) suggests that Free Voluntary Surfing on the computer will be a better way to use a computer, and that we are taking the wrong approach in our use of computers in language and literacy development. The computers should be used as a source of written comprehensible input, and not as an exercise screen with feedback and corrections.

Some late-acquired rules of grammar may have to be pointed out and taught to more advanced second language acquirers, especially for editing purposes, but the majority of foreign language students in colleges and universities seem to be beginners and low intermediates, and our immediate goal is to help them become upper intermediate or low advanced learners. Another goal in school is to help students become autonomous, so that they can keep acquiring English on their own after they finish school (Krashen, 1998). After we help them reach the high intermediate (for example, paper and pencil TOEFL 500) and low advanced levels (for example TOEFL 550), they can continue to improve their competency on their own.

Students can reach the upper intermediate level largely from reading and listening (Krashen, 2004) and can reach the most advanced "academic" language level only through reading. "More skill-building, more correction, and more output do not consistently result in more proficiency" (Krashen, 1994, page 48). Rather, "Reading is the only way we become good readers, develop a good writing style, an adequate vocabulary, advanced grammar, and the only way we become good spellers." (Krashen, 2002, p. 32). There are two different ways to develop academic competency, one using the traditional approach and the other the comprehension approach. Many teachers seem to believe that academic language is developed via the traditional approach, understanding the grammar of academic language, learning the academic vocabulary and doing exercises and drills to make the understandings and knowledge automatic. "This is a hopeless endeavor, one that has never been done by mortals" (Krashen, 2011).

Abundant listening and reading experience is missing in our language programs. Story-listening and self-selected pleasure reading are the bridge to academic language (Cho & Choi, 2008; Wang & Lee, 2007). Those who have experienced reading novels will have an easier time reading academic texts. Those who have experienced listening to stories will have an easier time listening to lectures.

Studies confirm that comprehension-based methods are more efficient on language acquisition. Students who majored in Health Science who took only one comprehension-based English class with listening and reading improved more, in terms of progress made per hour of instruction, than students who majored in English and spent more class hours in English classes that used eclectic methods（Mason, 2007）. Taiwanese University non-English majors benefited significantly more from extensive reading than students in traditionally taught classes（Lee, 2007）. Fourteen to fifteen year old EFL students in Taiwan who participated in a "pure" extensive reading program made greater gains in vocabulary and reading comprehension than the two comparison groups, intensive reading group and extensive reading group with supplementary activities（Smith, 2006）. The vocabulary acquisition rate of the Japanese college students who just listened to stories in German without any corrective feedback or supplementary activities was .10 words per minute, which is four times faster than the traditional approach for vocabulary learning（Mason, Vanata, Jander, Borsch, & Krashen, 2009）.

Studies confirm that comprehension based methodology alone is more powerful than the combination of comprehension-based and skill-based methodologies（Mason, 2004, 2007; Smith, 2006）.

Furthermore, comprehensible input is excellent "test-preparation." When a self-selected pleasure reading program is done correctly, there are significant effects not only on language skill areas, but also on standardized tests such as TOEFL or TOEIC（Constantino, 1995; Lee, Cho, Constantino, & Krashen, 1997; Mason, 2006, 2011, 2013a, 2013,b, 2013c）.

We have been making students speak and write too early. We make our students repeat after the teacher or a tape, have them sing songs, and make them memorize texts and dialogs. We make them do free conversation when they are not yet ready to speak easily. We make students write with correct spelling, make them write a diary, and make them translate texts in writing. We do this because we believe that speaking and writing practice causes improvement in speaking and writing. Those who listen and read do better on writing and speaking than those who do not spend as much time in reading and listening（Sari, 2013）. Output does not cause language acquisition（Krashen, 1998）.

In the next section, I suggest nine conditions for a successful pleasure reading and story-listening program. The combination of pleasure reading and story listening leads students to the intermediate level quickly and will raise TOEIC and TOEFL scores at the same time（Mason, 2006, 2011, 2013a, 2013c）.

SOME NECESSARY CONDITIONS FOR A SUCCESSFUL SELF-SELECTED PLEASURE READING PROGRAM

1. Understanding of the theory（Krashen, 1985, 2004）behind the reading and listening program is

necessary. Without understanding that the cause of language acquisition is comprehensible input, teachers can easily revert to skill-based methodology, which will slow down the acquisition process. There are three ways to do extensive reading; 1）the Traditional way, 2）the Comprehension way, and 3）the Eclectic way. Most teachers use the third one, the eclectic way, but the second one, the comprehension way is the most efficient（Mason, 2013b）.

2. Easy access to a large quantity of interesting, comprehensible books is a must. They say that you can lead horses to water, but that you cannot make them drink. Horses eventually get thirsty. Without water available nearby they will not be able to drink. It is a teacher's responsibility to teach them to start reading and encourage them to keep reading.

3. The teacher must be familiar with the content of the books available to second（foreign）language acquirers. This will help students feel welcomed and encouraged when the teacher shares his/her feelings about the story.

4. An orientation booklet or brochure is extremely helpful. Teachers, administrators, parents and students need to understand the theory, the methodology, and the research evidence of the effects and efficiency of the approach. The students will complain and stop reading if they do not understand why they are reading and how much they should be reading for what goal.

5. Sufficient amount of reading is required for significant gains on standardized tests such as the TOEFL and TOEIC. At least 1000 to 1500 pages per semester is required for efficient improvement. 500-pages per semester can be effective on a teacher-made reading comprehension test, and in helping students become used to reading books in English, but it will not result in significant gains on standardized tests. The important factor for making successful gains on tests such as the TOEIC and TOEFL is that students read many books that they enjoy. Some high school students in Turkey read 250 pages per week（Sari, 2013）.

6. Individual guidance ensures more reading. Some students will feel uneasy with this new method of acquiring a foreign language. They may be skeptical about the reading approach after having spent years in classes based on a conscious-learning skill-based approach. Individual counseling helps them feel assured that they are doing all right. The teacher should both regularly recommend books and share reflections with each student.

7. Occasional use of dictionaries should not be banned. When extensive reading is introduced for the first time to students, it is often advised that students do not use a dictionary, and that they should be encouraged to guess the meaning of each unfamiliar word or sentence. But occasional use of

dictionaries should not be forbidden, if checking the unknown word in a dictionary is helpful to make the content more comprehensible. The reading that does them the most good is highly comprehensible, however, with little need for a dictionary. Thus, students do not need to know every word, and should feel free to skip unfamiliar words when the meaning of the text is clear. Ironically, skipping words is a good way to build vocabulary as it results in more reading and more subconscious and gradual acquisition of vocabulary by context.

8. Minimum accountability is required. Students can be asked to keep a reading log, but it should be very short. The reading record（the amount of reading）should not be used as part of the evaluation（grades）. When the amount of reading is considered for giving grades, students read books with more pages, which are often more difficult for them. Students' self report on the amount of reading may not be trusted. It is not the quantity of pages, but the quality of reading that affects improvement.

9. For evaluation, I recommend the following reading and writing test. Have students read a text for thirty minutes, and ask them to write a summary of the story, including as much as they can remember, in English（the target language）without referring to the text. The students' writings can be evaluated both subjectively and objectively（Mason, 2004）. Even though students do not engage in writing activities during the reading program, you will be amazed how much they produce and how well they write without any writing practice, grammar teaching, or error correction.

For those students who simply do not read, it is a good idea to bring a wide selection of colorful easier books into a classroom, including comic books. Even one pleasant, satisfying experience could change their attitude. In one study, English teachers in Korea who did not feel confident engaging in pleasure reading in English themselves were introduced to easy children's readers and they became very enthusiastic about introducing reading into their classes（Cho, 2012）. Books with only a few words on each page are good for reluctant students. It is also a good idea to slip in some easy interesting books in the native language. At the beginning, progress may be slow, and patience may be needed, but once reluctant readers have a "home run book experience"（Trelease, 2006; Von Sprecken, Kim, & Krashen, 2000; Cho, 2010）, reluctance will be much less likely.

STORY LISTENING

The most natural way to do listening activities in a comprehension-based class is simply by students listening to stories. A story-listening lesson should not include dictation exercises, should not be accompanied with fill-in-the-blanks, or match-the–short-dialogs-and-the-pictures exercises. It's the story that counts.

Story-listening is used for aural comprehensible input in the comprehension-based program. It is especially helpful for reluctant readers. Listening to stories increases interest in book reading, in addition to providing the linguistic competence needed for book reading. For example, a number of studies show that listening to stories builds vocabulary (Cho & Choi, 2008; Elley, 1989; Mason, 2005; Hsieh et. al., 2011; Mason, et. al, 2010; Nation, 1990; Wang & Lee, 2007; Vivas, 1996).

Stories can come from fairy tales and folklore as well as Shakespeare plays. Stories can be as short as 200 words (e.g. The Golden Key, one of the household tales by Brothers Grimm: http://ebooks.adelaide. edu.au/g/grimm/g86h/chapter200.html), and as long as 5700 words (e.g. Measure for Measure, one of the Shakespeare plays written by Charles and Mary Lamb, Tales from Shakespeare (http://www. shakespeare-literature.com/Tales). For beginners, short stories (e.g. ten minutes) on familiar topics are best, then, gradually tell longer and more complicated stories.

Here is one procedure for story-listening lesson, but it is certainly not the only one. It involves a focus on vocabulary, but the purpose in doing this is comprehension of the story. Students are not required to practice and remember the key vocabulary.

Preparation for story-listening class:
1) The teacher decides which story to tell.
2) The teacher decides which words to introduce.

The classroom procedure:
1) The teacher tells the story.
2) The teacher draws pictures on the board to make the story more comprehensible. The teacher writes the words on the board to let the students know that he/she is using the words to tell the story.
3) The teacher asks the students to write a summary of the story in their native language. The teacher can evaluate her/his lesson that day by reading the summary of the story they write.

The following activities are optional:
4) The teacher can review the story and the words using flashcards.
5) The teacher can give a review test on the vocabulary at the end of the class. This is to give the students an opportunity to retrieve the meanings of the acquired words.
6) The teacher can give a review test on the vocabulary at the beginning of the next lesson.

SOME SUGESTIONS ABOUT THE STORY-LISTENING LESSON

There are many stories on the Internet, which can be downloaded for free. I have used the stories from

Children's and Household Tales by the Brothers Grimm (1812). There are over 200 long and short stories. The most well known stories are Cinderella, The Frog Prince, Hansel and Gretel, Rapunzel, Rumpelstiltskin, Snow White, The Wolf and the Seven Little Kids, and Little Red Ridinghood. There are many other stories that are unfamiliar to most people, and many of them are very interesting.

People may think that storytelling is just for kindergarten children. That is not true. Adults love to hear stories too. Stories deal with different themes and difficult concepts, such as deception, honesty, love, cruelty, adultery, robbery, piety, diligence, justice, loyalty, and so on. There are many different characters in the stories. It requires variety of words to describe the themes, concepts, and the characters. Listeners acquire many low frequency words without study and without realizing it. When each text is analyzed using text-analyzer software, the result almost always shows that there are some off-list words and some academic words. For example, the analysis on one of the easy stories, "The Wolf and the Seven Little Kids" shows that 93.7% of the vocabulary was within the 2000 most frequent words, but there were 33 off-list words and 3 academic words in the text.

Stories also calm people down. The stories usually start with "Once upon a time there was a …" which is a typical beginning and everyone feels comfortable with familiarity and do not feel threatened or uneasy. The beginning sentence, "Once upon a time there was an old goat who had seven little kids" brings listeners to the same place in the past, and all the students in the classroom pay attention to the mother goat and the seven little kids who lived on the meadow a long time ago in Germany.

The most important thing that we have to think about when we prepare a lesson to tell a story is whether the teacher – the storyteller – feels that the story will be well received by the students whom he/she will be telling the story to. The story that was successful with one class last year may not be so with a different class with different students this year. The teacher needs to rehearse a few times by reading through the story and acting it out and then decide on what meaning will be conveyed to the students through the story.

Then the teacher will pick the words that are important for the story and appropriate for the students and make a list of the words for the particular class. Therefore the list changes from a class to class or from one school year to another school year.

The teacher needs to get students' attention when he/she starts to tell a story. The class must be ready to go on the adventure of the story with the teacher. A warm but firm classroom discipline should be maintained. The students must understand that they are 50% responsible for language acquisition to occur while the teacher is also 50% responsible (personal communication with Ben Slavic, TPRS: Teaching Proficiency through Reading and Sotrytelling and TCI: Teaching with Comprehensible Input in

Denver Public Schools in Denver, Colorado: http://www.benslavic.com/）.

In order to evaluate whether students have improved on listening skills at the end of the semester, tell a story for thirty minutes in English. The content and level of difficulty depend on the level of the students. In order to evaluate their listening comprehension and how well they can write in English, have them write a summary of it in their native language or in English depending on the level and the purpose of the course. You will be surprised to find how long they can sustain their attention to listen to a complicated story in English, and how well they can remember and describe the story.

It is like magic. All you have to do is to tell an interesting story every day or every week to your students, and their fluency and accuracy in writing will improve. When they understand and have fun listening to stories in English, they cannot help but get better in English.

CONCLUSION

I recommend self-selected pleasure reading and story-listening for any language program, because it is effective for language acquisition, and because it prepares students for advanced studies in less time than the methods we have used so far. Not only is it time efficient, but also it is cost effective. As long as the school library is full of interesting books students can check the books out from the library for free. If there is a knowledgeable, qualified librarian（teacher）, and when a teacher tells a story every day, students can be led to the upper intermediate levels much faster than using the traditional skill-based approach.

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OTHER RESOURCES

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