



# The Power of Self-Selected Fiction

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## *Abstract*

In this contribution, I present evidence strongly suggesting that reading popular, self-selected fiction is a highly effective and very pleasant way of acquiring language and developing literacy. Not only does it increase language competence, it also increases knowledge of a variety of subjects: people who read more, know more, and it results in deeper understanding of others' points of view.

**Keywords:** Fiction, self-selection, language acquisition, input, academic language

## 1. My New Appreciation of Popular Fiction

I live in Southern California, about 40 kilometers from Santa Monica. Before the pandemic began, I drove to the Santa Monica area regularly, about twice a week, first in order to spend some time with my grandchildren and second, to work out at world famous Gold's Gym and maybe say hello to Arnold. The only route is Pacific Coast Highway, and I find the drive unbearably boring. At first, I tried radio news, but it is hopelessly conservative. Then, I tried music, but the greedy radio stations charge if you want to hear good music (classical or popular). Then I discovered audiobooks. I got them on disk from the two local libraries I belong to. It was a life-changing experience.

Both libraries only had audiobooks in English and neither had classics; nearly all were popular books, best sellers, and very little in my favorite genre, science-fiction. So I started listening to best-sellers, detective stories, historical fiction, romance, medical novels, legal novels, and novels for young readers, genres I rarely pay attention to.

My first: *Harry Potter* (Rowling, 1997). I was amazed at how good it was. Rowling included a lot of commentary about education, including good

teaching and bad teaching, and the headmaster of the school was one of the main characters. It was just right for a professional educator like me, and I even discussed it in one of my classes. (One of my students wrote an insightful essay with this title: Is Hermione smart?)

*Hunger Games* (Collins, 2008) gave me a new perspective on funding for education. Each city sends one young person to fight to the death; the city of the winner gets fantastic rewards. The reader/listener gets absorbed in the contest, hoping the protagonist will win. The core message is revealed by the fighter's coach: "Remember who the real enemy is." Of course, the real enemy is the central government (the "capital"), setting the cities against each other as a distraction. I realized, thanks to this novel, that we are doing the same thing in education, awarding grants to individual districts and schools, creating artificial competition instead of serving the common good, education for all students.

I have no special interest in courts and the law but I found John Grisham's novels not only fascinating but highly informative. I had served as a foreman for a jury about ten years before this experience. While driving Pacific Coast Highway, I listened to Grisham's *The Runaway Jury* (Grisham, 1996) and I realized what a mediocre job I had done as foreman and how I could have done much better in helping the jury arrive at a fair and just decision.

The books were so good that after I arrived home, I sometimes sat in the car for a few minutes to listen to the end of a chapter. In short, I developed a great respect for everyday "popular" literature. Not every novel was brilliant, but most were quite good.

## **2. Backing up: Some theory and application**

The foundation for this discussion is what I consider to be the central hypothesis of language education: The Comprehension or Input Hypothesis. Current theory distinguishes language *acquisition* from language *learning*. Language acquisition is a subconscious process: While it is happening, we don't know it is happening, and after acquisition has taken place we are not always aware that it has happened. Language *learning* is "knowing about" languages; conscious knowledge of the rules.

We are very good at language acquisition, but we are not very good at language learning.

Nearly all of our competence in using language, our ability to speak, write, and understand, comes from what we have acquired. Language learning has only one function: we can sometimes use it to “monitor” or inspect what we are about to produce, and make corrections, but our ability to do this is very limited: even the best linguists admit they consciously know only fragments of the grammar of a language; much of the grammar of any language is as yet undescribed. The real question for language teaching is not how we *learn* language. It is how we *acquire* language.

The evidence strongly supports a simple hypothesis: Language acquisition does not occur from speaking or writing or from grammar study or from getting corrected: We acquire (not learn) language when we understand what we hear and read. The ability to speak and write is the result of language acquisition, not the cause. This is, of course, a hypothesis, not a proclamation of truth. It is, however, consistent with a great deal of research which has been published in books and journals over the last several decades (see e.g. Krashen, 1982 and Krashen et al., 2017).

### **3. Application**

The Conduit Hypothesis claims that there are three stages in developing competence in a language, and each stage provides a passageway or conduit to the next. I present here one example, developed by Beniko Mason. In Stage One, Story-Listening, the teacher fills the class-time with stories, stories that have “stood the test of time,” (e.g. fairy tales), and are made comprehensible through the use of drawings, context, and occasional translation. There are no comprehension questions after the story, no grammar or vocabulary exercises, and no tests on the vocabulary or grammar used in the story. Students hear hundreds of stories over several semesters (Mason, 2020).

Stage Two is GSSR, Guided Self-Selected Reading (Mason, 2019). Students are provided with access to a library with large quantities of comprehensible, interesting reading material written for those acquiring

the language, e.g. what are called “graded readers” in English. Teachers help students select suitable material based on their interests and level of English. This stage can last for several semesters. In Stage Three, students read “authentic” books in English, that is, books written by and for native speakers of English. When students reach this stage, our job is done.

#### **4. The Importance of Self-Selection**

An excellent way of making sure students are interested in what they read is self-selection. Studies confirm that self-selected reading results in superior gains in reading competence when compared to assigned reading (e.g. Lee, 2007). Our reaction when a well-meaning friend or family member gives us a book as a gift is clear evidence of the value of self-selection. Gift books are often interpreted as “assigned reading” and we dread it when, a few weeks later, the giver asks us how much we liked the book.

Garrison Keillor (1985) describes an experience familiar to many of us. “As a former English major I am a sitting duck for gift books, and in the past few years I’ve gotten Dickens, Thackeray, Smollett, Richardson, Emerson, Keats, Boswell, and the Brontes, all of them Great, none of them ever read by me, all of them now on my shelf, looking at me and making me feel guilty.”

Again, my own experience: When I was in secondary school in the US, I took the required courses in American literature and English literature. “Great” books, classics, were assigned. I did the assigned reading and passed all the tests. I don’t remember a single author or title, not one. After school, I read what I wanted to read. I remember every one of the science-fiction novels I read, and every one of the baseball stories I read. And they had a powerful influence on me.

Before the pandemic, I met regularly with a friend who is about my age. Seymour and I decided to reread all the baseball novels of John R. Tunis. His classic, *The Kid from Tompkinsville* (Tunis, 1940), was our first selection, a novel described by one reviewer as “The book of Job for boys.” I read it first when I was about 12, again in my 20’s, again in my 40’s, and again, more than 30 years later to discuss it with Seymour. I have no

particular interest in baseball, but the novels are excellent literature and still give me reason to reflect on my life and behavior.

## **5. Research on Self-Selected Reading of Fiction Confirms its Value**

Fiction readers show very impressive development in language and literacy: We reported that the more self-selected reading done by college students of English as a Foreign Language, the better their gains on a standardized test of English (the TOEIC). The correlation between the amount of time reading and TOEIC gains was a spectacular .94, and doing other things (TOEIC test preparation, listening to the radio) had no effect. For each hour of reading, students gained an average of .6 points on the TOEIC (Mason & Krashen, 2017), which predicts moving from lower to very high levels after three years of relaxed reading. And what they read was largely fiction.

A particularly elegant study confirming the power of reading to increase vocabulary was done by Saragi et al. (1978). They asked adults (native speakers of English) to read *A Clockwork Orange*, a novel that contains 241 words, each repeated an average of 15 times, from a slang unknown to readers before reading the book. The version subjects read did not have a dictionary included in the back of the book. Subjects were given a surprise test on the slang words after reading the book and averaged 76% correct: That means they acquired 45 words, simply by reading a novel.

There is also good evidence that readers acquire a substantial amount of “academic” language, the language young people need for school, from reading fiction. McQuillan (2019) examined the vocabulary in 22 novels written for young people (e.g. Nancy Drew, *Twilight*): the novels included 85% of 485 “academic” words on an academic word list, words that appear in several academic areas at the post-secondary level (Coxhead, 2000) and 44% appeared 12 times or more in the novels McQuillan examined, indicating that readers who read these books had a good chance of acquiring them.

McQuillan (2020) reported that reading all seven *Harry Potter* novels would result in the acquisition of between one-fifth and one-half of the words on Coxhead’s academic word list. He concluded that this

vocabulary gain is 1.6 to four times more efficient than what has been achieved so far through explicit instruction.

## **6. Those Who Read More Fiction Know More.**

As I mentioned above, I learned a great deal from reading (and listening to) fiction, and the research supports this: Those who read more, know more. Studies so far have only been done in English as a first language among adults, but they tell us that those who read more (fiction) know more about history, literature, and science (West et al., 1993).

Reading also results in what has been termed desirable “habits of mind”: First, fiction readers show more empathy for others (Kidd & Castano, 2013). As journalist Terry Gross points out, when you read fiction “You’re learning to be somebody else, learning to see the world through their eyes.” In addition, readers understand that the world is complex, and are wary of simple solutions to complex problems (Djikic et al., 2013).

The Guardian asked Barack Obama about his reading habits and what he had learned from reading: His response is in close agreement with the results of studies exploring the “habits of mind” of fiction readers discussed above: “When I think about how I understand my role as citizen, ... the most important stuff I’ve learned I think I’ve learned from novels. It has to do with empathy. It has to do with being comfortable with the notion that the world is complicated and full of grays, but there’s still truth there to be found .. And ... it’s possible to connect with some[one] else even though they’re very different from you.” (Barack Obama, as cited in Colyard, 2016).

## **7. Fiction versus Non-Fiction**

Several studies confirm that fiction is not only a good predictor of performance on tests of vocabulary and reading, but have also shown that fiction reading is more effective than non-fiction (Sullivan & Brown, 2014; Jerrim & Moss, 2019). An interesting finding in the Sullivan and Brown study is that the scores on the vocabulary test were only related to reading done at age 42. The amount of reading subjects reported doing as age 16

was not a significant predictor, nor were their vocabulary scores on tests administered at that age.

## **8. Why the reluctance?**

Self-selected reading of interesting fiction appears to be the most powerful tool we have in language education: The research is consistent and agrees with many of our own experiences. It works and is very pleasant to do. Why the reluctance to even try it?

One possibility is that few teachers and administrators are aware of the substantial amount of research supporting self-selected fiction reading. This is understandable: Nearly all scholarship is buried in academic books and journals, unnecessarily long papers written using what one observer called “tortured vocabulary” (Hedges, 2010). To make matters worse, the books and journals are forbiddingly expensive: only university faculty who have access to first-class libraries can access these writings.

To make matters even worse, there is a long tradition of disapproval of fiction and a glorification of the value of nonfiction. This movement was very powerful 150 years ago, and its effects appear to be long-lasting. During this time, libraries “worked valiantly to reduce the proportion of fiction circulation (Ross et al., 2006, p. 11). Critics of fiction proclaimed that “... the craze for books leads to ‘inattention, want of application, distaste for study, and unretentive memory’ (Bean, 1879, p. 342).

My hope is that shorter, clearer writing, presented open-access in free or at least in affordable publications, will solve these problems.

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