

**We Acquire Language by Reading:
A Comparison between Avid Readers and Moderate Readers**

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Abstract

The study compares the performance of avid and moderate readers of first year Civil Engineering of National Institute of Technology, India, on a test that tests reading, grammar, vocabulary and writing competence. The results of the study confirm that avid readers performed better than moderate readers and the difference between the groups is statistically significant with an effect size of $d=1.36$. It is found that those who read more acquire more language and readers use the acquired language on standardized tests and in actual performance. In addition, reading results in the incidental acquisition of vocabulary, grammar, and writing skills and there is a strong relationship between the amount of reading and the language competence of readers.

Keywords: incidental acquisition; writing apprehension; pleasure reading; acquired competence.

Introduction

Studies have confirmed that reading results in the acquisition of all measures of language competence including grammar, vocabulary, spelling, syntax and writing competence (Krashen, and Lee 2004; Ponniah, 2011 & Smith, 2006). In order to make reading more effective, reading material must be well within the linguistic competence of a reader (Day and Bamford, 1998). This is consistent with the comprehension hypothesis that readers must be provided with a text that is comprehensible and, further, language acquisition will be effective only when readers focus on meaning. David, Hunt, and Kite, (2012) have also shown that readers who experience simplified version of difficult texts had greater gains in reading rate and acquisition as they received comprehensible input. Another experimental study conducted in India has also

confirmed that reading simplified version of the story 'The Chinese Statue' facilitated incidental acquisition of vocabulary and grammar of words. Moreover, readers were able to use the acquired words in sentences (Ponniah, 2011). In both studies the experimenters simplified the reading texts in order to facilitate reading by providing comprehensible input.

Despite consistent evidences supporting the claim that reading results in the acquisition of second and foreign language, it has been claimed that explicit instruction with a focus on form is required for acquisition (Coady, 1997; Pigada & Schmitt, 2006; & Peters, et al, 2009). This claim has been examined in different studies and the results of the studies have proved that form-focused supplementary activities after reading have only little value (Smith, 2006; Lehmann, 2007). Krashen and Mason (2004) in their study on incidental acquisition of vocabulary, confirm that intentional learning of vocabulary in addition to reading did not contribute to the development of language. Smith (2006) asserts that reading with a focus on meaning contributed to the development of all aspects of language and not the explicit instruction on grammar. Conversely, enhanced reading/output activities such as group discussion, book talk, sharing a book with group members in addition to reading had greater gains on specific grammatical items (Song and Sardegna, 2011) as the activities helped readers process the input they received by reading.

Reading positively affects not only language knowledge but also cognitive capabilities as reading is a cognitive-linguistic process. Studies on cognitive science have also shown that there is a significant association between reading skills such as decoding, reading fluency, and phonological awareness, and cognition (Gabay, Shamay-Tsoory, & Goldfarb, 2016; Yu & Reichle, 2017). The cognitive capability helps in generating new ideas and readers, in the course of giving shape to the new ideas, subconsciously generate infinite number of new structures which they have not explicitly learnt. This is because language is creative and the creative aspect of language is innate (Chomsky, 1965). The cognitive capabilities and language competencies developed by reading positively affect writing ability. The knowledge gained by reading in all dimensions scaffolds writing process as there is reciprocal facilitation of reading and writing (Tierney & Shanahan, 1991)

The study is designed to explain how reading contributes to the development of language competence such as vocabulary, grammar, and writing skills and how it positively affects scores on standardized tests.

Participants

The data was collected from 56 civil engineering students of National Institute of Technology, Tiruchirappalli, India. Subjects were highly motivated students who have cleared the AIEEE/JEE examinations conducted by the Central Board for Secondary Examinations which is considered as the nation's toughest Entrance examination to join Engineering courses in India. They have a habit of reading in English both for pleasure and information and they do not know the kind of reading they were doing helped them acquire language. They believed that they should receive form focused direct instruction to acquire language.

Procedure

Subjects were asked to take a proficiency test that contained the following four units: (i) Reading comprehension passage, (ii) Paragraph writing, (iii) Cloze test and (iv) Grammar / error correction.

The reading/writing passage is on civil engineering that contained questions such as the following:

1. What is the main difference between Construction engineering and Construction management?
2. Mention the types of infrastructure that Geotechnical Engineers deal with.

In the second unit of the test, subjects were asked to write a paragraph after reading the information given in a bar chart. The grammar and the cloze tests contained questions such as the following:

1. Civil engineering is (1) _____ the oldest engineering discipline. It deals with the built environment and can be (2) _____ to the first time someone placed a (3)

_____ over his or her head or laid a tree trunk across a river to make it (4) _____ to get across.

2. Employees love this company because it _____ rewarding wages to them.

i) offers ii) always offers iii) always offered iv) offered. (Choose the appropriate form of tense).

3. Among the two sisters Habiba is the better dancer. (Correct the error in the sentence)

They were also asked to respond to a questionnaire in order to confirm whether they have a habit of reading in English and to know about their choice of reading material.

1. Do you have a habit of reading in English?

2. What kind of books or material do you read?

Then, an author recognition test, a test used by Mezek (2013) was conducted in order to categorize subjects into avid and moderate readers. Subjects were asked to write the titles of five recently read books with the author names and themes. The subjects who gave the correct information for at least four books were considered avid readers and the rest were categorized as moderate readers.

The answer scripts were evaluated by the authors. The writing component of the test was evaluated using the composition scale of Jacobs (1981) et.al and, therefore, the parameters such as vocabulary, spelling, syntax, structure and style were considered for scores.

Some of the moderate readers experienced writing apprehensions while writing answers on the test. When the experimenters interacted with the subjects they said they do not know as to how to organize their thoughts and come up with ideas.

The subjects said they focused only on meaning while writing but when answering grammar questions, they thought about rules. However, they were not sure whether they used rules while answering grammar questions.

Results

The results show that avid readers performed better than moderate readers and the difference between the groups is statistically significant.

The table 1 presents the mean scores and the effect size values of moderate and avid readers.

	Mean scores for moderate readers	Mean scores for avid readers	Effect size(d)
Cloze test	3.66 (1.72)	5.31(1.34)	1.07
Grammar/error correction	3.20(1.32)	4.63 (1.57)	0.98
Writing competence	4.53(2.01)	5.86 (1.94)	0.67
Comprehension	8.80 (0.87)	9.29 (0.99)	0.52
Total score	20.20(3.57)	25.10 (3.60)	1.36

- N=41 for avid readers and 15 for moderate readers
- Standard deviation given in parenthesis for raw scores.
- Maximum score for the test is 40;10 for each parameters

The independent samples t-test (two-tailed) shows that avid readers performed better than moderate readers and the difference between the groups is statistically significant for all the parameters except reading/writing (Cloze test, $t = 3.76$, $df = 44$, $p < .000$; Reading/writing, $t = 1.69$, $df = 44$, $p < .095$; , Grammar/error correction $t = 3.13$, $df = 50$, $p < .003$; Writing

competence $t = 2.24$, $df = 50$, $p < .029$; Total score $t = 4.52$, $df = 50$, $p < .000$) but Cohen's value shows that there is a moderate effect size of .52 for reading comprehension.

Discussion

The results of the study confirmed that readers acquire vocabulary, grammar and writing competence incidentally and they use the involuntarily acquired language in real situation and on standardized tests. Further, language knowledge of readers is correlated with the amount of reading.

The participants believed explicit grammar knowledge is necessary for the increased writing competence because they assumed learning rules of grammar helps in writing well-formed sentences without errors. In fact, writers focus on meaning while writing and in the course of composing ideas, they analyze, evaluate, synthesize the received input to come up with new ideas. The thinking process helps in giving shape to the conceived new ideas using language. While composing the generated ideas, the subconscious mind involuntarily generates infinite number of new structures. The discussion with the subjects also indicated that they focused only on meaning while writing and not on form. Therefore, compelling learners to focus on grammar will not facilitate writing but, in fact, creates anxiety.

Moderate readers experienced writer's block as they have less exposure to language and the anxiety level is high for some moderate readers. Foreign language anxiety is the result of incomplete language acquisition (Krashen, 2008) and the learner can overcome this by experiencing more language by reading. This suggests novice learners have to be encouraged to read more for pleasure in order to reduce anxiety in the learning environment and for which they must be intrinsically motivated. Every learner has natural inclination to learn and grow and for the maintenance and the enhancement of the inherent propensity, learners require supportive conditions in the learning environment to avoid anxiety (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Pleasure reading in language classes is a crucial ingredient that supports the innate desire to learn and motivates learners to experience language with pleasure. Such reading can make academic reading easier

(Priya & Ponniah, 2014) and moreover learners will become autonomous which is the goal of all education.

The pedagogical implication of the study is that reading must be integrated into the curriculum to promote learning of any second/foreign language. Since reading is a most powerful tool for acquiring all measures of language competence such as grammar, vocabulary, syntax, spelling and writing, more in-class reading can be encouraged in ESL classes instead of devoting more time for learning grammar and other aspects of language consciously.

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