

Acquiring Standard Spoken English through Extensive Reading: A Case Study

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Abstract

An immigrant, who worked in an American machine shop, acquired polite standard spoken English by reading romance novels in an 18-week adult extensive-reading ESL class. Full-time employment in the machine shop and once-a-week class discussions provided the only places where the student was routinely exposed to spoken English.

Introduction

This paper reports a case supporting the claim that reading popular literature in a second language strongly influences a learner's acquisition of the spoken target language. The powerful effect of reading on first and second-language acquisition has been well-documented in many multi-participant research studies (Krashen, 2004). In addition, an overwhelming number of individual case studies, which support the larger more rigorous studies, continue to pile up (Krashen, 2007). The greater number of participants involved in larger studies ostensibly makes them more generalizable, but individual case studies, because they are experience-near, are often closer to the less abstract subjective truth we know as individuals. In the long run, the sum of the many one-off generalizations about the experience of individuals, outlined in the growing corpus of case studies about second language reading, provides robust evidence supporting the benefit of this language learning practice.

A Case Study

Sergei¹, a recent thirty-something blue-collar Russian immigrant, enrolled in an 18-week adult ESL class taught at a junior college in a large American city. He had lived in the U.S. for a little less than two years. By day, he worked as a machinist in a machine shop where he was the only non-native-born worker. The shop employed an all-male, racially diverse group of native-born working-class employees. Until taking the class described in this paper, the machine shop was the only place where Sergei had routinely heard or practiced English. He lived in a Russian-speaking neighborhood, socialized with Russian speakers, and

rarely watched English language television. He was married to a Russian and spoke Russian at home with his wife and family.

Sergei was a highly motivated student who said he wanted to improve his English so he could understand everything his co-workers said. At the beginning of the semester, he reported that he had no trouble communicating and understanding anything related to his job. He had been working in the machine shop for almost two years and said he understood almost all of the work-related conversations. But when the conversations among his fellow machinists left the nuts-and-bolts topics of the shop, understanding the English around him became more difficult, and he often could not follow what his co-workers were talking about. He also mentioned he had trouble understanding his co-workers' jokes and humor. He thought his English had stopped improving. This is why he enrolled in the ESL class and what motivated him to improve his English.

The ESL class was for adults and based on an extensive-reading curriculum. It met for three hours a night, one night a week, for eighteen weeks. The class read nine Danielle Steel novels over the course of the semester—three weeks for the first novel and two weeks for each novel after that, except the last week, when students were asked to read an entire novel in one week. There was also an optional finals week bonus assignment for which the students were encouraged to try to read an entire book of their choice in one day, or over the weekend.

Over the course of the semester, students were asked to read at least one hour a day at home and, if this was not enough time to finish the book, to catch up on the

weekends. At the beginning of the semester, students were taught how to read a book for pleasure. The rules for pleasure reading were simple: 1) Focus on the story and read for meaning; 2) Read quickly and silently; 3) Do not use a dictionary; 4) Do not translate; 5) If you do not know a word, guess its meaning and go on; 6) If you cannot guess the meaning of the unknown word, skip it and go on; 7) Give it a chance².

Students who objected to not using a dictionary were encouraged to at least try this method for the first book, just to see if it worked. They were reminded that this was probably how they read for pleasure in their native language. The students were also told that the first fifty pages, or even first half of the first book, might be hard going. But they were promised the reading would get much easier after breaking this barrier and that after that, they would soon take off in English and fly through the reading.

The in-class work consisted of conversations about the books. The topics under discussion were generally initiated by the students, but guided by the teacher when structure was necessary. At the beginning of each class, students were routinely divided up into small groups of four or five for group discussions. After this, "grand conversations"³ including the entire class ensued. A relaxed student-centered classroom atmosphere encouraged many of the English learners to successfully participate in front of the large group of classmates during these grand conversations, something many had never done before (Graves & Fitzgerald, 2003). The focus was on meaning and students discussed their opinions about the books. Many lively topics about the narratives were discussed. Students generated many high-interest questions concerning characters in the novels, such

as "Should Adrian divorce her husband?" The novels spurred many lively conversations and debates among the students, which they often tied to their own lives.

There were no tests, no grammar instruction, nor any systematic attempt to explicitly teach the English language. However, on occasion, when students asked specific questions about English usage, structure, grammar, or pronunciation related to the reading, the teacher addressed them and then went back to the focus on meaning.

Sergei had never read an entire book in English, or even tried to start one. But he became an enthusiastic learner after reading *Heart Beat* (Steel, 1992), the first assigned novel, which became his "home run book"⁴. He reported that he read for an hour a day, as instructed, and several hours beyond that over the weekends. He finished all of the books that were assigned. As the weeks went by, his face often lit up in class, and he was animated in his small group conversations. He routinely raised his hand in the large group discussions to give his opinions to the class. He became an avid learner. He always looked happy and would sometimes stay to talk after class.

Then during the fifteenth week, just before our class started, and seven books (close to two-and-a-half million words) later, Sergei entered the classroom and sat down to talk with his discussion group. But he did not act like his usual self and looked depressed. This was not like him. Other members of his group noticed it, too. An unhappy hangdog look clung to his face. His luster was gone.

I was concerned and approached his table. As I did, one of the group members spoke up and told me that Sergei had had a bad experience.

So, I said, "Sergei, what's the matter?" He raised his head and, in a sullen voice, replied, "The guys at work made fun of my English."

"What did they say?" I asked.

"They said, 'Hey, Sergei. How come you started talking like a guy on a soap opera?'" As he spoke, a wounded feeling crossed his face and slouched his body.

He went on to complain that, the previous day, the guys at work had started talking about the way he was speaking. He looked convinced that the ESL class was not working. He had wanted to improve his English in order to fit in better with his fellow machinists, but now the guys were ribbing him about the way he spoke. This had never happened to him before.

I laughed and said, "Congratulations. That means your English has really improved a lot. You're even starting to speak better English than the guys around you at the shop, and they were born here."

Then I explained to him about different dialects, linguistic registers, and how the speech of males in an all-male group is often much rougher and less standard than their speech at home with their wives, or at school, or church, or in polite company. I also explained that American humour, especially among males, can be quite rough, but that they were just having fun and really giving him a compliment. I said it was probably that way in Russia, too, at least with the rougher speech, but that he may not have thought about it. I told him that the novels' dialogues were written using the polite speech of standard educated English. As a result of reading the books, he was using this kind of language. The guys at work had noticed he had started speaking more properly, so this proved he was making excellent progress. He felt better after this

explanation, and the hangdog look started to slip away.

I further explained that the language of romance novels was like the language used in soap operas on television. I reiterated this because his co-workers had noticed that he had started talking like the people on soap operas. This was proof he was talking like the characters he was reading about in the books. So, he should take what his fellow machinists said as their way of saying how much he had improved his spoken English.

He began to look mollified.

I said that if he read spy or detective novels, he could read dialogue that was more like the machine shop's. But that he did not need to do this, because his co-workers were just kidding him. He should take their soap-opera comments as an acknowledgement of his progress and a genuine curiosity about how he started to talk that way. In addition, the good-natured kidding around showed he had been accepted as one of the guys. If they really thought his English was bad, they would not bring it up at all. Furthermore, they were kidding him for speaking good proper English, not for speaking it poorly!

I also asked Sergei if he would share this experience with the class. This turned into a discussion about the powerful effects of extensive reading. A number of other students testified that people had also noticed and complimented them on an improvement in their speaking. Many said they had found themselves being able to perform better and speak English more fluently. Others discovered themselves uttering vocabulary words they had read, but never heard before in conversation. Sometimes, words they had neither heard nor explicitly studied, just rolled off their tongues and out of their mouths, without

conscious awareness that they even knew them, until they discovered they had used them. After listening to the others, Sergei also volunteered that he had experienced

Discussion

The most interesting aspect of this case is that Sergei picked up many elements of standard educated white-collar spoken English almost solely through reading. This register is sometimes referred to as “proper English” and is what most teachers and middle-class mothers want to instill in their students and children. Because of Sergei’s relative isolation from this polite spoken register of standard American English, this case provides an excellent example of how powerfully extensive reading promotes language acquisition without focusing on explicit instruction. Limited weekly exposure to the teacher’s speech, combined with the imperfect versions of English spoken by his classmates, who were also reading the same romance novels with the same polite educated “soap-opera” language, certainly helped. But, except for the teacher, none of the students fluently spoke polite educated standard American English. In addition, the two-and-a-half million words Sergei read, before his co-workers made the soap-opera comments, dwarfed the amount of English he had heard in the classroom.

The effect, although not quantifiable, was large enough and significant enough to

become a topic of discussion at Sergei’s workplace among his fellow machinists. This was no mean feat, considering that none of them were ESL teachers or linguists. Most surprising is the fact they identified Sergei’s new-found language ability as belonging to the romance genre by labeling it as “talking like a guy on a soap opera”. As far as I know, up till now, no linguist has ever described the linguistic qualities of the genre of romance novels nor the spoken register of soap operas. Machinists may have a greater interest in, and be more sensitive to, this kind of language than linguists, perhaps because they do not want to be identified as someone who talks that way—at least at work. The influence reading had on Sergei’s growing acquisition of proper spoken Standard American English is clear, and most of this change was a result of reading romance novels.

Notes

1. Sergei is a pseudonym.
2. Dupuy et al. (1996) encouraged their students to follow this simple set of rules for EFL pleasure reading.
3. Peterson & Eeds (2007) use the term “grand conversations” to distinguish student-centered discussions in which learners explore their thoughts and feelings, as opposed to traditional teacher-led classroom discussions.
4. Trelease (2001) introduced the concept of a ‘home run book,’ a reading experience that readers claim stimulated their initial interest in reading.

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