

Free Voluntary Reading and Heritage Language Development

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Abstract

The paper discusses a free voluntary approach to improving Heritage Language (HL)* competence. The approach includes reading self-selected books and watching TV in HL. Seven heritage language speakers of Korean living in the US were asked what they thought was the best way to improve their Korean language skills. All seven mentioned reading; five of them were dedicated readers in Korean, and three explicitly gave the credit for their proficiency in Korean to reading. The findings from the study justify the inclusion of pleasure reading in HL programs in the form of popular literature written in the students' HL.

*Heritage Language is a minority language (either immigrant or indigenous) learnt by its speakers at home as children, but never fully developed because of insufficient input from the social environment: in fact, the community of speakers grows up with a dominant language in which they become more competent (Valdés, 2000).

This definition may be regarded as a reasonably accurate definition of "heritage language" (HL) but not entirely accurate because it has not been established that heritage languages are never fully developed. We argue in this paper that there is an effective and pleasant way of developing HL that has not received sufficient attention.

We should be concerned about HL development. It is well documented that continuing the development of the HL has advantages to both the person and society, such as the development of a healthy sense of biculturalism, school success and economic advantages (Lee & Shin, 2008; Krashen, 1998; Cho & Krashen, 1998).

In this paper, we would like to focus on an approach to improving HL competence that appears to be extremely promising—free voluntary reading. There is a massive and still growing research literature to support the claim that free voluntary and self-selected reading is an important means of developing the HL. This reading largely consists of fiction and has been consistently shown to improve reading, writing, spelling, grammar and speaking ability in first and second languages, as well as in different languages (Krashen, 1989, 2004; Nell, 1990; West, Stanovich, & Mitchell, 1993; Shu, Anderson, & Zhang, 1995, among others.).

McQuillan (1998) reviewed studies in which in-class, self-selected reading in the HL (Spanish) was compared with traditional approaches like sending children to community schools or parent-teachers teaching children HL at home. He reported that self-selected reading was at least as effective as traditional approaches in terms of progress in vocabulary and reading, as well as attitudes toward reading. In studies where the readers did not outperform comparisons, the study ran for a short time; teachers were less conscientious in administering the program, and/or

students had negative attitudes about reading in Spanish.

According to Cho & Krashen (2000), second-generation HL speakers of Korean who reported greater proficiency in Korean said they did a lot of pleasure reading. They also reported more TV watching, greater parental use of Korean, and more trips to Korea when they were young compared to Koreans who did not speak HL much. All of these factors were independent predictors of HL proficiency.

Tse (2001) studied ten HL speakers. All of them were born in the US except for one, who moved there at the age of four. At the time Tse interviewed them, they were young adults, between the ages 18 to 24 years, and all of them had native-level competence in their HL (Spanish, Cantonese, and Japanese) as well as English, despite having done little or no study in the country where their language was spoken. All of them had "literary experience in the HL in the home and community at an early age" (p. 691). Tse concluded that "nearly all the participants developed [an] interest in reading for pleasure, which they credited for their advanced reading ability as adults." (pp. 261-262). Her participants' reading choices were mostly fiction, with some of them indulging in "light reading", such as magazines and comic books.

To summarize, previous research tells us:

1. Free voluntary reading improves the HL competence of HL speakers more than traditional instruction does (McQuillan, 1998).
2. More reported reading results in higher gains in HL competence, controlling for other factors like parental inputs and trips to Korea (Cho and Krashen, 2000).
3. Those who are successful in HL development frequently attribute their competence to pleasure reading (Tse, 2001).

Thus, whichever way we look at it—method comparison, multivariate

analysis or case histories— we arrive at similar results.

Subjects

The study presented here is similar to that of Tse (2001) as it includes interviews with HL speakers who had successfully developed their HL skills while living in a country where their language was not widely spoken.

The participants in the study were Korean-Americans that Cho met at a social gathering of family members and friends from the Korean-American community in southern California. At this gathering, the topic of conversation turned to their childrens' competence in Korean. Cho noted that all of those involved in the discussion spoke Korean well. Further, she discovered that none of them had taken any classes or gone through any schooling in Korean. Curious, she asked them how they had succeeded in developing their competence in Korean. She then invited them for a formal interview.

In contrast to Tse's subjects (Tse, 2001), the seven participants interviewed in this study were neither born in the US nor were they young arrivals. They had relocated to the US from Korea between the ages 12 to 16 years (mean = 14.4, sd = 1.4 years), and had been in the US for an average of 34 years. As was the case with Tse's subjects, all the participants were proficient in their HL (Korean). On a scale of one to five, they rated their speaking and listening ability in Korean as 5, reading as 4.7 and writing as 4.3.

In the interview (conducted in Korean), we asked the subjects what activities other than formal instruction they engaged in, to develop their HL skills. Did they listen to the radio or music, read (magazines, books, newspapers), or engage in conversations in Korean. We also asked them about what they thought was the best way to improve Korean language skills.

We will now present the relevant features of their responses (translated from Korean):

Howard, now a high school math teacher, stated,

I read every day. When I was hooked on Chinese novels (translated into Korean), especially historical novels, I read for three to four hours a day, spent many hours trying to finish a novel in one sitting.

Among other novels, Howard had read the popular *Three Kingdom series*.

Yvonne, an optometrist, said,

I read a lot of Korean books for pleasure. I have a great deal of exposure to the Korean language because I live near Koreatown in Los Angeles. I still read in Korean, but mostly newspapers, and occasionally some books about cooking.

Grant explicitly attributed his competence in Korean to reading:

I came here when I was 16. I didn't have many Korean friends in high school or in graduate school. . . . I was . . . able to maintain Korean by reading Korean books. Even now I read books in Korean.

Lucas became a dedicated reader in Korean after arriving in the US; he also attributes his competence in Korean to reading:

When I left Korea, I was too young to have read many books in Korean [he was 12 years old], and my understanding of the Korean language was limited to the elementary-school level. As the years passed, I had more far chances to read Korean books and newsletters and to interact with other Korean-speaking friends. As a result, my Korean language skills got much better, and my understanding of the Korean language improved to the college level. I read Korean fables [and] Korean historical biographies such as King Sejoing

[founder of the Korean alphabet]. One of my favourite books was *Mu So yu* [not possessing anything], written by a Korean monk.

Lucas added that reading in Korean helped him develop his Korean well enough to volunteer as an interpreter for the police department.

Tony, a California state-certified professional Korean translator, stated,

To me, Korean language classes didn't help much. . . . I think I maintained Korean from simply reading books, magazines, and newspapers and from watching Korean dramas and talking about them with church friends and teachers afterwards.

Kerry was an exception. She developed a high level of spoken competence in Korean but did not attribute this to reading. She told Cho that she had limited access to Korean books, but she had read some non-fiction books such as autobiographies. She also had little chance to socialize with other Koreans until she married a Korean man, and their language of communication was Korean. She attributed the credit for her Korean competence, especially in speaking, to her relationship with her husband.

Lisa did some reading in Korean, including reading a set of classic novels adapted for younger readers as well as biographies. She said that she also acted as a "broker" or interpreter for others and spoke a lot of Korean at home.

Summary of Interviews

It is noteworthy that all seven subjects mentioned reading as a source of input, and five of them (Howard, Yvonne, Grant, Lucas and Tony) were dedicated readers. Three of them (Grant, Lucas, and Tony) explicitly attributed the credit for their

proficiency in Korean to reading. While Lisa and Kerry also appeared to be readers, they were less enthusiastic about reading than the others.

Discussion

There is evidence from various studies that a pleasant activity that is done enthusiastically and voluntarily, such as self-selected reading, has a positive effect on HL development. The results of the case histories presented here are consistent with those of earlier studies (McQuillan, 1998; Cho & Krashen, 2000). Further, they replicate the results of Tse's (2001) study on HL speakers, who arrived in their adopted country when they were much younger than our subjects.

Gaps

Two of the studies discussed here (Cho & Krashen, 2000, and our current study) used only self-reporting to measure HL competence.

None of the studies gives detailed descriptions of what was read by the participants.

None of the studies attempted to study subjects who are or were readers in the HL but did not achieve high levels of proficiency.

Of course, self-selected reading is not the only kind of comprehensible input that leads to improvement in language and literacy, as documented in Cho and Krashen (2000). A close examination of the relative efficacy of different kinds of input among HL speakers awaits the development of more precise measures of HL proficiency, and input quality and quantity.

Directions

Despite these lacunae, the case for self-selected reading is promising. There is more than enough evidence to justify the inclusion of pleasure reading in HL programs in the form of popular literature

written in the students' HL. The inclusion will ensure greater access to easier reading (Guided SSR, Mason, 2019) for those who need to build more competence before reading authentic books, and above all provide access to reading material at all levels on a wide variety of topics and genres.

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