

The Effect of Pleasure Reading Experience 30 Years Ago

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Abstract: This paper reports on a pleasure reading experience case. “Miyako” developed an English reading habit as a student in Japan 30 years ago and has continued pleasure reading in English since that time. She reads not to improve her English but because she enjoys it. In 2011, she started working for a company that required the TOEIC examination. Miyako achieved a near-perfect score and was awarded an \$800 bonus from her company. At first she did not think she had done anything special to achieve this high level of English, and only later realized that her reading habit was the reason.

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1. Introduction

Do students who are introduced to pleasure reading in a foreign language continue to read after they graduate from the university? It is hard to track students after they graduate. They often leave home and start working. It is not easy to find out whether what we teach in school is actually helping them do well at their workplace after they leave school. The goal of foreign language education in school should be to help them become autonomous acquirers of the foreign language (English in this case for Japanese students). We need to find out whether this occurs.

2. The origins of a reading program

I started a story reading program at Shitennoji University Junior College in 1985 after persuading the department head that it was the right direction for the English department. It was a new approach suggested by the Input Hypothesis (Krashen, 1981, 1982). The strong version of the hypothesis claims that understanding messages is the cause of language acquisition and reading alone is sufficient for the development of accuracy and fluency in reading and perhaps in other areas of language competence.

In 1985, the program had in total about 750 graded readers. The graded readers came primarily from two publishers: Oxford University Press (most of which are out of print now) and some books from Heinemann (which later became Macmillan Readers). This collection served roughly 250 students. Students began the program by reading from the simplest of these books, and then gradually moved up to the highest level of graded readers available at that time (2200-word level).

3. Miyako and TOEIC

Miyako was in the first group of students who experienced pleasure reading with me in the English department at Shitennoji University Junior College. However, Miyako only took the course for one year. She had the taste of what reading was like for two semesters, but then she graduated.

She went to Tampa, Florida for one year and four months to study English at a language school. She took the TOEFL test then and she recalls that she scored 520 out of 677 on the paper and pencil TOEFL test in 1988, equivalent to about 645 on today's TOEIC examination (<http://www.conversation.jp/faq/faq-english/TOEIC-TOEFL.html>).

After she returned to Japan, she took a job at a shipping management company in Osaka. She told me that the language that people used in that company was English. So, she regularly communicated in English with her colleagues. She worked for this company for 23 years. After the company closed down and left Japan, she took another position at a different company in Kobe in 2011. The language that they used in this company was not English, but the employees were required to take the TOEIC and were required to submit their score to the company. Those who scored over 800 points on the TOEIC were given a bonus of ¥80,000 (US\$800).

When Miyako took this second job, she was also told to take the TOEIC. She did as she was told. Her score was 975 out of 990; almost perfect. I asked her if the company had given her US\$800, and she said yes. I asked her what she did to score so high on the TOEIC. At first, she said she had done nothing unusual. I pressed her and insisted that she must have done something to score 975 on the TOEIC. She finally realized what it must have been and admitted that she had been reading in English all these years.

4. What was Miyako reading?

I asked Miyako what she had read. She said that she had read most of the mystery books written by Agatha Christie (Amazon lists 85 Agatha Christie titles). She said that she had read all the Harry Potter series and other best-sellers on the train she took to go to work.

Miyako told me that she had no interest in reading newspapers in the past, but after finishing reading all the Harry Potter books, she began to read newspapers with no difficulty.

I asked her whether her English competence could have been from working in an English-speaking company. She said she did not believe so. She gave the credit to reading Agatha Christie, Harry Potter, and other books she had read in English.

She told me that she is one of only four company employees to have a score above 900. She said that there are other employees who have gone abroad to study, and they all have been using test preparation exercise books to improve their TOEIC score, but many of them cannot reach 800. She told me that she advises them to read books in English, but they don't. They say reading is difficult.

5. Conclusion

An interesting comment from Miyako was that she thought that she had done nothing to raise her TOEIC score. She was not reading books to raise her TOEIC score. She was reading because she wanted to. She told me that the reading class that she took 30 years ago was the beginning of her book reading in English.

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