

STORY-LISTENING AND GUIDED SELF-SELECTED READING

A Letter to Parents

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Our goal in language teaching is to develop “autonomous” acquirers of second/ foreign languages, that is, to bring students to the point where they no longer need us and can continue to improve on their own. In other words, our aim is not to lead students to become perfect users of the language while in school, but to make sure they can reach high levels of competence after they leave school.

We first discuss what we know about language acquisition, and then we present a program that shows promise in accomplishing our goals.

How Language Acquisition Takes Place

Research over the last four decades has shown that: 1) we acquire language when we understand what we hear and read, that is when we receive "comprehensible input"; 2) students need to receive large amounts of rich compelling (highly interesting) comprehensible language input in order to make good progress in acquiring a language; 3) second language students go through similar stages as first language acquirers; 4) acquiring a language and learning about the language are not the same thing; 5) consciously learned rules of the language are not helpful in real communication, they are generally only helpful when we take a written grammar or vocabulary test, and sometimes in editing our writing; and 6) students should not feel defensive, anxious nor threatened in a language classroom.

Optimal Instruction

Our foreign language program uses a methodology based on current language acquisition theory: The methods used are input-based, that is they emphasize providing students with rich, highly interesting comprehensible input, messages that are so interesting that students even "forget" they are listening to or reading in another language. Study after study has confirmed that students who use these methods acquire far more language than students in traditional classes. We focus here on two ways of providing optimal input: Story-Listening and Story-Reading.

STORY-LISTENING

Begin with Story-Listening

Our program begins with Story-Listening. In Story-Listening, a teacher tells an interesting story, usually a fairy/folk tale that has stood the test of time. The teacher tells the story using mostly language that she thinks the students already know.

There will be some words or parts of the story that students don't fully understand. The teacher makes the story comprehensible with the help of many different kinds of support, primarily

adding context through description and explanation using the second language, and also drawings, written words on the board, occasional use of the students' first language, and taking advantage of the students' background knowledge. Use of this kind of support ensures that the students will understand the content of the story easily. Again, language acquisition is only possible when students understand what they hear or read.

Much Lower Costs

Story-Listening is not expensive. Story-Listening does not require textbooks or worksheets. Copyright-free stories can be downloaded from the internet, and books can be checked out from the library. When there is no library, the teacher can look for appropriate copyright-free stories from the internet and gather them for the classroom library.

What else is done in class?

Story-Listening is the core of the program at beginning stages, and it is an important part of the program even when students are more advanced. Occasional games, songs, and other activities can bring some variety into a classroom, but songs and games should not dominate class-time. These kinds of activities do not contain the rich input needed for *optimal language acquisition*.

Evaluation

In foreign language classes in which students and teachers speak a common language, students may be asked to write a brief summary in their first language of some of the stories they hear. This will tell the teacher what students have understood and what they have not understood. For very young students who cannot write yet, they can indicate how much of the story they understood in different ways. Samples of these summaries serve as feedback to teachers on their teaching performance and help them keep track of students' progress.

STORY-READING

Story-Listening leads to reading. It is a "conduit" to self-selected pleasure reading, providing the competence which helps make at least some authentic texts comprehensible.

Self-selected pleasure reading is introduced gradually and gently, using texts of high interest, so that students find the reading comprehensible and enjoyable. Our goal is to establish a pleasure reading habit, which will ensure continued progress in the language after our students' school program ends and they are on their own.

Guided Self-Selected Reading

We feel that an intermediate stage between Story-Listening and reading "authentic" books is needed. We call this GSSR or Guided Self-Selected Reading. The "guidance" comes from the teacher, in the form of helping students choose reading material, depending on text difficulty and the readers' interests.

In GSSR, until students become self-selected readers, a teacher guides the students to books that students will be able to read easily and enjoy. To find out what students are experiencing as they read, information on whether they enjoyed the books that they read helps the teacher

decide which books to suggest next. We ask students to fill out a short report after reading a book, providing a brief description of what the book was about in a few sentences, their impression of the book as well as its difficulty.

In one to two semesters some students can reach the “authentic level,” ready to read books written by and for native speakers. Not all students can reach this stage so quickly. Some stay with GSSR for as long as three years. This is very different from the traditional course in which students jump to challenging reading nearly instantly.

The goal of GSSR is to bring students to the point where reading can be completely self-selected. Once this level is reached, our work is done, and students will continue to improve on their own while enjoying themselves with good books.

Evidence

Research evaluating the effect of Story-Listening has shown that providing large quantities of optimal (rich, compelling, and comprehensible) input in an anxiety-free classroom is not only effective for developing language skills but is also highly efficient: students acquire more per unit time (e.g., per classroom hour) than in traditional methods.

Similarly, study after study has confirmed the superiority of pleasure reading for developing competence in reading, writing, vocabulary, and grammar. The amount of pleasure reading done is a consistent predictor of performance on standardized language tests.

Easy to Set Up

“The provision of a rich supply of high-interest storybooks is a much more feasible policy for improving English learning than any pious pronouncements about the urgent need to raise teacher quality.” (Francis Mangubhai and Warwick Elley (1982) *The Role of Reading in Promoting ESL, Language Learning and Communication*, 1(2): 151-161). Creating an English Library is simpler and less expensive than dealing with ever-changing computer technology.

We don't need massive amounts of interaction to acquire language: We need massive amounts of input, which is easy to provide.

Much of the research supporting the ideas in this handout can be found free of charge from the following links.

- ✧ www.sdkrashen.com (Stephen Krashen)
- ✧ <http://web.ntpu.edu.tw/~lwen/publications.html> (Sy-Ying Lee)
- ✧ <http://backseatlinguist.com/blog/> (Jeff McQuillan)
- ✧ https://c021.wzu.edu.tw/eecatfiles/c021/img/img/1460/89013_1.pdf (Ken Smith)
- ✧ <http://beniko-mason.net> (Beniko Mason)