

Story-Listening and Story-Reading

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Our goal in language teaching is to develop “autonomous” acquirers of second languages, that is, 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. We begin with a brief review of what we now know about language acquisition.

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 a massive amount 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 students; 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 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.

Comprehension-Based Methods

Our foreign language program uses methodology based on current language acquisition theory: The methods used are comprehension-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 and enjoy it much more.

There are different ways to give lessons using comprehensible input. We describe two of them here: Story-Listening and Story-Reading.

Story-Listening

Begin with Story-Listening

Our program begins with Story-Listening. In a Story-Listening lesson, a teacher tells a story, usually a fairy/folk tale which has stood the test of time. The teacher tells the story using language that she thinks the students already know. There will be, however, 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, such as drawings, written words on the board, occasional use of the students' first language, and taking advantage of the students' knowledge of the world. 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 does not cost students any money. There are no textbooks or worksheets to purchase for Story-Listening lessons. Copyright free stories are downloaded from the internet, and books are checked out from the school library. When there is no library for students to check out books, 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 the class-time should not be filled only with songs and games. These songs, games and activities commonly used in language learning classrooms do not contain the rich input needed for *optimal language acquisition*.

Evaluation

Depending on their age, students will be asked to write a brief summary of the story they hear by drawing pictures or writing in their first language. Samples of these summaries serve as feedback to teachers on their teaching performance. This feedback on summary writing could be also used as formative evaluations, and as progress reports. We have discovered that as their English competence improves, students gradually start writing the summary of the story in the target language.

Story-Reading

Story-Listening leads to reading. Story-Listening is a “conduit” to self-selected pleasure reading, providing the competence which helps make at least some authentic reading comprehensible. Story-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 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 to choose possible reading material, depending on text difficulty and the readers’ interests.

In GSSR, students are asked to fill out a short report, providing a description of what the book they read was about, their impression of the book, as well as its difficulty. This information is useful so that teachers can guide the reader to books that are right for them.

In one to two semesters some students can reach the “authentic level” where they are ready to read books written by and for native speakers depending on their backgrounds. 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 findings have demonstrated that providing optimal (rich, compelling, and comprehensible) input abundantly 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. The positive effects of Story-Listening as a method for increasing vocabulary have been repeatedly confirmed. Similarly, study after study has confirmed the superiority of pleasure reading for developing competence in reading, writing, vocabulary, grammar, as well as on performance on standardized 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 a one-time project and causes much less trouble than purchasing many computers which will need new software as teaching material, maintenance, and replacement.

A Comment on Distance Learning

Can we accomplish all this in isolation, as in during the corona virus situation? Yes. We don't need massive amounts of interaction to acquire language: We need massive amounts of input, which is easy to provide thanks to technology. We also don't need many of the components of traditional instruction including error correction, comprehension questions, vocabulary study, and speaking and writing practice.

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

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