

# Literature and Language Learning

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## Abstract

There are many reasons for reading a good book. There can be the curiosity for human drama, excitement about a good plot or thirst for gripping episodes. Others marvel at the deep thoughts and philosophies presented in good literature. All wonderfully worded by a skilful author who plays around with words and imagery.

Not many people will read a good book because it enables them to learn a language. Not often are readers aware of the virtuous potential of reading for pleasure on the arduous task of language learning. But there are enormous benefits for schools, institutes and private learners: By reading the language skills are developed unconsciously and thus without much effort. In this contribution research into the effects of reading on language acquisition and the use this can have in education will be dealt with.

**Keywords:** language acquisition, extensive reading, literature, vocabulary learning, school library, reading for fun

## The Benefits of Reading

I started my contribution about reading and language learning, by asking the audience three questions:

1. What was the last book you read? And then I mean fiction, maybe even literature.
2. What is the book about?
3. Why did you read it?

After having listened to their conversations I concluded that I had heard various motives to read particular books. Reasons for reading were interest in the thoughts and philosophy put forward by the writer, or curiosity to know the story, the plot, the background, the history, the main characters, the genre, etc....

Interestingly, not many of them mentioned their desire to learn the language or improve their language skills. Not that I am implying that that is necessary, but for many learners of a second language reading is a wonderful source of language development. To put it simple: People can learn or improve their language by reading literature. This is a wonderful side effect to literature which is worth considering. Moreover, as many of the readers are working with language students, whose English needs to develop, and who in turn will often teach pupils at primary and secondary education themselves, it is good to share some benefits of reading literature. Hopefully some of these thoughts will filter through to our lecture halls and further into the classrooms of the communities we are serving.

At Driestar University (Gouda, Holland) we frequently have adult students who want to enroll. During the intake session which is in English we often discuss their former education and the level of their English. Quite often we are struck by the fact that they only attended basic education in the past, for example, no more than ordinary secondary school, while at

the same time they can demonstrate a high proficiency of English. When asked they indicate that the level of their English is so high, because they have always read English literature. Often that is the reason why they want to study English at a later stage.

For us this is such a regular phenomenon that at our department we have accepted the benefits of reading for language learning. But how widespread is this? Has this phenomenon been researched at all? Are we talking about assumptions or are there facts and numbers? How can we organize this at our universities and colleges? How can this filter through to our secondary and primary schools? Let's explore! I want to deal with two points:

1. The research
2. How to organize this?

### **1. Research**

One of the linguists who already in the 1980s suggested that extensive reading could facilitate language learning was Stephen Krashen. It was part of the exposure movement where research into exposure to (or: even better – immersion into) the target language showed that this was at times even more important than explicit tuition. Quite a bit of research has been done into this phenomenon, especially in the so called emerging markets of English learning such as Asia. I will deal with three experiments:

In Fiji, for example, 500 pupils in 12 schools, 8 research schools and 4 control schools, were monitored for two years. The control schools followed normal English classes, while the experimental schools used 250 reading books with students either reading for pleasure for 20 – 30 minutes a day, or having a teacher read the books aloud with them. After those 2 years they were tested extensively and the experimental groups were, according to Krashen, 'far superior in tests of reading, comprehension, writing and grammar' (4). Another experiment in Singapore among 3000 pupils confirmed the findings in Fiji. When tested at the end of years the students in the experimental reading classes were not only better at reading, which would have been understandable, or at vocabulary, also logical, but also at oral language, grammar, listening comprehension and writing! This is interesting, isn't it? Just the thought of substituting normal English classes for reading sessions.....

Another experiment was made in Singapore, where weak schools had to improve their achievements under pressure from the government. Many schools looked for individual approaches, but one group of 40 of the country's weakest schools went for reading. In each school the timetable was changed so that on top of normal textbook lessons the students read silently for 20 minutes a day and had one extensive reading lesson per week to exchange books, discuss them or just read more books. The schools developed a lending system so that books could easily be taken home. After five years the project was assessed by checking the English examination pass rate of the schools involved. It became clear that the weakest schools had all now exam marks above the national average. Philip Prowse quotes linguist Colin Davies who reported about this project that 'pupils developed a wider active and passive vocabulary. They used more varied sentence structure, and were better at spotting and correcting mistakes in writing and speaking. They showed an overall improvement in writing skills and increased confidence and fluency in speaking'. Christine Nuttal also observed a spin off towards other skills in her research: 'Students who read a lot will not become fluent overnight, and it may take a year or two before you notice an improvement in their speaking and writing; but then it often comes as a breakthrough. They will progress at increasing speed and far outstrip classmates who have not developed the reading habit'. (128)

The last experiment is about the acquisition of vocabulary, one of the more important elements in language learning. A group of American adults had to read the novel *The Clockwork Orange* in which the main characters use an invented language called 'Nadsat'. There are more than 240 nadsat words in the book, most of which are repeated 10 to 15 times. The adults taking part in the experiment had to read the book and come back to school after some time for a comprehension test and a discussion on the contents of the book. Instead, when they arrived at school they found a multiple choice test on the nadsat vocabulary of the novel. Philip Prowse writes about this: 'The results were stunning, with scores between 50 and 96 per cent, and an average of 76 per cent. Just by reading, these adults had learnt the new words from context without any effort' (11).

To recapitulate, research shows a strong link between extensive reading and language learning. This is, of course, something that teachers have known for a long time. But it is interesting and helpful to see this in research. It is something not to ignore in language learning and language learning. It made Christine Nuttal summarize these findings by saying: 'The best way to improve your knowledge of a foreign language is to go and live among its speakers. The next best way is to read extensively in it'. (128) Well, it seems to work, doesn't it? How can we organize this? Let's consider at least four points.

## **2. Organising it**

In order to set up a good system of reading it is important to keep the following four points in mind:

### **1. Level**

The level of the books should ideally be just about or slightly above the student's current level. In this way the reader will enjoy the story without having to guess or use a dictionary all the time, which will spoil much of the fun. In order to develop a real reading habit there should be time when students can immerse themselves in the target language. It is vital that pupils should relax into their reading, avoid the temptation to look up all sorts of difficult words and phrases or puzzle over grammatical difficulties. Just let the target language seep into their skins. Christine Nuttal underlines the need for accessibility: 'The level must be easier than that of the current target language coursebook. We cannot expect people to read from choice, or to read fluently, if the language is a struggle. Improvement comes from reading a lot of easy material' (131). And they will grow, and need more and different books. Nuttal calls this the virtuous circle of reading: Successful reading makes successful readers. The more students read, the better they get at it. And the better they get at it, the more they will read. The important question for all schoolteachers is: Is there easy enough literature at your schools, in your departments, in your classrooms? And remember, teachers do not have to start with books. As Lynne Cameron suggests, there is a wealth of easy to understand stories which are ideal for language learning: 'Stories offer a whole imaginary world, created by language, that children can enter and enjoy, learning language as they go' (159).

### **2. Availability of Books**

In order to have access to the right books it is vital to know the publishers. All the catalogues are online and there is a wealth of interesting literature which our pupils and students can read without too much effort. Finding the funding is another matter, especially in this economic hard times, but seeing the merits it is worth trying to speak to managers to

get money for a good lending system, or a well-stocked library with either new or second hand books.

What most publishers offer nowadays are a wealth of attractive books. Most publishers offer a good choice of paced readers: Books with a listening CD or a file to download on an MP player. This allows pupils to read along at the pace of the voice, which mostly increases reading speed. Secondly, students hear the pronunciation and become more aware of the correspondence of sound and letters. Very helpful for reluctant readers.

### 3. Reading Time at School

The next thing is the inclusion of some reading time in the timetable. As we saw in the example of Singapore, just 20 minutes per day on top of regular teaching did a lot of good. Not only will it provide the necessary structure in reading, but it will also help less enthusiastic readers to get started. Especially in an age where more and more teachers wonder what their students do outside school, apart from hanging around and gaming, this could be vital for the reluctant readers. If the choice of books is right and **the teacher persuasive** enough to inform them of the merits for their own good, most of the students will give it a try. And then when the book is exciting, it will probably kick start their reading habit.

When I deal with this in my lectures, my students (teachers to be) will always object: Do you really think you can make pupils read again? It is not their culture! So what, it is not their culture to write much either, but still we ask them to produce essays, letters or emails. Do we ask them if they want to study grammar? Or vocabulary? You know, most of my children play a musical instrument. My eldest plays the violin, the second the flute, the fourth plays the trumpet, while number five has just started the clarinet. They are quite gifted. But nevertheless, none of them likes practicing the never ending scales, or the boring breathing or finger techniques. It is especially my wife who sets them a time in which their daily practice takes place, and it is remarkable how much they grow in a year or so. But not without effort. Or should we as a family accept that they can learn to play the instrument in the way they like themselves best.....

So, back to reading. If students do not read much at home, then give them the opportunity to read at school. Give them a chance to find out how rewarding reading is. Plus, Bruce Milne reminds us not to forget to explain to students why reading is so beneficial for them (47).

### 4. Allow Them to Just Read

The last element I want to mention under the heading of organizing is the fun element and the role of the teacher. Again, this is important for our institutes, because what many of us do is train students to become good teachers. What should teachers be aware of: Research shows that students will learn a lot more when they can make their own choice and when they can read for pleasure.

As teachers we should therefore not always link all sorts of language tasks to their reading. Do not ask comprehension questions. Do not give tests, you know they have read the book in class anyway. Don't require written summaries or book reviews. They only serve a purpose when you want to check whether they have studied or not. Do not ask students to read aloud for the whole class. It might embarrass them more than you can imagine. In short, when the book has gripped them, do not bother them and let them enjoy a good read.

Don't be afraid to start simple. Instead of books, you can start with short stories. Especially young learners should not be pushed towards too difficult books.

I even know of a colleague who allows uninterested pupils to start with comics. The deal is that after a number of comics you choose a real book. And it works, even dyslexic students start to enjoy reading in the end. Did Stephen Krashen not confess that he was a bad reader in his youth who started to appreciate reading for fun by taking comics. Just like South Africa's Bishop Desmond Tutu (107). My experience with literature is that at the start of their reading careers some students like short stories better than novels, they prefer detectives to plays, and they find Agatha Christie more compelling than Thomas Hardy. In my opinion it is totally acceptable, it is simply part of the development of their literary appreciation. Our role is to persuade, almost seduce them to take an interest in the book they have in their hands.

One of our fourth year university students wanted to get her class to read. She took 'Hound of the Baskervilles' as a starting point. She made all kinds of assignments which the pupils of the lower secondary school had to do as part of a quest to find out who was the murderer of Sir Charles Baskerville. She used book fragments, parts of the film to whet the students' appetite, she made role plays in which the students had to impersonate Holmes and some of the other main characters, she gave them slips of paper with clues which the students had to solve by logic reasoning and detective work, after which they had to read a few chapters to see if their assumption was correct, and so on.....The whole novel was treated like an information gap exercise. Wonderful to see the pupils eager to read.

For teachers it is vital to know many books themselves, so that they can recommend titles or help students find a suitable book at their level. It is good if teachers know where to find books, either in real bookshops or online. Without enthusiasm of the teacher the setting up of a reading scheme is bound to fail. What you need is enthusiasm and commitment from the teachers. Plus the availability of attractive books. Neither is sufficient on its own, but in combination the effect of reading on language learning can be quite spectacular.

To summarize, Philip Prowse again: 'Reading is principally a matter of enjoyment. The best advice I can offer is to let students get on with the reading, and the key to that is to provide books they want to read. The teacher's role is to facilitate access to the books – and then to step aside' (11).

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