

A Student in Korea Discovers the Power of Reading.

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Abstract

This paper presents a case study of a middle school student in Korea who developed a very high level of competence in English as a foreign language through self-selected pleasure reading, with no cram school and no time spent in English-speaking countries.

Keywords: *self-selected reading, EFL, pleasure reading, long-term reader, access to books*

Introduction

Studies done over the last few decades have led to the conclusion that highly interesting (or "compelling") self-selected reading is the primary cause of language and literacy development once we reach the stage where at least some texts are comprehensible (Krashen, 2004). This conclusion holds for both first and second language acquisition (Krashen & Mason, 2015; Krashen, 2004, 2011; Cho & Krashen, 1994).

A serious problem for those involved in foreign language acquisition is access to reading material. Younger students of English as a foreign language, for example, often have a difficult time finding interesting books in English.

This paper presents a case study of a reader who, thanks to a library, her mother, and her family, was able to gain access to books. The results were spectacular.

Finding Sodam

In 2009, the Board of Education in the city of Busan set up an English library for city residents, especially intended for elementary and secondary level students. This investigator asked the director of the library if there were any cases of long-term English readers among the young people who used the library. The director introduced me to the mother of one young reader, a woman with a master's degree in Korean education for foreign students in Korea. She generously supplied me with information about her daughter's reading history, with the full cooperation of the young reader, Sodam (real name used with permission).

Sodam's Awards

Sodam was 13 years old, in her second year in Middle School when this study was done. She had won nearly every possible major prize for mastery of English awarded to young people in Korea. She won the grand prize for middle school students in the Nationwide English contest, based on her performance in writing and public speaking.

Sodam also has an impressive record of doing well in local English contests: In 2012, she placed first and third in two speaking contests, and first in a reading contest held by an internet publisher. In 2013, she won another local English speaking contest and a reading award from the superintendent of schools in Busan. In 2014 she won a special award for reading from the Busan English library, and in 2015 she won first prize in a book report contest.

An English Teacher's Reaction

One of her English teachers, a native speaker, had this to say about Sodam: "She is very well-spoken and her reading comprehension skills are second to none among her classmates When I talk to her I almost feel as if I'm speaking to another native English speaker."

What Sodam Didn't Do, and What She Did Do

Sodam had no special advantages. She did not go to cram school, and had the same exposure to English in EFL classes that other Korean children have. She had never lived in an English-speaking country. The difference was that Sodam was a reader.

Sodam's English Before Starting to Read in English

Sodam's reading and writing competence in English were very low compared to friends who were attending cram schools. Her mother said that Sodam was not even able to read and write simple words like "fox," and the English books that her friends had from cram school were much too hard for her.

How it Began

During the fall semester of 2012, when Sodam was in fourth grade, the school introduced a new reading program. In reaction to the new program, Sodam's mother began to look for English books for her daughter.

Soon, the entire family became members of the English library, in order to make sure Sodam could take out all the books she wanted to. Sodam's mother even asked a family friend to become a member of the English library so Sodam could use her library card and take out even more books. And in reaction to this abundant access to books, Sodam, already a reader in Korean, became an enthusiastic reader in English.

Access to Books

Sodam's school provided lists for recommended reading, and at first, Sodam's reading selections were taken from these lists. But soon after, she started selecting her own reading from the public library collection.

Her mother's dedication continued: she searched other libraries in the city to find even more English books, and when she noticed that her daughter developed a special liking for a particular book, she bought a copy for Sodam's personal book collection.

A Thousand Books and More

From the time Sodam was in fourth grade in September 2012 to March, 2016, Sodam and her family checked out an astonishing 1,124 books from the library. In addition, Sodam and her family checked out many books from a commercial site which the school provided for free reading. Sodam's mother estimates that Sodam may have read nearly 4,000 books in total.

Of course this could be an overestimate because we do not know if Sodam actually read each book.

What She Read

Sodam's reading interests included series books (e.g. the Oxford Bookworms series). Her taste for series books is consistent with previous studies of dedicated readers (Cho & Krashen, 1994, 1995a, 1995b, Lamme, 1976), but she also reported reading a variety of genres, especially history and classical novels.

Sodam has read books designed for English learners, but did not rigidly read all the books on every level, as many were not interesting to her.

Other Sources of English Input

Movies

In addition to reading and attending EFL classes, Sodam is an avid movie-goer in both English and Korean. She mentioned that when she liked a movie, she would then read the book in English. Also, she would often read a book in English and then see the movie in English, a strategy demonstrated to make movies in a second language more comprehensible (Cho, 2006, 2007, 2011; Cho & Kim, 1999).

Peer Input

The only peer input in English that Sodam had was when a child her age (12 at that time) visited from India and stayed at Sodam's house for one week. They occasionally communicate using e-mail.

More Reactions

Sodam's Mother's Reaction

Sodam's mother said that English seemed to be easy for Sodam, and she attributed this to Sodam's pleasure reading habit:

"Sodam seems to express, read, write and listen comfortably in English. She acquires English from reading. The pleasure she gets from reading has helped her improve her English..." (translated from Korean)

Sodam's mother also noticed that Sodam's reading habit actually gave Sodam more time and less pressure from school:

"Sodam has more free time than her friends who go to cram school to improve their English ... I am so happy that Sodam is free from the terrible pressure and that she has time to do what she wants to do."

Reaction of Other Parents

Other parents in school noticed Sodam's remarkable competence in English without attending cram schools, and asked Sodam's mother for the secret of Sodam's success.

Sodam's mother told them about Sodam's pleasure reading habit, but most of the parents were not convinced, and were skeptical that such progress could take place without extra studying at cram schools after regular school.

Conclusions

Novelist Lisa See (2004) proclaimed, "Read a thousand books and your words will flow like a river." Reading more than 1,000 books certainly worked for Sodam.

Sodam's case supports the hypothesis (Krashen, 2004) that highly interesting reading results in improvement in literacy and language development, a conclusion that also supports the more general hypothesis that we acquire language when we receive comprehensible input.

Of great interest is that Sodam's case is quite similar to descriptions of other long-term EFL acquirers who improved through self-selected reading: All had plenty of access to books, were able to read what they wanted to read, were not tested on what they read, and did not do supplementary workbook exercises (Cho & Krashen, 2016, 2015; Krashen, 2004).

This case thus confirms that EFL students can become autonomous language acquirers, that is, they can improve on their own, without extra instruction, through reading.

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Editor's note: There is 5 book check-out limit per person at the English library in Busan. The loan period is two weeks. For this reason, Sodam's family members and friends obtained cards so that she could check out more books per week.

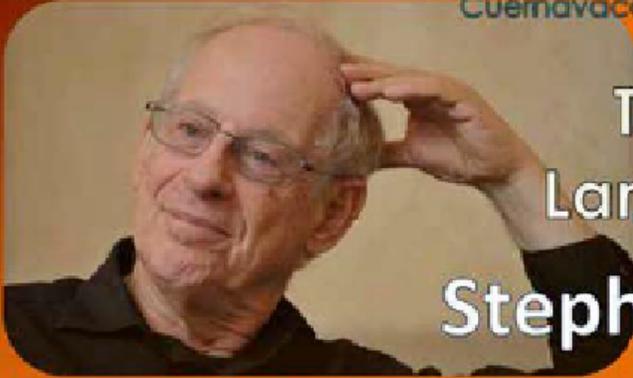
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