

San's Story: The Power of Reading in English as a Foreign Language

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Abstract:

San is an 11-year old boy who has developed a remarkable level of competence primarily through reading for pleasure. According to his teachers, he speaks, reads, writes and understands English at a level far above his peers, including many of those who have lived in English-speaking countries, and he has won all the major prizes in English awarded by his school. His teachers report that when San was in elementary school, he always had one or two English books in his school bag.

Key words: *Read- aloud, Self-selection, Book and movie, compelling comprehensible input, Pleasure reading habit*

This paper presents the case history of San, an 11 year-old Korean boy now in grade six, who has an exceptional command of spoken and written English. San has had very limited exposure to English outside of Korea (including a one-month English summer camp in the Philippines, which San did not like because the focus was on grammar and testing), has never attended a cram school, has never received special tutoring, does not spend time memorizing English vocabulary, does not play with English-speaking friends and does not speak English regularly at home. San is a pleasure reader in English.

How it began.

San's mother started him reading in English when he was five years old, after he had learned to read in Korean. She read aloud to him from English books for an hour a day until San was in grade 2. They read stories from the Oxford Reading Tree series, Step into Reading, books by Dr. Seuss, Eric Carle, Audrey Wood and John Burningham.

San and his mother played together acting out parts of stories from the books. During this read-aloud time, San's mother spoke English to him, but she did not speak English to him otherwise; she describes her English as limited, and reports that the read-alouds helped her improve. This stopped when San was in grade 2, when he complained that his mother's English was not good enough!

Reading in grades 1-6.

San soon became an independent reader. San and his mother provided information about what he read after he started school. Some of his selections are listed here: Grades 1-3: The Arthur series, the Diary of a Wimpy Kid series, the Ricky Ricotta Robot series.

Grades 4-6: Books from the Star Wars, Harry Potter, Lord of the Rings, and Charlie Bone series, Holes and The Giver.

Current reading: Continuation of reading from the Harry Potter and Star Wars series.

San's source of books at first was the bookstore and the Internet. His mother ordered books according to what she thought San would like.

English books were also available at the public library: San's mother checked out four books a week for him, two selected by San and two selected by her. San was generally more interested in books that he selected himself.

By 5th grade, San started going to the bookstore by himself and bought his own books. He now reads movie and teenage oriented magazines in addition to books.

San's teachers reported that that he always seemed to be reading in English and carried one or two English books in his bag all the time. His mother reported that San reads whenever he has free time, sometimes even during mealtimes.

Movies

San is a fan of English movies and uses reading to help make English-language films more comprehensible. When he first started watching movies in English, he followed his mother's advice and watched the movie twice, the first time reading English captions and the second time without the captions. More recently, he began reading the book (or graphic novel) in English before seeing the movie. He used this method for Hunger Games and some of the Marvel movies. Without realizing it, San is thus providing support for the "read the book, see the movie" method, validated in several studies (Cho, 2011, 2007, 2006; Cho & Kim, 1999).

Evidence

We do not have standardized test scores, but there is strong evidence that San has acquired a considerable amount of English.

San won first prize in three school-wide English contests. One for reading in grade 6 and one for writing in grade 5. He also won speaking contests in his grade every year from grades 3 to 6.

Also, an interview with one of his English teachers, a native speaker of English, confirmed that San was highly competent in all "four skills." This is what he said about San's English:

Listening: "He understands everything I say ... I never need to change my sentences and make them easier so he can understand them. He understands what I say the first time."

Reading (and listening): "Most of the books and movies he talks about to me are English ones. Some of these books are for students his age or older in America."

Writing: "Even if his writing isn't perfect, he is still far above other students in his grade and even better than many students his age or older in America..."

Speaking: San speaks "very naturally."

In addition, a Korean English teacher with many years of teaching experience commented on the size of San's English vocabulary and on his grammatical accuracy: "Surprisingly San's vocabulary is much larger than those who have lived in English-speaking countries, and San speaks with greater accuracy in grammar than those kids."

The incident at the cram school

Recently San's mother wanted him to enroll in a cram school. But when San took the placement exam, he was told that he scored above the level required for every English class in the school, including classes for high school students. The only class he was eligible to take was a TOEFL preparation class, designed for advanced students interested in study abroad in English speaking countries.

San and Korean

It must be pointed out that San's accomplishments in English were not at the cost of his Korean language development. His mother reported that San is also an avid reader in Korean and his first language development is at the level expected of children his age.

Conclusions

In terms of theory, San's experiences are consistent with the Comprehension Hypothesis: hearing stories and reading for pleasure are a means of obtaining compelling comprehensible input, and are therefore a powerful means of developing language and literacy, including speaking and writing. San's case history is also consistent with many others, in both first and second language development (Krashen, 2004).

His experiences are also in agreement with Cho and Krashen (2016), who concluded that several factors are favorable to establishing a reading habit: access to reading material, self-selection, and a time and place to read, with little or no testing.

San gives reading the credit for his English proficiency. When asked what he had been doing to improve his English, San replied: "I love to read books in English and I read a lot. Also I like to view videos."

Postscript

San has reached high levels of competence primarily from reading and some aural input, with occasional conversations with native speakers and with little contribution from formal instruction.

San is now in grade 7, the first year of middle school. Before entering middle school, San's mother felt that her son needed to learn grammar and grammatical terminology. She had him attend an Internet English grammar class for an hour everyday for a month. San was not happy with this grammar class because he had already acquired a great deal of the grammar from reading: "This class is unnecessary because I know all the answers on all of the grammar questions. Why do I have to?"

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