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Learning Grammar and Vocabulary through Reading: A Case Study

Nina Daskalovska

Goce Delcev University, Stip, Republic of Macedonia

Email: nina.daskalovska@ugd.edu.mk

Abstract

Many linguists agree that one of the conditions for successful second language acquisition is exposure to large amounts of comprehensible input through listening and reading. A lot of studies have been carried out in order to determine the effects of listening and reading on acquiring aspects of a second language and developing language proficiency. The aim of the present study was to determine the effects of extensive reading on the improvement of grammar and vocabulary knowledge. The participant read 15 books of her choice in the course of two months. Before and after the treatment she was tested on her grammar and vocabulary knowledge. The results of the posttests show that there was improvement in both grammar and vocabulary knowledge as a result of extensive reading, which implies that incorporating an extensive reading component in language learning programmes can greatly enhance second language acquisition.

Keywords: extensive reading; language acquisition; grammar; vocabulary.

1. Introduction

Learning a second language is not an easy task. The issue of the most effective ways of learning a second language has been a topic of many debates and discussions and a subject of many studies. As a result, we have witnessed a number of theories of language learning that try to describe and explain the process of second language acquisition. One of the most influential theories is Krashen's Monitor Theory with its five hypotheses.

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: nina.daskalovska@ugd.edu.mk.

Krashen claims that people can learn a second language in two ways: by conscious learning and by subconscious acquisition and that acquisition is more important than learning [1]. He explains that second language acquisition is similar to learning the first language which happens during meaningful interactions in which the focus is on the message rather than the form. His Input Hypothesis states that people acquire languages by receiving comprehensible input which contains structures that are a little bit beyond their current level of competence [2]. He maintains that “we are able to understand language containing unacquired grammar with the help of context, which includes extra-linguistic information, our knowledge of the world, and previously acquired linguistic competence” [2: 2]. By being exposed to large quantities of comprehensible input, grammar will be acquired automatically, so that explicit teaching of grammar is not necessary. He supports this view with the evidence from several studies which show that informal language learning environments may lead to higher language proficiency than formal situations. Canadian French immersion programmes where learners start learning a second language by receiving comprehensible oral and written input without being forced to produce language have also demonstrated that comprehensible input can help language development [3]. This implies that listening and reading at an appropriate level can be extremely beneficial for language acquisition. Krashen [4: 4] claims that reading, by itself, will not “produce the highest levels of competence; rather, it provides a foundation so that higher levels of proficiency may be reached” and that it is very difficult to attain advanced levels without extensive reading. In this paper we focus on the effects of extensive reading on the acquisition of grammar and vocabulary knowledge.

2. Literature review

Most of the studies on the effects of reading on language acquisition have focused on the acquisition of vocabulary. The majority of them have investigated the acquisition of meaning [5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13]; a few studies have examined the acquisition of other aspects of word knowledge such as spelling, word class, grammatical functions, collocations, etc. [14, 15, 16]. One of the characteristics of most of these studies is that the participants read one or several short texts and the reading treatment rarely lasted more than an hour. There are only a handful of studies in which the participants read several books during a longer period of time. One of them is the case study carried out by Pigada and Schmitt [15] in which the participant read four books in the course of one month, and the results of the posttests showed that there was improvement in the knowledge of spelling, meaning and grammatical characteristics. Another study which implemented extensive reading conditions is the study carried out by Cho and Krashen [6] in which four participants read between 10 and 23 books of their choice. The results of the tests showed that the participants learned 56-80% of the previously unknown words. The participants declared that there was improvement in their speaking skills, reading and listening comprehension and grammatical knowledge.

There are fewer studies that have examined the acquisition of grammar through reading. One of them is Ponniah's study [17] in which the participants were divided into three groups: the first groups were students who studied in English medium schools and who had the habit of reading English books; the second group also studied in English medium schools but did not read English books; and the third group studied English as a second language only in English classes. The results showed that the scores on the grammar test for the first group ranged between 67.5 to 95%, the second group scored between 40 to 70% and the third group between

12.5 to 40% of the total test score. After the test, the participants in the first group said that they did not apply grammar rules while taking the test, but used their acquired knowledge of grammar intuitively. In a study conducted by Paribakht and Wesche [3] the participants were divided into two groups placed into Comprehension-based class and Four-skill comparison class. The first group “focused on the development of listening and reading skills using authentic texts (e.g., radio, newspaper) on selected themes”, and there was no explicit grammar instruction. The other group was taught using an integrated four-skill approach which included explicit grammar instruction and exercises on prepositions and vocabulary. In relation to vocabulary, the Comprehension-based class had superior gains on the instructed cloze test in the total number of known words, content words and discourse connectives, while on the uninstructed close test both groups had significant gains only for content words. The grammar tests showed that neither group demonstrated significant gains in recognizing correct or incorrect sentences, but the Four-skill class had greater gains on the preposition test. The authors concluded that explicit grammar instruction may not be necessary for the improvement of text comprehension skills, but some focus on grammatical forms may be needed for developing “sensitivity to them and possibly as a basis for greater accuracy in speaking and writing” [3: 26].

3. Research question

The aim of this study was to determine the effects of extensive reading on the improvement of grammar and vocabulary knowledge. The questions addressed in this study were the following:

1. How does extensive reading affect grammar knowledge?
2. What is the effect of extensive reading on vocabulary knowledge?

4. Methodology

4.1. Participant

The participant in this study was a 14-year-old learner of English who had studied English in elementary school for four years. She had three 45-minute lessons per week in which there was equal focus on learning the language system and developing the language skills. The English language programme did not include extensive reading.

4.2. Materials and instruments

The measuring instruments included a grammar test which contained 90 items at three levels: basic, intermediate and advanced. Some of the items had several correct answers, so that the total number of correct answers was 121 [18: 4-9]. The knowledge of vocabulary was tested with Nation’s Vocabulary Levels Test at five levels: the 2nd 1000 word level, the 3rd 1000 word level, the 5th 1000 word level, the academic word level, and the 10th 1000 word level with a total number of 150 words [19]. The reading texts were selected by the participant on the basis of her interest. They were all graded readers from levels 3 to 7 and contained a total of 1415 pages (Table 1).

Table 1. The books read by the participant

Books	Levels	Pages
Love Story – Eric Segal	3	55
The Count of Monte Cristo - Alexander Dumas	3	64
Three Adventures of Sherlock Holmes - Arthur Conan Doyle	4	80
Great Expectations - Charles Dickens	5	86
Far from the Madding Crowd - Thomas Hardy	5	86
The Dead of Jericho - Colin Dexter	5	101
King's Ransom - Ed McBain	5	86
The Bride Price - Buchi Emecheta	5	85
Deadlock - Sara Paretsky	5	85
The Woman in White - Willkie Collins	6	104
Vanity Fair - William Thackeray	6	120
Night without an End - Alistair Maclean	6	102
Jane Eyre - Charlotte Bronte	6	101
Memoirs of a Geisha - Arthur Golden	6	120
Crime Never Pays (short stories)	7	140
Total number of pages: 1415		

4.3. Procedure

The two pretests were administered before the reading treatment. After that the participant was taken to a library and was asked to choose the books that she would like to read. In the course of two months she read 15 books. As she read the books during the summer holidays after the school year had finished, there was no other English language input except for television and the Internet. At the end of the two-month period the pretests were administered as posttests.

5. Results and discussion

The results show that there was improvement in both grammar and vocabulary knowledge as a result of extensive reading. Since the items of the tests were not taken from the books she read, the results show general improvement in these areas.

The result of the grammar test shows that there was improvement in the participant's grammar knowledge. The areas of improvement were the use of tenses, the choice of correct sentences, the place of adverbs in sentences and the order of adjectives, which indicates that reading can contribute to acquiring grammar knowledge. The participant did not show any gain in the basic grammar points because she already knew most of the items. The greatest improvement was in the knowledge of the grammar items at intermediate level. Since most of the books

she read were at an intermediate level, the results demonstrate that receiving comprehensible input through reading enabled the participant to acquire many of the structures at this level and improve her grammatical knowledge by 10%.

Table 2. Results of the grammar test

Levels	Pretest	Posttest	Gain
Basic	31 83.78%	31 83.78%	0
Intermediate	27 67.5%	31 77.5%	4 10%
Advanced	20 45.45%	23 52.27%	3 6.82%
Total	78 64.46%	85 70.24%	7 5.78%

Table 3. Results of the vocabulary test

Levels	Pretest	Posttest	Gain
2,000	27 90%	28 93.3%	1
3,000	13 43.3%	24 80%	11
5,000	19 63.3%	21 70%	2
AWL	20 66.6%	23 76.7%	3
10,000	3 10%	5 16.7%	2
Total	82 54.6%	101 67.3%	19 12.7%

In relation to vocabulary knowledge, the results show a remarkable increase in the number of words the participants knew after the treatment. Since the 30 words at each level represent 1,000 words, the increase in the knowledge of meaning of 19 words or 12.7% more on the post-test represents an increase of more than 600 words. More than half of these words belonged to the 3rd 1000 word level, which was expected as 12 of the books the participant read were graded readers from levels 5 and 6 which cover the first 3,000 most frequent words. The fact that she already knew 90% of the words at the 2,000 word level, and that she also had

substantial knowledge of the words at the 3,000 and the 5,000 level, shows that her vocabulary size enabled her to read these book with understanding and provided conditions for acquiring new vocabulary [20, 21]. These results demonstrate that reading books at an appropriate level can greatly increase learners' vocabulary knowledge.

6. Conclusion

The aim of the study was to investigate the influence of extensive reading on learners' grammar and vocabulary knowledge. The reading treatment lasted for two months during which period the participant read 15 books of her choice. In this way the conditions for extensive reading which include reading large amounts of books and selecting books on the basis of interest were satisfied. The results of the experiment demonstrate that extensive reading can help EFL learners improve their grammar and vocabulary knowledge. This implies that incorporating an extensive reading component in language learning programmes at all levels can greatly enhance second language acquisition.

Note: The study was first presented at the 46th Annual IATEFL Conference in Glasgow in 2012. This paper is an extended and revised version related to the original one.

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