

## **MAKING BILINGUAL EDUCATION EVEN BETTER THROUGH SELF-SELECTED PLEASURE READING**

Stephen Krashen

Nooshan Ashtari\*

University of Southern California

**Studies** have repeatedly confirmed that properly organized bilingual programs work very well; children in these programs score higher on measures of academic English than do similar children in all-day English programs (see meta-analysis by McField & McField, 2014). Strong bilingual programming will do even better if we take advantage of the power of self-selected pleasure reading.

A strong bilingual program means three things: (a) providing optimal input in English through ESL and sheltered classes (Krashen & Mason, 2020); (b) focusing attention on developing reading skills in the first language, which fosters the ability for transferring to reading in English; and (c) teaching subject matter in the first language, thus imparting knowledge that makes English input more comprehensible.

### **Findings from the Literature**

#### **The Role of Pleasure Reading in Bilingual Language Development**

We have known for a long time that reading for pleasure is helpful for language development (e.g., Krashen, 2004), but research and our experience show that reading for pleasure is much more powerful than we originally thought for the acquisition of vocabulary, spelling, and grammar. In one study, for example, for each hour of reading, EFL students gained 0.6 point on the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) examination (Krashen & Mason, 2015). According to these results, a reader can move from the bottom of the "Elementary Proficiency" level on the TOEIC to the threshold of "International Proficiency" in three years through engaging in relaxed, self-selected pleasure reading. They reported in addition that when preparing for the TOEIC, neither focused vocabulary study nor listening to the radio had any discernible effect; only reading had a positive impact on test scores (see also Stokes et al., 1998).

Of particular importance for school success is the recent evidence that popular literature is a good source of academic vocabulary. For instance, Rolls and Rodgers (2017) reported that one million words of science fiction (about a year's worth of pleasure reading for a competent reader) contained 92% of the 318 science words from different areas of science included in the Academic Word List, a list of words that frequently appear in academic texts. Nearly half (44%) occurred 10 times or more, which is usually enough for acquisition. Quillan examined the vocabulary in 22 popular novels written for young people and reported that they included 85% of words included on the Academic Word List, with 44% appearing at least 12 times; this is 1.6 to four times as efficient as explicit instruction. The next year, he concluded that reading all seven Harry Potter novels would result in acquisition of between one-fifth and one-half of the words on the Academic Word List (Quillan, 2020).

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\*nashtari@usc.edu

Fiction is not only a good source of academic vocabulary, it is also an important source of academic knowledge. Studies show that those who read more in their first language know more about history, literature, and science (e.g., Stanovich & Cunningham, 1993). To our knowledge, no studies of this kind have been done with second language reading, and including pleasure reading in the first language can be a powerful supplement to subject matter teaching, helping to make English input more comprehensible.

### **The Role of Pleasure Reading in Heritage Language Development**

As noted above, bilingual education programs have done very well in developing second language skills. We cannot say the same about heritage language (HL) development. In many cases, children who come from homes in which a heritage language is spoken typically do well in family interactions, but by the time they are in middle school, they have trouble talking with their grandparents. The usual solution, it is assumed, is traditional language classes.

The few reports so far suggest that traditional teaching of heritage languages is not well liked. Tse (2001a) interviewed three former students who had experienced traditional instruction in HL classes. As she reports, "For the most part, these participants had negative impressions of their experiences in heritage language schools, calling them 'boring' and 'a waste of time' " (p. 264). Also, as Tse observed, "Formal schooling in the HL, whether in community schools or in foreign-language classrooms, left several of the participants unwilling to continue learning the language" (p. 265). Comments made to Ashtari (2020a) by former HL students echoed these findings: "It actually pushed me away from learning Farsi . . . I spent about less than six months in one [class] and I hated it." The experience, quoting another former student, was "daunting" and "impossible" because of the heavy focus on mastering "completely" the Farsi writing system in early stages of instruction.

Even those who want to improve in their heritage language on their own have little interest in traditional methodology. Ashtari and Krashen (2020) measured interest in the independent study of Farsi grammar by examining signs of wear and tear in public library books written for self-study of basic Farsi grammar, such as smudge marks, separation of pages on the binding, and worn and wrinkled corners caused by page turning. They concluded that potential readers of Farsi self-study books only read about 5% of the text.

Two studies, however, provide evidence that pleasure reading in the heritage language can have very good results. In these studies, HL speakers achieved high levels of competence and credited pleasure reading for this result. Tse (2001b) interviewed subjects ages 18 to 24 who were clearly successful at developing their heritage language. Most were born in the United States, but had achieved native-level competence in their heritage language without experiencing extended residency or education in the country where the HL was spoken: "[. . .] nearly all the participants developed [an] interest in reading for pleasure, which they credited for their advanced reading ability as adults" (p. 261). Cho and Krashen (2008) used a similar design, although their seven participants arrived in the United States between ages 12 and 16 and had been in this country an average of 34 years. They rated their competence in their heritage language (Korean), including reading and writing, as very high. All seven subjects were readers in Korean, and five of the seven said they were "dedicated readers." Three explicitly gave reading the credit for their high level of Korean. One reader told us that he read for three to four hours a day, spending many hours trying to finish a novel in one sitting. Among other novels, he read the popular Three Kingdom series. Another reader, now a California state-certified professional Korean translator, stated: "To me, Korean language classes didn't help much. . . . I think I maintained Korean from simply reading books, magazines, and newspapers and from watching Korean dramas and talking about them with church friends and teachers afterward."

## Implications

If self-selected reading is so helpful, HL students need access to reading material. As our review of the literature has shown, some have access to such material, but many do not. Ashtari (2020b) visited several bookstores in or near Los Angeles, an area with many Iranian families. There were, until recently, several bookstores with Farsi language books in Westwood, but they are disappearing. Visits to four bookstores revealed the problems HL acquirers face. The books for sale were largely textbooks and classics. Nothing for children was available, and nothing for older readers who wanted to improve their Farsi. One owner described the holdings as follows: "We don't have any books with simplified language for adults in Farsi. We have a few bilingual books in Farsi and English, but they are mostly poetry books such as Hafiz or Rumi, mostly classic poetry and some modern ones here and there . . . not the easiest even for native speakers." Public libraries do not fill the gap. There are 72 branches of the Los Angeles Public library. A visit to their website revealed that the entire collection contained only 300 books in Farsi, and most were dictionaries and self-study. Only 12 were taken out at the time of the visit.

For heritage language development, self-selected reading of popular literature has, to our knowledge, never been seriously explored for heritage language development. Our research and investigations show that it's time to at least try it, in and out of our classrooms.

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